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Building a Christian Worldview through Response to Literature

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Building a Christian Worldview through Response to Literature

Abstract

Research has shown that what one reads can be an important factor in developing one's worldview. This paper will report my thoughts about experiences I had while reading aloud-challenging texts in two Christian school classrooms. My goal for the read alouds was to have students think about issues related to justice, love, and commitment as they apply to both the family and the larger community. Various types of response methodologies (written, art, drama, discussion) were used to encourage students to build connections between what they learned, to what is the appropriate response and action.

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Abstract

Research has shown that what one reads can be an important factor in developing one's worldview. This paper will report my thoughts about experiences I had while reading aloud-challenging texts in two Christian school classrooms. My goal for the read alouds was to have students think about issues related to justice, love, and commitment as they apply to both the family and the larger community. Various types of response methodologies (written, art, drama, discussion) were used to encourage students to build connections between what they learned, to what is the appropriate response and action.

Introduction

What is Christian education all about? There are many answers but key to the mission of any Christian school is the goal of creating disciples who willingly serve the Lord with their heart, mind, and actions. While knowledge is central to understanding the issues of life, Christian teachers want to go beyond knowledge to help students learn to apply what they have learned. It is not enough to know that prejudice and poverty exist in this world; teachers need to help students understand that God requires us to love our neighbors in both word and deed. This is all part of helping our students develop a Christian worldview. This worldview is one based on the entire Bible but is heavily informed by the living Word of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus' life can serve as a concrete example of how we want our students to think and live. The Bible gives us parables and stories of key episodes in Jesus' life. Our hearts are convicted when we read or hear God's word because of the Holy Spirit working in us. As teachers we can use what we learn from our own spiritual formation to help guide our students in Christian maturity.

Story is key in a Christian's life. "The very fact that God revealed the most important truth that we can

imagine in written and literary form commits Christians to a belief in the ability of language to communicate truth" (Ryken, 1991, p. 299). While the Bible is the key text in a Christian's life, God has given people the abilities to use their creative talents to write stories that take us places we have never been and to experience thoughts and feelings that real life might never afford. Because literature can do this it should have a very important place in a Christian school education. However, today in K-12 education there are forces that can derail our commitment to literary appreciation and response. Standards that focus our attention on skills can force teachers to spend so much time on them that the time spent on consciously trying to form disciples is diminished. Of course, learning reading skills is very important, but along side learning skills students should see the real reason for wanting to learn to read. They need to hear and read stories that engage their hearts and minds so much so that they desire to learn to read better so that they can be part of this mysterious and fascinating world of words.

As a teacher educator who teaches courses in reading, language arts, and children's literature, I need to present a balanced view of literary. I need to teach my teacher education students about phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction. However, I also need for them to see the larger picture of the purpose and joy of reading and how literature can be a wonderful way to have students think and consider issues. Needing some fresh experiences and needing to practice what I preach, I returned to the elementary school to try out strategies that I hoped would engage the students' mind and hearts. What this paper reports are my thoughts about the delightful experiences I had with two third grade classes as I sought to help them develop their Biblical worldview.

The two third grade classes I worked with are located in a mid-sized Christian school in a small mid-western

town that is quite homogeneous in ethnic background. Most of the students are Caucasians and come from Dutch or northern European ancestry. The few notable exceptions are children who were adopted from India and China. Many of the students have close ties to agriculture either through parents or other relatives, especially grandparents. Since I taught third grade in this school some years ago and have lived in this community for twenty-seven years I had some understanding of the age group and the ethnic background of the students. In this paper I will discuss how I used this knowledge, along with research about reading, to explore my objective of having the students think about and apply their Christian faith in their everyday lives.

