

Sponsoring Committee: Dr. Charlotte Zales, Moravian College  
Dr. Joseph Shosh, Moravian College  
Mr. Scott Toonder, Bethlehem Area School District

WHY MORALS BUZZ IN OUR CLASSROOM: DISCUSSING AND  
ANALYZING FABLES, FOLKTALES, AND FAIRY TALES

Mark Lesh

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## **Abstract**

In this qualitative research study, the experiences of 23 third grade students and their teacher in a diverse urban elementary school have been recorded as they discussed and analyzed the morals within fables, folktales, and fairy tales. Methods of data collection included teacher observations, interviews, surveys, and student work. Students read aloud and discussed a variety of moralistic stories in a whole group setting. They discussed these stories in greater detail within small groups, analyzing the lessons and values in each story, examining characters from multiple perspectives, and relating the story to their own lives. The purpose of analyzing moralistic stories was to encourage students' development of their own values systems. Study findings suggested that analyzing moralistic stories in small groups helped students strengthen their own values systems and increased student engagement in reading and writing. Students also reflected upon these values when making decisions outside the classroom.

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### **Researcher Stance**

Growing up, I always enjoyed learning. I had teachers who encouraged me to read, write, and create. I can still remember my third grade research projects, the science fiction stories I wrote in fourth grade, and many other exciting, engaging activities and projects. I did very well in school, and I placed great importance on my education. As a teacher, I like to think that I can inspire my students to develop similar feelings toward their learning. I want to stimulate their thinking and engage them as learners.

I spent the first four years of my career teaching in a suburban third grade classroom. As I began teaching, I felt familiar with the dynamics of the school, given that I had grown up in a suburban environment as well. For the most part, I could teach my students the way I had been taught in school. I designed creative activities that stretched students' thinking and interested them, but I did this using my own personal experiences from elementary school. In this way, teaching was not very difficult for me.

This changed, and I was forced to grow as a teacher, when I moved to an urban elementary third grade classroom within the district. This introduced new dynamics to the classroom as students brought with them varied and rich background experiences that were different from my own as a child. I knew the transition from suburban to urban teaching would require changes in my teaching style, but I was not able to anticipate all of the challenges I would meet. I learned

to redesign lessons to provide appropriate background knowledge for every student. I could not risk making assumptions that every child brought specific prior knowledge to school that I could easily tap into, so I had to develop ways to provide what they would need to find success. I found that, while they did not bring the background experiences I was used to seeing in a suburban classroom, my students brought an equally valuable set of experiences that could lead them toward great success, if only I took a closer look. I also had to accept the fact that students' lives outside of school were often more hectic and complicated, and this would require a balance of understanding while maintaining high expectations for all students. I built a strong rapport with each of my students and their families in this process.

These changes and accommodations I learned to make in my teaching were relatively easy, however, in comparison to learning how to better support the unique emotional experiences my students brought with them to the classroom. As a teacher, I realize that I play many important roles in students' lives. First and foremost, I am their teacher. Yet, I am also a counselor, nurse, parent, and friend, when the need arises. Given the unique lives of each child, it is important for me to be flexible with changing these roles as quickly as the needs of the students may require it. I like to think that teachers carry with them an array of masks, each representing a different role they perform. In my case, I was used to wearing the "teacher" mask more than any other in my collection. However, the switch to

my urban third grade classroom required me to practice wearing my other masks more often. In particular, my “counselor” mask was donned quite frequently as I attempted to mend students’ arguments with one another and address their behavioral issues. I had several students whose unique situations interfered with their and other students’ learning and engagement in the classroom. In our current test-driven society, I felt uncomfortable placing my “teacher” mask aside during those times, but I did what I needed to help students through their emotional struggles so they could return to learning. I came to realize that my students needed to feel emotionally and physically secure in the classroom before their learning and engagement could thrive.

As the year continued, however, I began to realize that I was not teaching students how to deal effectively and independently with their personal and interrelated conflicts and concerns. I helped reengage students and solve their conflicts with one another, but it required my consistent support. I began to reflect back to my own childhood, when I was so excited to learn each day, intrinsically motivated, and couldn’t think of a time when I had conflicts with my peers. I would relate my dilemma to the old proverb, “if you give a man a fish, he’ll eat for the day. If you teach a man how to fish, he’ll eat for the rest of his life.” In my case, I wanted to provide students with stronger values systems to help them develop mutual respect for one another, promote sharing, and encourage kindness and honesty. At the same time, I wanted to help students become more

intrinsically motivated to learn, to see the enthusiasm on their faces as they delved into a new book and studied new things. As each individual problem with motivating students and solving peer conflicts arose on a day-to-day basis and was subsequently solved, I began to wonder more and more how I might be able to strike at the heart of the matter.

An answer began to appear around mid-February, as I started encouraging students to talk openly and honestly about their feelings with one another in forum-like discussions. As I gave students the opportunity to freely discuss their feelings and provided them with an open platform for new ideas, I began to see them take on new responsibilities within our classroom community. The solutions that students brainstormed in discussions helped them independently settle instances of bullying, solve issues with sharing at recess and with work in the classroom, and develop respect for one another.

I realized that open discussions about these types of issues could provide students with the opportunity for real, positive change. I wanted to offer students this sort of possibility more frequently, helping to develop their moral growth in the classroom. I hoped that by doing so, students would feel more ready to learn in our classroom community. After some initial research, I found that reading stories with morals in them could also support this effort. I realized that I could weave character, or values, education into the reading curriculum by reading and discussing such stories. In this way, I would be wearing my “teacher” mask and

“counselor” mask simultaneously. These stories would provide the basis for discussion of certain moral themes, including honesty, respect, and sharing, so students could relate the stories and the characters to their own lives. I decided to attempt this decision, and I set aside some time during our reading block to experiment with reading and discussing a few fables. Every time my students and I read a new story together, they enjoyed talking and writing about what they had learned. Students began asking when we could read the next one. I began to see that these stories were not only having an effect on their moral thinking, but were also a motivating experience. For some, it seemed almost as if they had discovered a new purpose for reading, realizing the value that books can hold within them. I realized that this type of character education warranted further study through action research, which brought me to my question, “What will be the observed behaviors and reported experiences of teacher and students when moralistic stories are discussed and analyzed in a third grade classroom?”