Literature Review

Reader Response

While reading to these students and seeing the expressions of intense interest on their faces, I was reminded of what Rosenblatt (1978) said about the aesthetic experience of reading. Because I read to the students they were freed from the need to decode the text and were able to engage in a way that sometimes does not happen during a structured instructional reading time. The attention and questions of the children showed me they were “living through” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25) the experience portrayed in the books. Rosenblatt (1978) writes:

...the reader who adopts the aesthetic attitude feels no compulsion other than to apprehend what goes on during this process, to concentrate on the complex structure of experience that he is shaping and that becomes for him the poem, the story, the play symbolized by the text. (p. 26)

Today so much attention is put on measurable outcomes that the importance of aesthetic experiences is sometimes forgotten. Instead of engaged readers we may be creating students who love to read at home or on their own but dislike what happens when we make reading teacher-centered rather than reader-centered (Sloan, 2003; Wilhelm, 1997).

Reading aloud is an important aspect of literary development. Students say that they enjoy being read to (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006) and the bond that is created between teacher and students is so important

for building a positive classroom atmosphere (Sloan, 2003). Reading aloud motivates children to read on their own. When a competent reader reads with expression and enthusiasm, the listener learns that reading is an enjoyable activity (Sloan, 2003). Jim Trelease (1996), famous for being an advocate for reading aloud, says that children learn much about language (Sloan, 2003) and story structure by listening. Additionally reading aloud stories that focus on experiences where people learn to overcome discrimination and hardships help students empathize with others and develop a sense of justice (Trelease, 1993).

When reading aloud picture books, the child is free to attend to the illustrations (Mikkelsen, 2005; Lehr, 1991). They look and listen and observe details that adults often miss. Contrary to the philosophy of some reading programs that eliminate or keep the illustrations to a minimum, the illustrations in a picture book help the reader or listener comprehend the story (Lehr, 1991). The illustrations enrich the aesthetic experience and help the child think deeper about the content of the story (Mikkelsen, 2005).

Of course teachers are in the business of teaching skills, whether they are teaching decoding, comprehending, or critical thinking skills. However when the focus is centered on skills, the reason for reading can be lost. Reading excellent thought provoking texts to the students is one way of combining the teaching of essential skills with worldview formation. We must spark the imagination in order to influence the heart of the student (Sloan, 2003). The right book can get students to think through how they would or should react to the situations presented in the books. The teacher can then direct the student to consider how the book might apply to their every day lives (Sharer, Pinnell, Lyons, & Fountas, 2005).

Types of books

Books that students can relate to are of course essential for a successful read aloud but other factors are also important (Mikkelsen, 2005). Whitmore and Crowell (1994) found that the best discussions took place when the books did not give all the answers and where the topics were challenging and, at times, sad. Students need challenging books that give them something to think about. Challenging texts include ones that have open endings. Excellent examples include picture

books by Chris Van Allsburg where there is often a mysterious happening that is not fully explained. Another wonderful novel example is *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry because the reader needs to fill in the gaps the author intentionally left open.

When I think back on my own experience of teaching in grades three and four, the most powerful student responses to read alouds were when I read challenging books about social issues. Two of these stand out. One was Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), a Depression era novel about the discrimination the African American Logan family suffers. Another was *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (1977) by Eleanor Coerr, a post World War II novel set in Japan about a young girl who dies of leukemia as a consequence of the radiation caused by the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Being sensitive to the unique make-up of a class is also important. Culture and class (Wolf, 2004) are a part of every classroom and being sensitive to this is important if we don't want to reinforce stereotypes. The classes where I did my research are largely composed of middle class children, a large percentage of them with northern European forebears. In such a homogeneous classroom, the students who look different are very obvious. When discussing discrimination we can make these children feel uncomfortable or cause others to point to them as being like the people mentioned in the books, even when they are from a different cultural and/or ethnic group. Children in homogeneous communities can confuse various ethnic groups or lump all people of color together. For example, after I read a book where African Americans are discriminated against, Gerald mentioned that, "if it was like that today, Matt," a boy in the class from India, "would not be allowed in our class." While this might have created an uncomfortable moment, we should not avoid these topics. It made me rethink what I was doing and clarify to the students that discrimination has been a part of many ethnic groups' experience. Brooks and Thompson (2005) address this topic in their article "Social Justice in the Classroom": When we discourage students from engaging in public conversations about race and social justice, we lose an important component of education. In a multicultural society, it is crucial to help students consider diversity, understanding, and the places where the two intersect and clash (p. 48). Carefully choosing texts that avoid

stereotypes is important and one needs to balance topics and also read books where "white" people are discriminated against or live in difficult situations. In a Christian school the students are very knowledgeable about the discrimination faced by the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians. Reminding them that slavery and discrimination were sinful practices used by many cultures can help us avoid the blacks as victims generalization.