## Literature Review

### Introduction

John Dewey (1938) once said, “The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning” (p. 48). Nurturing such an attitude in students is a challenge that every classroom teacher faces. For students who have lost sight of the value in learning, there are often visible behaviors in the classroom, including ones that negatively affect their ability to learn. This may not only affect the individual student who has lost interest in learning, but also his or her peers and the overall classroom environment (Ratcliff, 2010). While it has been a debated topic in the past, providing students with the opportunity to discuss their own personal values and incorporating character education into the curricula can be crucial for improving student behavior and engagement, and for helping to prepare students for adulthood (Rayburn, 2004). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2002) supports this, stating that teachers should commit to their “students and their learning, [their] self-esteem, motivation, character, sense of civic responsibility, and respect for individual, cultural, religions, and racial differences” (p. 3). The question is, how do classroom teachers turn kids on to learning and ensure that they develop values that will allow them to succeed in the classroom, and in life?

There is a definite need to provide students with a set of core values; however, while society has come to expect teachers to provide students with these

values, many teachers are unsure how to accomplish this in the classroom (Edgington, 2002). Reading, both as a subject and an activity, can serve as a vehicle toward helping students develop such values and attitudes in the classroom. Literature can be used to help students cultivate positive traits through the study of the characters and their choices, as well as help students deal with their behaviors and emotions (Kara-Soteriou & Rose, 2008). More specifically, moralistic stories, like fairy tales, folktales, and fables, can provide powerful opportunities to weave character education into the curricula. The discussion and analysis of these stories can not only improve students' literacy skills, but also serve to reengage students and help them develop values for succeeding as individuals and participating as a community of learners.

### **Character Education in the Classroom**

Before espousing the benefits of discussing moralistic stories in the classroom, it is important to understand what structures must be in place in order for effective character education to occur. Additionally, one must be familiar with the leading approaches to character education in order to understand how to develop appropriate classroom instruction.

**Types of character education.** There are several approaches to teaching character education in the classroom, the most prominent of which are values inculcation, values clarification, moral reasoning, and values analysis. The aim within each of these methodologies is to provide students with a deepening

understanding of core traits and values that have been deemed desirable by our society. These values serve an immediate purpose within the classroom and an ongoing function in students' lives as they mature into adults. Among the top-listed traits within these approaches are: honesty, kindness, fairness, respect, and responsibility (Prestwich, 2004).

***Values inculcation.*** Values inculcation is the traditional approach to character education. With this approach, the teacher stresses the importance of predetermined values to students. From a literature standpoint, students might read stories with characters possessing valuable traits that the teacher emphasizes through discussion and reflection (Edgington, 2002).

***Values clarification.*** Values clarification is a more student-centered approach, as it allows students to identify and strengthen their own personal values. The teacher does not correct or adjust students' preferences in values. Instead, the teacher helps students reflect upon their choices. It is important to note, however, that there are flaws in a purely values clarification driven approach to character education, as this encourages relativism in students' development of values. Without any guidance from the teacher, students are left to fine tune their own beliefs, regardless of whether or not these beliefs are desirable to society (Kohn, 1997). For example, if a student believes that hurting others is an acceptable reaction to feeling upset, then this approach, when unaccompanied with any of the other approaches, would encourage that student to pursue that line

of thinking. From a literature standpoint, the teacher might provide students with open-ended questions that force students to clarify their own personal values (Edgington, 2002).

***Values analysis.*** A values analysis approach asks students to make values-based decisions, examining all of the possible choices and consequences. Students must then defend and justify their decisions. From a literature standpoint, the teacher might ask students to identify a critical point in a story and decide on their own course of action, analyzing all of the alternatives and reflecting upon how those choices will affect the characters and the society at large (Edgington, 2002).

***Moral reasoning.*** Moral reasoning is an approach to character education arguing that values-based decisions are a developmental process. Similar to the values analysis approach, students are presented with a values-based decision to make. Once a student's decision is made, it is important that the student provides the reasoning behind the decision. The teacher can then ask probing questions and change the circumstances of the moral situation to help students better understand their moral position. It is through this repeated process over time that students develop moral reasoning and move to higher levels of moral thought. Kohlberg (1975), who was the key contributor to the development of moral reasoning, stresses that open peer discussions are also vital to the movement toward each progressive stage of moral reasoning. From a literature standpoint, the teacher might provide students with an activity similar to the values analysis approach.

However, the teacher would then verbally change small parts of the plot and the characters' circumstances, forcing students to either stand firm with their reasoning or slightly tweak their decision in order to better fit the situation (Edgington, 2002).

**Classroom environment.** The classroom environment has a huge impact on the success of students and character education. Teachers must provide a safe learning environment for students as well as create a classroom that physically and emotionally supports character development. Studies have been done on how changing the classroom design can positively affect student behaviors and engagement and decrease disruptions (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010). But, there is additional evidence for how the classroom environment can be restructured to develop students' values. For example, Adams (2007) reported success with using "peace tables" to mediate student arguments before serious student conflicts arise. Teachers also create safe and character-building learning environments by sharing personal experiences with students during discussions. The same extends to students sharing experiences with one another. This leads to rich dialogue among students and teachers, helping them build values, such as compassion and understanding for one another (Adams, 2007). Creating a physical and emotionally safe classroom environment for student interaction and learning is vital, and a prerequisite, to the success of students and their character education.

**Parent involvement.** Parents play a critical and foremost role in the character development of children (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Parents are key stakeholders in students' lives, and, as such, should be included in the character education that takes place at schools. Unfortunately, many parents do not feel comfortable in the school environment, so it is important that teachers and principals make active and consistent efforts to include them as partners in their children's character growth. Parents are, traditionally, disempowered stakeholders in the school setting who must be empowered in order to promote healthy character education. It is to the benefit of each student when the behaviors and practices of parents align with the moral mission of the school (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Parents must be encouraged to become an integral part of classroom activities and instruction in the classroom to develop a more cohesive character education program.

### **Discussing Moralistic Stories for Character Education**

In general, literature is a natural and comfortable instrument for the transmission of core values to children (Edgington, 2002). Literature allows for the open discussion of moral dilemmas and the examination of character traits. It can be used across all ages, and the conversations that emerge from these examinations can help students identify with and build connections to the traits exhibited in the characters of the stories (Prestwich, 2004).

Fairy tales, folktales, and fables have the potential to serve as a powerful foundation for well-developed character education. The rich discussions that can arise among students from these moralistic stories warrant closer study. Educators have successfully used these genres to promote higher order thinking skills and critical literacy in students (Adams, 2007). This alone would compel the discussion of such stories. However, the prospective benefits of moralistic stories being analyzed by students extends beyond building literacy, as educators have also reported that students were able to define and develop their own personal values through careful literary analysis (Kara-Soteriou & Rose, 2008; Miller, 2011; Paris, 1999). This is critical to the character development of students. Educators also noted positive changes in student engagement when culturally relevant stories are read and discussed, allowing for students to foster an appreciation of their own and each other's cultures (Bourke, 2008; Sturgess & Locke, 2009).