With multicultural picture books the illustrations are especially important. Children often relate to the characters depicted in their storybooks. A love for these characters can develop when the books are read over and over. This is why positive and attractively illustrated pictures are important in multicultural books. Janice J. Beaty says that, "Detailed, realistic depictions are the best" (1997, p. 26). When the words and illustrations show that the characters have many of the same feelings as the reader, a positive bond is created and this bond can be the start of acceptance and even loving people who at first glance are different from the reader (Beaty, 1997).

Worldview

Knowing in the Biblical sense implies action. As Robert Bruinsma (2003) states, "Knowledge in Scriptures is not finally something one possesses but something one uses to serve God, neighbor, and creation" (p. 37). This is the essence of discipleship: using knowledge to serve others. The teacher must confront the students' sinful hearts with convicting knowledge that will open them up to a new ways of thinking and acting. It is my belief that story is one way of doing this. Language, a wonderful gift from God, enables us to learn, consider, and reflect on our own experiences and those of others. Rather than just seeing and experiencing our own small worlds we can "walk in another's shoes."

Engagement is key. While the students I worked with had the reputation for not being good listeners, you could hear a pin drop while I read to them. In order to connect with the heart you need to engage the mind. Starting with what students know and working with the current background knowledge allows you to move to more challenging topics and texts. This is necessary to help students move from a self-centered view of reality to one that includes others who have thoughts and feelings similar to their own.

Pre-reading activities

Background knowledge plays a significant role in text comprehension (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Pearson & Fielding, 1991). Anderson (1985) suggests that relevant knowledge should be discussed and shared before reading. During pre-reading discussions, students often share information that is relevant to the topic but which they were not aware of possessing until the discussion helped them see the connections. Having students predict what a story (Yopp & Yopp, 2001) could be about is an important skill for comprehending as well as a way to build interest in the story. The following are some of the ones I used that utilize prediction as a strategy for building comprehension.

Book Bits

The teacher prepares for doing this pre-reading strategy (Yopp & Yopp, 2001) by reading the story and writing down key sentences from it. The key sentences are put on strips of paper then passed out to pairs of students, or individual students. Students are called on to read their sentence and to guess what the story might be about. This can be repeated during the reading of the story. The teacher should remind the students that thinking about the story before and during the reading could be a very useful strategy for enhancing comprehension.

Story Impressions

Another pre-reading strategy that capitalizes on background knowledge to improve comprehension is story impressions (McGinley & Denner, 1987; Denner & McGinley, 1992). This is a useful technique because it does not require a lot of preparation by the teacher and does not give away too much of the story. The teacher prepares by listing key words including character names, setting, and plot. The words are listed vertically with the order consistent with when they appear in the story. The students predict by writing their predictions then discussing the predictions. This can be done orally for younger children. Again a discussion of the predictions and how they can help comprehension is essential (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Pearson & Fielding, 1991).

Book Boxes

Making and presenting a book box (Yopp & Yopp, 2001; Pearman, Camp, & Hurst, 2004) is a very concrete strategy for having students think about a book before reading it. The objects included should evoke what the book is about. For example, if you are about to read *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (1969) by William Steig, a rock and an umbrella can be put in a picnic basket and then the objects taken out one at a time as students are given a chance to predict what the story is about. This strategy can spark interest in the book about to be read and works well if not a lot of background information is needed to comprehend the text.

Carousel Writing

If more background information is needed, then carousel writing is a useful activity (Towell, 1995-96). In this strategy a teacher thinks of questions related to the book and writes them on the top of large sheets of butcher paper. About five to six questions are sufficient. The students then are divided into groups and move clock wise from one question to another. If you have a class of twenty-five and you have written five questions, group one starts with question one then moves to question two when the teacher indicates. Since the pen switches hands as the groups rotate, each person has the opportunity to write down the groups' answer to a question. A sample question for *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) could be "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry takes place during 1933 at the height of the Great Depression. Discuss with your group what you think the Great Depression was. Then write your answer on the butcher paper." Another example for *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) is "What does Uncle Tomming mean? Discuss this with your group and write an example of Uncle Tomming on the butcher paper." The questions are discussed and the students are asked to think about them while the book is being read. For a novel this process takes some time. For a picture book, the questions and possible answers should be discussed briefly before the reading, then in more detail after the reading of the book.