**Developing students' values.** The discussion of moralistic stories allows for students to become aware of their own value systems. Through the development of these values, student behavior and interaction in the classroom will noticeably change as students develop increased respect for themselves, one another, and the teacher. There is a definite connection between discussing students' values and improving students' behavior and their respect for one another (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). Educators will see an improvement in

students' values and behavior that reflect the specific goals of the character education program that is designed (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). For the purpose of discussing moralistic stories, then, students will develop values with respect to the traits and values discussed within each story.

Discussing and analyzing the characters in children's stories and the traits they possess allow students to safely explore their own values systems and morals. Kara-Soteriou and Rose (2008) used various stories to highlight desirable character values in Rose's second grade classroom, elucidating the moralistic themes and values woven into each story through class discussion and activities. Rose discussed matters like what it means to be a good person, individual and shared responsibilities, and appropriate ways to settle differences. Kara-Soteriou and Rose reported that the characters within the stories "help[ed] children explore conflict resolution, intergenerational communications, social conformity, and the negative effects of prejudice" (p. 30). In helping students discuss and explore the concepts of "right" and "wrong" in these stories, they saw that there were "fewer negative interactions between children in a more caring classroom community" (p. 35).

Other educators, such as Paris (1999), have written about similar successes with using fairy tales to discuss and understand issues of maltreatment. Students in first and fourth grade discussed and analyzed the characters in "Cinderella" and "The Twelve Months." This gave students the opportunity to assess the

characters' actions and consider how they would respond, if in a similar situation. Paris noted that, "the fairy tales are well suited for the investigation of psychological maltreatment because the abusive elements are set forth as having happened in a time long ago and far away" (p. 15). Essentially, students were able to discuss more sensitive subjects, even if the topics connected on a personal level, without fear because they could fall back to the character in the story.

Similar literature has been used in other classrooms to help students deal with issues of bullying by identifying with more positive role models and behaviors. Miller (2011) reported middle school student success when analyzing animal characters in stories. Students were able to categorize animal characters as bullies, positive role models, followers, and leaders. They identified specific actions and behaviors that portrayed the characters as such, and were able to connect with the characters. They comfortably related personal stories during these discussions because of the emotional distancing allowed through the use of the characters, similar to the findings in Paris's study. Miller reported that students gained personal insights during the study with regard to the themes discussed. Looking at characters in this way allows students to dig deep into their core values and safely make important connections to their own lives.

**Improving student engagement and relationships.** Student engagement can arise out of the personal and cultural connections students make with the moralistic stories being discussed. Each of the studies that relate to developing

students' values emphasizes this. Kara-Soteriou and Rose (2008), in addition to helping students explore character traits and make personal connections to selected stories, also noted that the discussions and activities led to higher levels of student engagement (p. 35). Paris and Miller's studies also showed evidence of students making personal connections with the stories. In this context, discussion of literature can promote student engagement. Almasi and McKeown (1996) found that student motivation was linked to engagement, and that "students are more highly engaged in the literary act when provided with the opportunity to respond to and challenge each others' interpretations, challenge the author's style, share their opinions about the text, and question the meaning of the text" (p. 36).

In addition to making personal connections that promote engagement, the cultural links students make with fairy tales, folktales, and fables can lead to higher levels of engagement and the building of a more understanding community of learners. Sturgess and Locke (2009) successfully used fairy tales in a culturally diverse classroom in New Zealand to help students understand one another and develop better relationships. The fairy tales were selected from students' cultures to make them relevant and personal. According to the results of the study, "student feedback indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity to explore and present an aspect of their own culture. They gained more knowledge of each other and, for a few students, more knowledge of their own culture" (p. 394). Students were enthusiastic toward reading and discussing these stories, and they began to

see one another's cultural diversity as a positive resource. Other educators have reported similar findings, writing that students are more motivated by connections made to their cultures, and this makes them more active learners (Adams, 2007). Carefully selecting the right types of stories to read with students can lead to powerful forms of motivation and engagement.

**Improving students' literacy skills.** There is research to suggest, however, that character education programs may not lead to greater student achievement (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). However, Skaggs' and Bodenhorn's research examined only stand-alone character education programs on a school-wide level, where the character education was separate from the rest of the curricula. Obviously, when infused and interwoven within the reading curriculum, there is the opportunity to improve students' literacy skills at the same time that values are being developed.

Discussion and analysis of moralistic stories can certainly lead to higher level thinking skills and increased literacy. Each of the previously mentioned studies pushed students to think critically about the characters and their choices in each story. They compared characters to themselves and others, wrote about the stories, and formed and argued opinions about the characters. In particular, Bourke (2008), a first grade teacher, did a research study on how critical literacy can be developed using fairy tales. Fairy tales served as the catalyst for his work, giving students the chance to scratch away at the surface of "good" and "bad" and

begin reassessing and redefining the characters and stories through critical lenses. The discussions he had with his students allowed his students to develop better analytical and reflective-thinking skills. Critical literacy, for the purposes of this study, is the act of engaging students in thought-provoking discussions that seek to look at the text from multiple perspectives, often from a social angle (DeVoogd, 2006). This deeper analysis of the text then has the potential to turn toward discussions of how to develop a more compassionate, fair community (Powell, Cantrell, & Adams, 2001). It is through this sort of literary reflection that students will develop their values and make personal and cultural connections to the stories.

### **Conclusion**

Many obstacles can interfere with students' learning, including student behavior, disengagement, and the classroom atmosphere. These concerns can be addressed with the use of character education-infused curricula (Ratcliff, 2010; Rayburn, 2004). It is important that educators seek to engage students and help them develop values that allow them to succeed as students in the classroom and as members of society (**National Board** for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002). Dewey once asked the question:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of

things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?" (p. 49)

The discussion and analysis of moralistic stories has the potential to help students regain their souls, so to speak. The effects of reading fairy tales, folktales, and fables are vast, ranging from social and behavioral development to increased motivation and multicultural understanding to improved literacy skills (Adams, 2007; Almasi & McKeown, 1996; Kara-Soteriou & Rose, 2008; Miller, 2011; Paris, 1999; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006; Sturgess and Locke, 2009). However, before embarking on this endeavor, it is important to understand the ways in which to set up such classroom discussions (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010). The construction of a safe and understanding classroom environment is also critical to this process, as is including all important stakeholders in the process to ensure a united front (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). These stories have the potential to be a worthwhile and enriching experience for both students and educators alike.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of implementing discussions and analyses of moralistic stories in my third grade classroom's reading curriculum. My goals were to provide students with opportunities to build their values systems and to promote student engagement and interest in reading. As I designed my research study, I tried to plan meaningful discussions around stories that would meet the needs of my students as well as be flexible to any needs that might arise among students. I chose carefully a variety of data gathering methods to ensure that my findings as a teacher researcher were valid and effectively revealed students' experiences. This ensured that I maintained the highest level of trustworthiness to my research and my students.

### **Setting and Participants**

My study took place in an urban, open concept elementary school in northeast Pennsylvania consisting of approximately 250 students. An open concept school is one in which there are few or no walls separating each classroom's space. The sounds and activities from one classroom can be heard and seen by the connecting classrooms and spaces. The school's student body was approximately 49% Caucasian, 31% Hispanic, 15% African American, and 5% Asian American.

My classroom borders along the room where computer class is held twice a week. The classroom is also adjacent to a stage area, where various assemblies and special programs are held. Classrooms also use the railing that separates the classroom from the stage as an area to line up prior to specialist classes (gym, music, art, and computer class).

My class was comprised of 23 students (13 boys and 10 girls). Eight of the students were Hispanic, ten of the students were Caucasian, four of the students were African-American, and one student was Asian-American. Five of the students had identified learning disabilities and individualized education plans, or IEPs. Additionally, one of these students spoke only Spanish, and thus he received ESOL services. Two of my students also possessed gifted individualized education plans, or GIEPs. Some students have been attending this school since kindergarten and have been a part of the community since they were little; however, the majority of the students have transferred schools from other schools and districts at least once in their life.

### **Procedures**

The study was conducted over the course of eleven weeks. The first week was spent introducing the study, which included sending home and collecting parent consent forms, conducting a student survey, introducing students to the types of activities and discussions that would take place, and conducting initial individual student interviews with all students.

The next seven weeks focused on reading and discussing folktales, fairy tales, and fables. Students read a moralistic story together as a class, followed by a whole group discussion of the moral and story structure. The following days focused on deeper analyses of the morals and themes of each story within student-led small groups. Students were provided with a set of carefully designed questions to encourage discussion and reflection on certain values related to the story, connections between the story and students' lives, and instances of critical literacy. Students were also allowed time for additional questions that students might want to discuss. Stories were selected based on students' responses to their survey responses. Books focusing on important values shared by students were read in the early weeks of the study in order to elicit strong communication and discussion. Once students gained experience with discussing values in these stories, they were introduced to books containing values they had not yet formed strong opinions about, in order to help develop their values systems. Following these days of discussion, students reflected on these stories and what they discussed in groups inside their journals, usually using one of the previous day's discussion questions as a prompt.

The next two weeks focused on students writing their own, personal fairy tales, folktales, and fables. Students selected a value or moral from one of the stories they read together and used that to create their own writing pieces.

The final week was devoted to conducting individual interviews with each of my students again. Students were also given another survey to complete, similar to the one from Week One.

### **Data Collection Plan**

In order to effectively answer my research question, “What will be the observed behaviors and reported experiences of teacher and students when moralistic stories are discussed and analyzed in a third grade classroom?”, I needed to create a data collection plan for my study. I used a variety of data gathering methods to ensure that my data captured the essences of my students’ experiences and the occurrences in the classroom. This included participant observations, student surveys and interviews, and student work. All of this was added chronologically into a field log, wherein I reflected upon students’ experiences and my own teaching practices throughout the course of the study. I maintained the field log for the duration of the study.

**Participant observations.** I recorded brief, consistent observations during classroom discussions. I collected my notes in a field log that detailed what I saw and heard in the classroom (Hendricks, 2009). These notes focused on the discussions following read alouds, journal writing, and any conversations or activities that related to students’ values or connected with the research study. Immediately following the end of each school day, I wrote my notes and additional details I remembered in my field log, separating my own thoughts and

reflections from what I saw and heard. I maintained objectivity in my description of each event, recording any inferences, thoughts, or feelings in brackets. These notes were stored in a safe and secure location throughout the study and destroyed upon completion of the study.

**Student surveys.** I used surveys to gauge any changes in students' thinking and beliefs. I conducted a pre- and post-survey using the same rating scales and questions to measure any changes in students' value systems and enthusiasm toward reading. The surveys asked students to rank the importance of certain qualities on rating scales. The surveys also contained several open-ended questions that posed moral dilemmas. Students needed to explain how they would respond to these dilemmas. I encouraged students to express their answers honestly so that their responses did not reflect what they thought I wanted them to write. I also stressed that they would not be reprimanded, judged, or graded in any way for the truthfulness of their answers.

**Student interviews.** I conducted student interviews at the beginning and end of the study. I began the study by interviewing each of my students individually. I asked students open-ended questions relating to their values systems. I also gave students the opportunity to share additional thoughts, concerns, and feelings about the study. I wanted to give my students the chance to freely express themselves, including anything they wanted to share about their

home life and other personal experiences. I concluded the study by interviewing each of my students again during the last week, using a similar set of questions.

**Student artifacts.** I collected and analyzed student work. This consisted of student journals and stories. Students' journals related to characters' values and moral choices in the stories and helped elucidate students' personal connections with the stories.

### **Trustworthiness Statement**

There are several ways in which I ensured that my action research study was carried out in a safe and trustworthy manner.

Before beginning my qualitative research study, I submitted my proposal to the Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board, or HSIRB, for approval during the summer of 2012 (Appendix A) to ensure that student safety and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. Once my study was approved, I provided my building principal with a consent form (see Appendix B) explaining the nature of my study, asking her permission to carry out the study in the fall. Shortly thereafter, I sent home explanative consent forms to all of my students' parents and legal guardians (Appendix C). Although all my students participated in the activities of the research study, their parents, at any time, were allowed to discontinue the use of the data from their child at any time without penalty. All students who participated in the study remained anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. I also shared this information directly with my students in

“kid friendly” language, explaining their rights to withdraw from the research study if they at all felt uncomfortable.