Book Talks

One way of motivating students to read is to do book talks (Osborne, 2001). I brought to each session five or six books related to the topic. I briefly told a little about

each while showing them to the class. I then put them on the chalk ledge so that the students could see them. Sometimes I showed a few of the illustrations. The students were very interested in these books and did indeed read them for their free reading time. One reluctant reader in one of the third grade classes read *Stone Fox* (1980), a short and exciting novel about a dog sled race, and was looking for more books like that.

Post reading activities

Students need time to reflect on what they read or what is read to them. The type of response is crucial. If we just give them simple factual recall activities, they will start reading and listening for information. While the efferent stance is appropriate with certain materials, it can be limiting when the text one is reading is a narrative (Rosenblatt, 1978; Yopp & Yopp, 2001). Instead we should be doing activities that give students opportunities to express opinions, make connections to their own life, and be creative.

Shelby Wolf (2004) discusses four types of response: talking, writing, art, and drama. Because of the limited time I had for each lesson (between 45 minutes and an hour) most of responses needed to be short and simple. Due to the excellent questions they asked about the books read, the students often directed the discussion. To encourage brevity, small pieces of paper were used for written responses. Torn paper collages and simple marker sketches were part of the art response. The drama included pantomime and tableaux (Wilhelm, 1997). These responses will be explained further in the next section of the paper.

The Teaching

Setting the Stage: The First Two Weeks

The first two weeks of my time in the third grade classes was spent on reading books that had the twin themes of dogs and loyalty. I read *Hachiko: The true story of a loyal dog* (2004) by Turner. This story, set in Japan in the 1920s, is about a professor named Mr. Ueno and his dog, Hachiko. Hachiko waited each day for Mr. Ueno to return to the train station. One day Mr. Ueno does not return from the university because he died suddenly at work. However Hachiko returned to the station each day for over ten years until Hachiko himself died. There is a statue at the Shibuya train

station commemorating this loyal dog's unswerving devotion. We discussed how Hachiko was loyal. This type of blind loyalty was a start to our thinking about human loyalty. We ended this section by writing stories about dogs that were loyal in various ways. For example one of the students' stories was about a dog that rescued drowning children and another was about a dog that woke up sleeping family members during a house fire.

I read *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (2004), the picture book that uses the words to Alexander's hymn, as a reminder of who created what we often call "man's best friend." While we could learn something from dogs and how God created them, we needed to expand our horizons. We needed to think about how humans can serve God in an intentional and thoughtful manner.

The Next Three Weeks

For the next three weeks we focused on ways we can love our neighbors-both near and far.

Love your neighbor-close to home

The first week we zeroed in on how we can be faithful to our families. *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (1996), written by Mitchell and with lovely illustrations by James Ransome, was a good choice. Because Uncle Jed and his family are African American they had an especially hard time during the Depression. But let Tiffany and Alex, two of the students in the class tell us about the story. The writing is taken from their predictions using the story impressions strategy (McGinley & Denner, 1987; Denner & MacGinley, 1992).

Uncle Jed is a barber and is a neice [sic] /nephews favorite uncle, who came from the South, and is going to own a barber shop, and his neice [sic] gets sick and needs an operation and does not have enough money, Uncle Jed taught her to dream, and is going to have a birthday. (Tiffany) ...his niece get very sick and he has to use all his money for his barbor [sic] shop. (Alex)

While many people want to protect children from some of the harsh realities of life, I believe it is the life and death nature of this book that captured the students' attention. However I also believe that children need stories where people overcome obstacles and end

on a hopeful note. Christians are people of hope and an upbeat tone should pervade the lessons and books we use with elementary and middle school students. In this book the girl, Sarah Jean, survives and Uncle Jed does indeed get his barbershop on his seventy-ninth birthday. It was the self-sacrifice of Uncle Jed and the discrimination that Sarah Jean faced when she is brought to the emergency room of the hospital that most captured the interest of the students. Even though Sarah Jean was unconscious, she was not attended to until all the white patients were seen. The students responded with outrage that this would happen, giving them an opportunity to build empathy for others, especially for people being discriminated against.