It was also extremely important that the data I collected throughout this study was cross-referenced with other pieces of data using triangulation to ensure that my findings were valid. Triangulation is the process of validating one’s findings by analyzing data collected through multiple methods and sources and through the lenses of different perspectives (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997). Looking at multiple forms of data during the action research process allows the researcher to avoid leaving any gaps in his or her analysis that might have occurred if only one method or source had been used (Lancy, 2001). This is why I used a variety of data collection methods, including participant observations, surveys, student interviews, and student artifacts. This ensured that I had multiple sources of data leading to my analysis of the study. I sorted through all these pieces of data using coding. Once I coded all of my data, I placed related pieces of data into bins to help organize my data. This allowed me to visualize the most frequent topics appearing throughout my research study. Then, I was able to make theme statements that accurately and appropriately summarized my analysis of the research data. Eisner (1991) writes that the purpose of triangulation is to “look for recurrent behaviors or actions, like those theme-like features of a situation that inspire confidence that the events interpreted and appraised are not aberrant or exceptional, but rather characteristic of the situation” (p. 110). I also conducted

member checks throughout this process to ensure that I captured the ideas, feelings, and thought processes of students appropriately (Hendricks, 2009).

As I collected and coded my data, I was also aware of the fact that I had collected instances of data that did not reflect the overall goals of my qualitative research study. These cases are known as negative case studies, or discrepant findings. It was important for me to explore these findings in more detail and maintain them in my field log. It is just as important to understand what did not work as it is to understand how things worked effectively. It helped me to look at my study from new perspectives and better clarify under which conditions my study would succeed (Hendricks, 2009; Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997).

### **Researcher Bias**

Another important part of ensuring that this study was trustworthy was to be aware of my own personal biases. I reflected on preconceived notions I had regarding my students, the classroom setting, and my research study so that I could keep these biases in check (Hendricks, 2009). One preconceived notion that I continue to reflect on is that a “loud” student is a “bad” student. I recognize that not every student, especially in an urban environment, learns best by sitting quietly and listening intently to the teacher. I have learned from personal experience that some students need to move around, talk to peers, and be expressive in order to learn successfully. However, I must help students learn to balance this need with the respect for other students and their learning, especially

in an open concept school setting. I feel an unspoken pressure to maintain a quiet atmosphere in order to be respectful of the classrooms and spaces that surround me without walls. There are times when students may be focused on their work, but are talking to their partners so loud that I have to remind them to be quiet. When I must share repeated reminders to the same students, I may identify the student's behavior as defiant, and I need to remember that I must find ways to be encouraging to those students. I need to remind myself that I was not so firm about maintaining such a classroom environment prior to teaching in an open concept classroom, and I must always be aware of the challenges that such a school environment presents.

Additionally, I have come to appreciate certain morals and values over the years that are both important and relevant to my life, yet I must be careful not to force my own values and beliefs upon my students. Knowing the different approaches to character education, I wrestled throughout the study over how much input I should have in my students' developments of their own values systems. I continue to reflect upon my role in students' lives in this respect, and I try to balance a values inculcation approach with the other three approaches that encourage more student-driven moral thinking. I tried to reach a comfortable compromise, providing students with appropriate feedback and guidance in their moral thinking while still allowing them the freedom to develop their own sense of values.

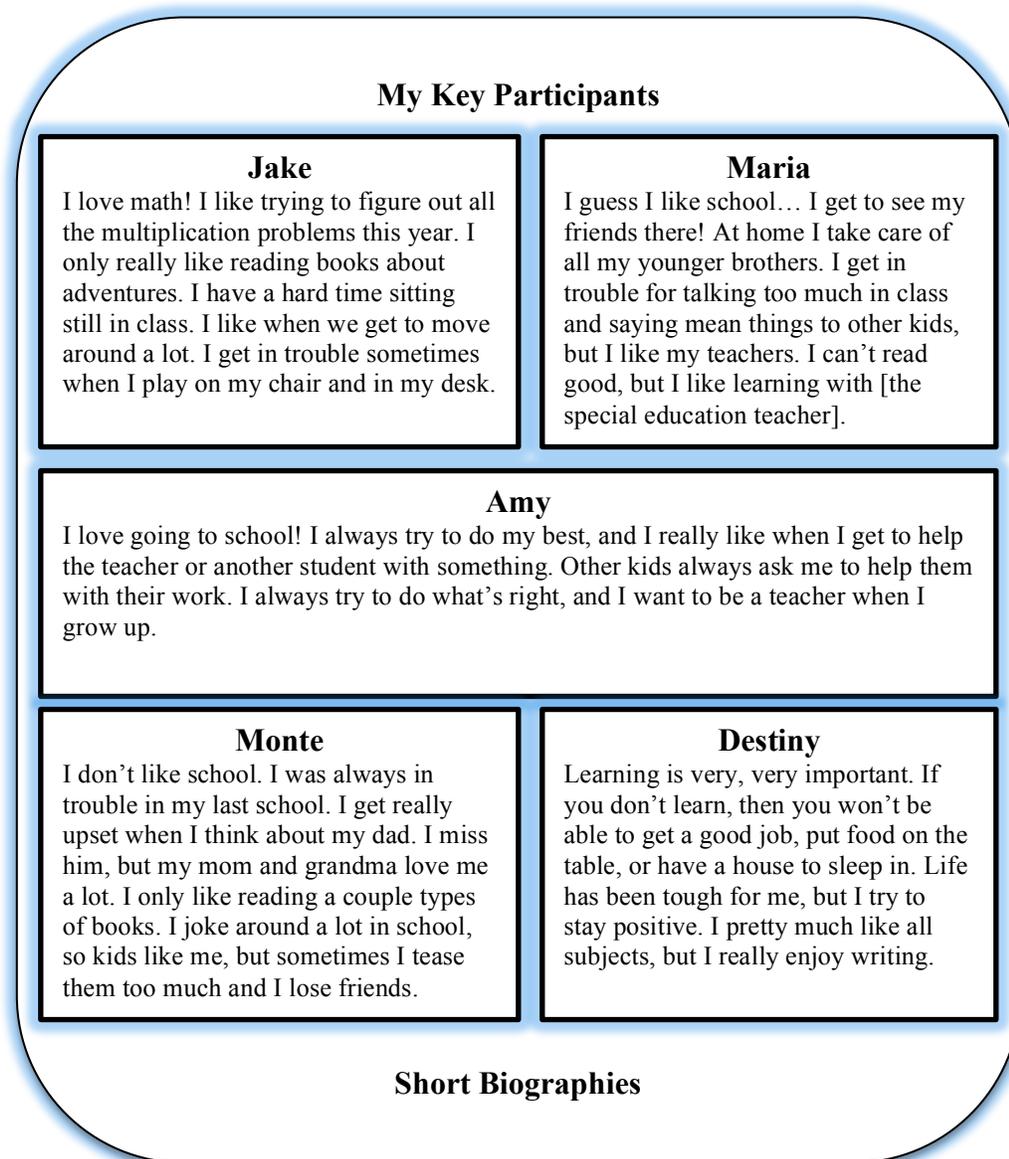
## **My Story**

### **Introduction**

Mosquitoes are buzzing in our ears, yet we choose to ignore them, knowing they are harmless and seek only our attention. Apprehensive readers are singing Caribbean folktale songs in the middle of a new read-aloud. A group of students are considering the driving forces behind a king's greed that led him down such a dark path, and students who would sooner feign illness than write a paragraph are pulling out their stories as soon as they get into their seat.

These are some of the more poignant images I have in my head when I reflect back on my research study. When my students say things like, "I want to be the green snake when I grow up," or they point out greedy kings in our midst, I cannot help but smile. To an outsider, it might seem like my students are speaking in riddles, but the truth is that these animals and characters are metaphors for much deeper meanings and realizations that took place within the literature discussions and writings of my students. To better understand the significance of these accounts, I must first begin by talking about some of my students and introduce a small, annoying mosquito.

## Key Participants



*Figure 1. My key participants. Short biographies of each of my key participants.*

During the first week of gathering data from surveys and individual student interviews, I found that my key participants' responses and values systems represented the classroom dynamics well. For example, their open-ended responses to moral situations and dilemmas were very different from one another. Maria and Monte both wrote that they would keep an iPod Touch they found on the sidewalk, while Amy, Destiny, and Jake would all try to find ways to return it to its owner. The rest of the class seemed split with this moral dilemma as well, with more students leaning toward finding its rightful owner. Maria also said she would try to hide the glass she broke, while the rest either remained undecided or wanted to tell the truth. Their responses accurately reflected the rest of the class. They all agreed that they would help out in a bullying situation, which was true for the entire class. Interestingly, all the other students but Destiny wrote that they would fight back if their brother pushed them.

Table 1

*Student Open-Ended Responses (pre-survey)*

<b>“You find an iPod Touch on the sidewalk in your neighborhood. What do you do?”</b>
<p>Jake: I would take it to city hall.          Maria: I’d pick it up and take it home.          Amy: I would tell my mom and ask whose it is, and if it’s no one’s I would put it in a lost and found box.          Monte: I’d keep it because I could use it.          Destiny: I would return it to the person who dropped it because that person would miss it.</p>
<b>“Your brother shoves you down on the ground. What do you do?”</b>
<p>Jake: I’d punch him in the face.          Maria: I would punch him in the forehead.          Amy: I’d defend myself because I’m not going to let him boss me around.          Monte: I would slap him.          Destiny: I would tell on her and say stop because if she didn’t stop my mom would ground her.</p>
<b>“You see someone being picked on out at recess. You aren’t close friends with the person. What do you do?”</b>
<p>Jake: I’d help him by telling the teacher.          Maria: I’d go and tell the teacher.          Amy: I’d help them and defend them so they wouldn’t get hurt. I would tell the bully to stop.          Monte: I’d tell the teacher.          Destiny: I would tell the teacher.</p>
<b>“You broke a glass of water while your parents were out. What do you do?”</b>
<p>Jake: I would be responsible and let them know.          Maria: I’d throw it away and pretend it never happened.          Amy: I’d tell them and ask my sister if she can help clean it up.          Monte: I don’t know.          Destiny: I would clean it up and tell mom it was an accident.</p>

All of this helped me see which values were more important than others to students at the start of the study. For example, the iPod scenario shed some light on students' levels of responsibility, which was varied, and the broken glass showed that honesty was very important to almost all the students. Students' sympathy and kindness toward others were very strong, as was obvious with their reactions to the bullying scenario, although it was interesting to see that most of them would be willing to fight back or at least defend themselves if a sibling was bothering them. This was used to help me gain a better understanding of my students and guide my decisions throughout the study.

Interviews with my students also helped me gain a better sense of their values systems. I wanted to discover their definitions of "good," in terms of people. I was also curious to see whether or not they had made any connections to fictional characters in stories serving as role models.

I was impressed to find out that students like Amy and Destiny had already developed strong definitions of what "good" people should be and possess, describing them using the same value I wanted to focus on during this study. For students like these, my study would undoubtedly serve as a means toward better refining their already-sophisticated values systems. Jake was able to provide specific examples of what makes a person good, although he was not able to articulate how characters in stories can be role models at the same level as Amy or Destiny. Interestingly, both Jake and Amy thought that being smart made a

person good, which other students in the class also believed. Maria was very unsure about the questions I asked her, which suggested to me that this study would serve as an important opportunity for Maria to really think about her values systems and how it applies to the world around her. Monte's responses were reflective of other students in the class, who believed that being cool and funny made a character in a story a good person. These responses from students reinforced my resolve to pursue this study, in the hopes of helping students develop their values systems and potentially break stereotypes about what makes characters and real people "good."

Table 2

*Student interview questions (pre-study)*

<b>“What do you think makes a character ‘good’ in a story? Why?”</b>
<p>Jake: When they help people. And the main character is one.</p> <p>Maria: When they’re funny.</p> <p>Amy: When they’re nice, kind, caring, and thoughtful. It makes for a good person.</p> <p>Monte: When he fights crime, cuz the good guys always beat up the bad guys.</p> <p>Destiny: Well, honesty, respect, being faithful... because you need good characters to make a good story.</p>
<b>“What do you think makes a person good in real life? Why?”</b>
<p>Jake: My mom is one. She helped an old lady get to a place once. I think she needed help getting across the snow or something.</p> <p>Maria: To be nice.</p> <p>Amy: The same things. Being smart and helpful is good for people to be.</p> <p>Monte: You should be nice to each other.</p> <p>Destiny: A kid needs to live in a house over their heads with a good family, they need to be nice to other kids, and if you get bullied, you just ignore it, and they’ll get tired of trying to bother you.</p>
<b>Do you think characters in stories can be role models?”</b>
<p>Jake: Frannie K. Stein is smart and invents, so she’s pretty good.</p> <p>Maria: I don’t know.</p> <p>Amy: Yes. Hansel and Gretel are kindof like role models, because they show you that you shouldn’t go in strange people’s houses.</p> <p>Monte: Captain Underpants is one cuz he’s cool and he flies around in his underpants. Big Nate’s good cuz he gets bullied by Randy and so he’s the good guy.</p> <p>Destiny: Mmhhh. They can help show kids how to be better.</p>
<b>“What’s your favorite story to read?”</b>
<p>Jake: Frannie K. Stein.</p> <p>Maria: I don’t really have one.</p> <p>Amy: I enjoy the Black Lagoon series because of the pictures and since they’re easier to read. I also like Charlotte’s Web because of the animals.</p> <p>Monte: Captain Underpants.</p> <p>Destiny: I pretty much like all books I read.</p>

## The Mosquito

After a week of collecting initial data, I have finally gotten myself ready to begin reading the first moralistic story with students. I have chosen a classic children's story, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*, by V. Aardema. I selected this book because I want the research study to begin with a value they already strongly possessed. Looking over the survey data I collected from the prior week, it was obvious that honesty was a unanimously important value to students.