The second book I read was Pearl S. Buck's *Christmas Day in the Morning*, originally written in 1955, and reissued with illustrations by Mark Buehner in 2002. Many of the students in the two third grades have close ties to farming so the setting of this book was indeed interesting to them. The story is about a young boy, Rob, who shows his love for his Dad. At first Rob begrudgingly helps his Dad milk cows each morning. He does not realize that his Father really loves him until he overhears his Dad tell his Mom how he hates to wake Rob each morning from such a sound sleep. Now he decides to surprise his Dad by giving his first real gift of love. He gets up even earlier than his Father and does the chores. Even the students who have no farming connections could relate to this simple act of love for a member of their household.

Christmas Day in the Morning starts with the middle aged Rob waking up on Christmas morning and remembering his simple deed of love. Even though Rob does not milk cows any more he still wakes up before the break of dawn. Janine, a girl in one of the third grade classes, said that this happens to her Dad too. Even when he is on vacation and away from the farm, he stills wakes up very early. Interestingly students noticed details about the illustrations that I did not notice. They pointed out how the clouds looked like angels in several of the illustrations. My reading to them freed the children to be able to focus their attention on comprehending the story through the words and illustrations (Mikkelsen 2005). As a follow up we did a pantomime activity where groups of students depicted how they might show their love to a member of their family by helping in some way. The audience

then guessed what actions were being shown (Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998; Wilhelm, 1997). The students pantomimed helping someone who was injured, carrying groceries for Mom, cooking dinner for the family, etc.

Love your neighbor-near by

Now we were broadening our focus to think about community, whether that is our town, state or country. I chose *Raising Yoder's Barn* (1998) by Jane Yolen with paintings by Bernie Fuchs. Yolen's story tells about the help an Amish family receives from their community after their barn is struck by lightning and burns to the ground. The striking illustrations and action packed story had the students enthralled. After the reading we made torn paper collages. The students first decided which scene they wanted to portray and chose the color of the background paper in keeping with the scene. For example black for the storm scene or blue for the rebuilding of the barn scene. I also asked them to put themselves somewhere in the scene and then to fill in a sheet which asked them seven short questions: (1) What scene did you choose to create? (2) Where are you in the scene? (3) What did you see? (4) What did you feel? (5) What did you hear? (6) What did you smell? (7) What did you taste? (Baer, 2005).

I chose the torn paper collage response because the medium does not allow you to copy the illustrations in the book but to just give a sense of the color, shape, and line of the action. Many students chose to depict the lightning striking the barn with yellow lightning piercing the black sky and orange flames on top of the barn roof. While not looking anything like the illustrations of the book, the collages were attractive in their own right. The idea of putting themselves in the collage and asking questions about how they felt is an adaptation of the Symbolic Story Representation used as a protocol to enable teachers to "see" into the processes a student used while reading (Wilhelm, 1997; Baer, 2005).

The second book I read for this focus on community was *Almost to Freedom* (2003) by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson with illustrations by Colin Bootman. I introduced this book by telling the students that this book is a bit different. I asked them to think about this while I read it. The unique feature of this book is that it is told from the point of view of Sally, a rag doll. Sally was made by Miz Rachel and given to her daughter

Lindy. Lindy, Miz Rachel, and her father, Mr. Henry, are slaves on a southern plantation. Mr. Henry is “sold ...down the river,” leaving the mother and daughter distraught. One day Lindy is whipped by the overseer and this confirms the family’s resolve to “steal away home.” Eventually the family escapes by means of the Underground Railroad. However Sally, the rag doll, is unintentionally left behind. Sally is lonely until another family occupies the shelter where Sally was left. The back matter includes an author’s note and a picture of rag doll from the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Trent wondered why they would put these rag dolls in a museum. At first I did not understand his question but eventually he asked, “What was so important about the dolls that they would be in a museum?” Trent probably has visited a number of museums that feature dinosaurs and other big and exciting displays. His question was an excellent one because it gave us an opportunity to discuss why the rag doll artifact was important. It was important because the slaves had so few possessions that very few things have been left behind. This gave us the opportunity to reflect on the plethora of things that we will one day leave behind.