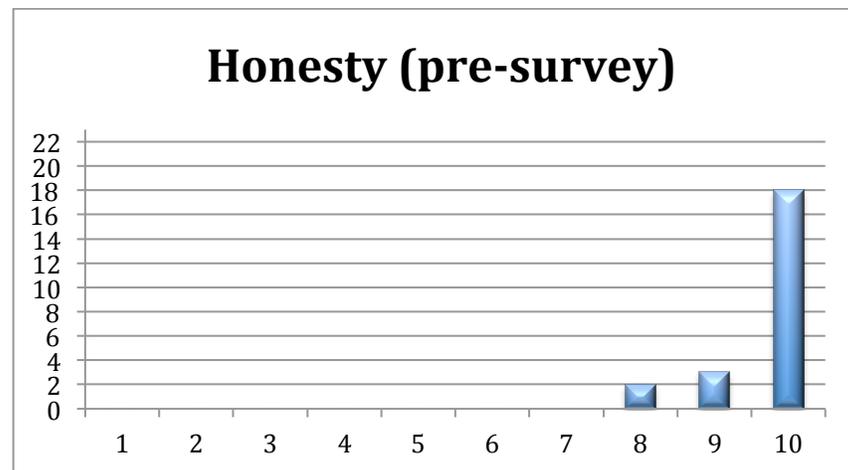
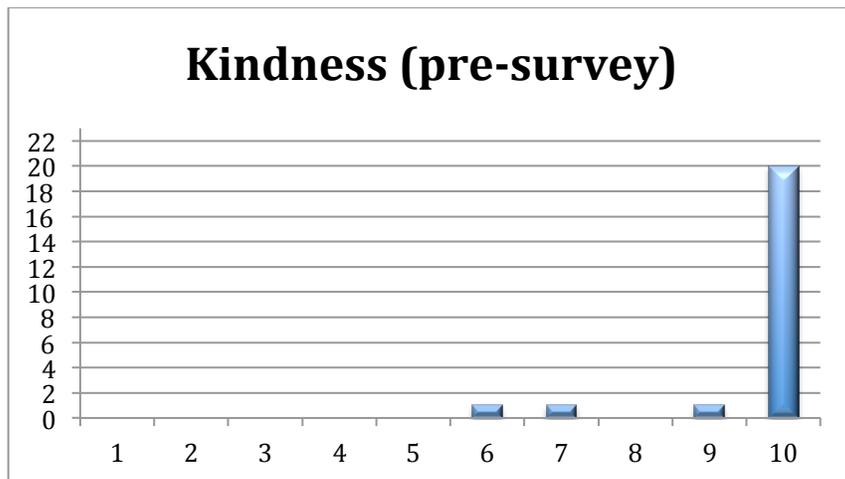
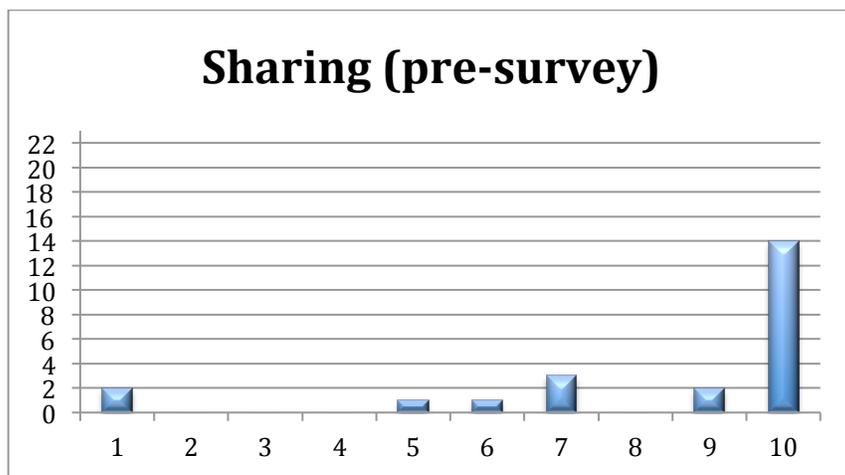


Figure 2. *Honesty (pre-survey)*. A bar graph displaying the importance of honesty to the class (1 being not important, 10 being very important). Bars represent the number of students.



*Figure 3. Kindness (pre-survey). A bar graph displaying the importance of kindness to the class (1 being not important, 10 being very important). Bars represent the number of students.*



*Figure 4. Sharing (pre-survey). A bar graph displaying the importance of sharing to the class (1 being not important, 10 being very important). Bars represent the number of students.*

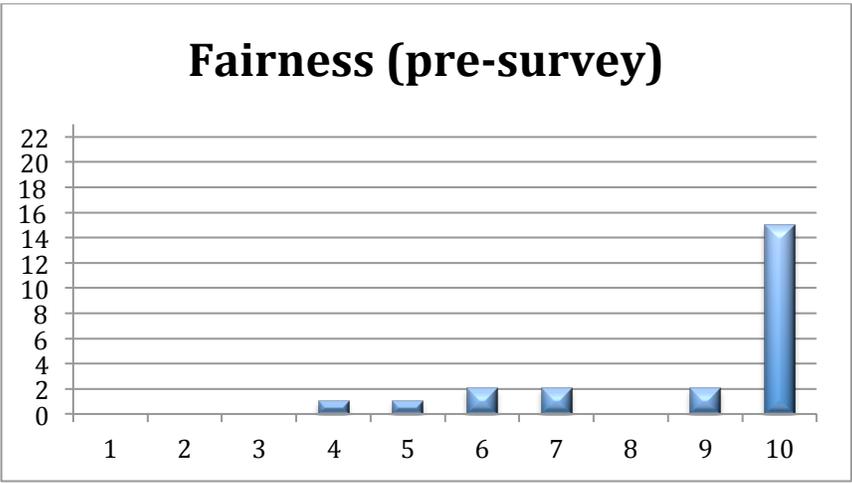


Figure 5. Fairness (pre-survey). A bar graph displaying the importance of fairness to the class (1 being not important, 10 being very important). Bars represent the number of students.