For a response to this book, the students were formed into groups and given a scene from the book to depict by means of frozen moments or tableaux (Wilhelm, 1997, Towell, 1995-96). It was interesting to see how the students portrayed the doll, Sally, in the various scenes. Cooperating is not something these students do readily, so giving them a structured activity like tableaux was workable. They were given a strip of paper telling them which scene they needed to show by creating a silent picture. I told them that the best tableaux are ones where the audience knows what they are doing. After a short time for practice they presented their scenes.

Love your neighbor-far away

Because of the students’ heritage I chose to read two pieces of historical fiction that were about events that happened in the Netherlands, during or immediately after World War II. Despite the Americanization of these families, many still have strong ties to the Netherlands, some having relatives that still live there or whose great grandparents are Dutch immigrants. The children adopted from other countries do have Dutch surnames and so are Dutch in many ways as well.

The first book I chose to read was *The Lily Cupboard: A Story of the Holocaust* (1992) by Shulamith Levey Oppenheim and illustrated by Ronald Himler. While the horror of the holocaust is not an appropriate topic for third graders, this book focuses on the bravery of a Dutch family who hides a little Jewish girl named Miriam. Since the background knowledge necessary for understanding this story was considerable, we engaged in a carousel writing activity beforehand. Questions included: (1) Would you ever lie to the police? If you would, when would you lie? (2) How would you feel if you had to leave your family and stay with a family you did not know? (3) How could you make some one feel welcome in your home if that person was a child far from home? (4) What does it mean to be a hero or heroine? (5) Who were the Nazis?

For the first carousel writing question about lying many wrote “No” and yet some wrote “they would lie to cover up their crimes.” After the reading of the book we revisited that question. I asked, “What if the Nazis were the police?” They saw the question quite differently now. Question three which was about how they would welcome a stranger was the one that had the best variety of answers, perhaps because they have had experiences with doing this. Question five about the Nazis was interesting in that all the students had a sense that the Nazis were evil people. Several groups wrote something similar to this, “They were people who did not like the Jews.” While reading this story the expressions on the faces of the students were very intense. At times I thought maybe this book was too intense; however the happy ending with Miriam being safe calmed the students’ anxiety. Also remember that these children know the Bible and know that the Jews were God’s special people. They have listened to many stories of their enslavement, captivity, and mistreatment so in many ways this was part of a continuing story of discrimination and abuse.

After reading *The Lily Cupboard: A Story of the Holocaust*, the students were asked to write what they could do to help others around the world. “I could give money to them. I could give them books. I could send food and clouths (sic) to them. I could send them blankents (sic) and pillows, wrote Brittany. “I would share my love with them,” was one of suggestions given by Sandy. Another student showed me a picture of her little sister who will be joining them from China in a

few weeks. She chose to draw a picture of herself helping this little child adjust to a new family and culture. Interesting stories surfaced this week. One story was of a great-grandfather who was captured by the Nazis and made to work in a factory but later escaped. The connections kept on coming.

The last book I read is *Boxes for Katje* (2003) by Candace Fleming with illustrations by Stacey Dressen-McQueen. I started the lesson by showing the students a box that looked like a typical box you would get in the mail. I read the address and return address and said that Katje, the recipient of the box, is a friend of mine and that she said it was OK for us to open the box. Inside were a few items. I slowly took them out. First I took out a pair of socks, then a bar of soap. The students looked a little disappointed. Next I took out a bag of small chocolate hearts. Now the mood changed! The last item was a letter from Rose Johnson who writes, "I hope these gifts brighten your day" (Dressen-McQueen, unpaginated).

After distributing the chocolate, I read the story. This book is based on a true story of the author's mother who sent a box to a young Dutch girl named Katje. Over the course of the next few years, boxes containing food and clothes were sent to Katje's family. Katje did not keep the items but shared them with her community. Katje always sent Rosie, the American girl, a thank you letter. When the effects of the war diminished, the town where Katje lived sent a box to Rosie and in it were tulip bulbs. So for a follow up we wrote thank you notes pretending we were the recipients of the boxes. I distributed small yellow lined paper to look like the notes included in the book. Below is what Josiah wrote:

2-9-06

Dear Rosie,

Thank you for the chocolate. All the people of the town thought it was very nice of the people of your town to send the food, socks, coats, hats, mittens and espically [sic] the sugar. Inside this box are tulip bulbs.

From,

Josiah

The students related this book to their own experience of filling shoeboxes with needed items for children, a program sponsored by the Samaritan's Purse. This activity is encouraged around Christmas each year by many area churches and was a good connection for many of the students. Others mentioned that their families sponsor children overseas by sending money for clothes and food each month. One very interesting connection was that one of the teachers and one of the students have a common relative who has a plaque in her house that was a thank you gift from a Dutch family, similar to the gift Katje's town sent of tulip bulbs. This older relative was a child at the time of World War II and her family sent boxes to a Dutch family, just like Rosie and her family did. Another interesting discussion ensued when I was accused of lying to them, since I had said I knew Katje. This gave us an opportunity to discuss the difference between lying and using our imagination. Also in both of these stories, it is white people who are being mistreated and in danger of starvation.

Conclusions

My convictions about the value of reading excellent, challenging texts to students were confirmed by my experiences. Even students who have a reputation for being poor listeners can and do become involved in books that have beautiful, detailed illustrations and which tell exciting stories that they can relate to. Each classroom is unique and while I believe the books I used would work in many third grade classrooms, teachers need to use what they know about their students in making decisions about the books they read to their class. One thing I did do before each session was to time how long it would take to read each book. I rejected several books that were too long and detailed. Knowing when a book is too long is not an exact science. A boring book is always too long while one with an exciting story can be much longer and still be enjoyed by young students. Even with the read alouds I do with my college students, I quickly sense that even adults have a limited attention span and this is certainly something we should keep in mind.

Books that have large, detailed illustrations are also important. If the students can't see the illustrations, then it might be better to just read the text and let them look at the illustrations later. Not being able to see what is depicted can be an annoyance and distract-

tion for some children. With picture books, rather than illustrated storybooks, the illustrations do tell the story so seeing them is crucial to the story's comprehension. A variety of styles and media are also important. Topics that are enjoyed by both girls and boys with both male and female characters also make for more successful read alouds. For example in *The Lily Cupboard: A Story of the Holocaust*, the person being hidden is a girl but it is a boy, Nello, who helps Miriam adjust to being away from home by letting her make one of the rabbits in his family's hutch her pet.

Most importantly, books with characters that are sympathetic allow the listeners to emphasize and imagine how they would feel and act if they were put in a similar situation. The teacher also needs to reinforce this empathy by bringing the issues home for the students. The things that are the most important in life like being able to empathize with others and feeling sorry for someone besides themselves can't be tested (Trelease, 1993). With an overemphasis on the testable we might focus too much on the head and forget about touching the heart and opening the hands of our students.

What surprised me most were the insightful questions the students asked. These questions usually came after the reading in response to something they did not understand in the text. These unplanned events gave us opportunities to discuss various issues including: lying, discrimination, heroism, race, imagination and other important worldview forming issues.

As teacher educators we need to tell our students about successful experiences we have had that confirm the value of using good literature. We also need to engage our teacher education students in experiences similar to what these third graders had. Reading aloud or having students in the class read aloud quality literature is important for future teachers too. Some of my teacher education students come from homes and schools where they were read to regularly but others have not had this experience. Some express their dislike of reading. Rather than be shocked by this, teacher educators have the opportunity during the four years of undergraduate education to change their minds. While not all courses will have this as their goal, certainly reading, language arts, and children's literature professors can and should make every attempt to form future teachers who do love reading, see its value, and will use it with their future students.

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