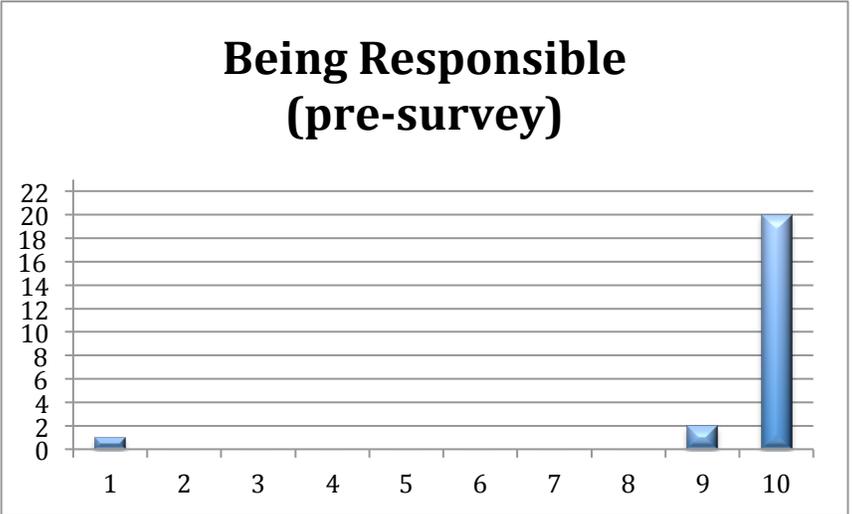
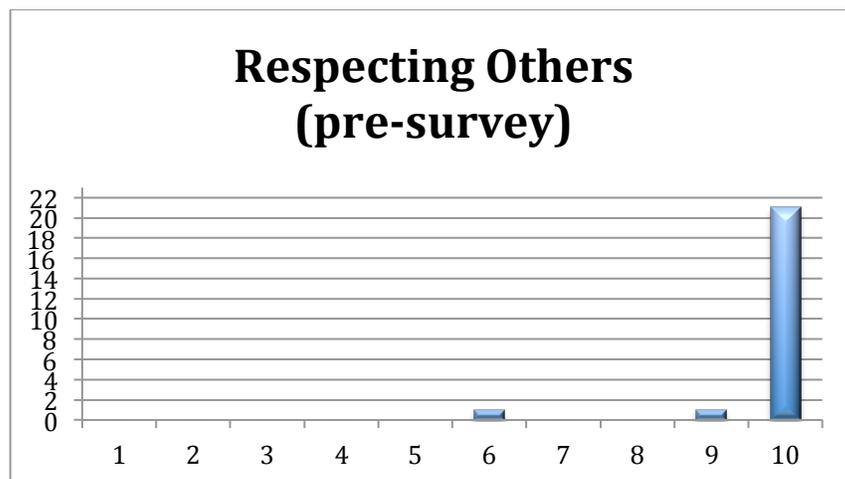


Figure 6. Being responsible (pre-survey). A bar graph displaying the importance of being responsible to the class (1 being not important, 10 being very important). Bars represent the number of students.

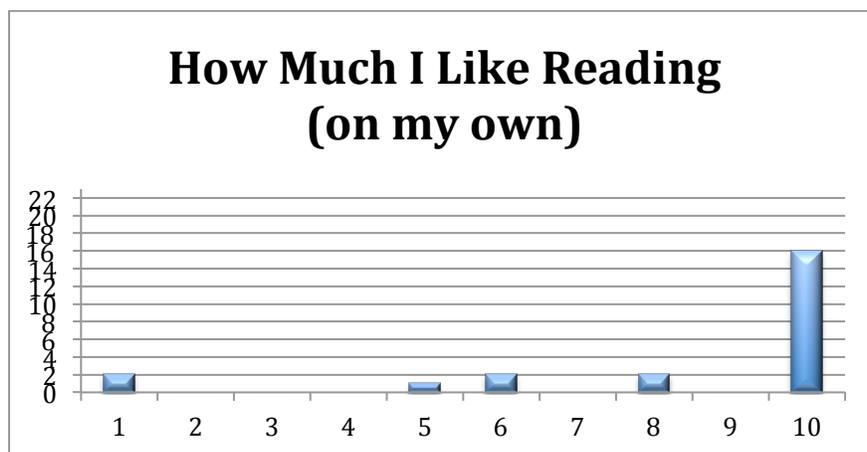


*Figure 7. Respecting others (pre-survey). A bar graph displaying the importance of respecting others to the class (1 being not important, 10 being very important). Bars represent the number of students.*

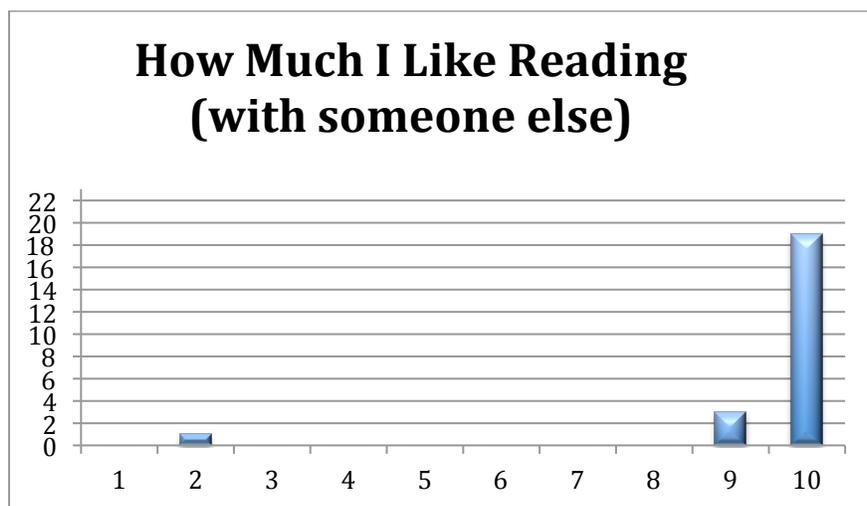
Although most of the values students were asked to rate were considered very important by the majority of the class, there were no students who ranked honesty lower than an eight out of ten, which made it stand out from the rest of the values. *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* is a book focused heavily on the idea of honesty, so I believed that it would be interesting, and comfortable, to begin discussing a value that students felt universally strong about.

In previous years, students had really enjoyed this story. I was very conscientious about the stories I had selected, especially after talking with students about their favorite stories. Several students could not tell me what books they liked to read, and some told me with honesty that they did not enjoy reading. This reluctance toward reading was one of the reasons why I began this study, in the hopes of promoting students' reading interests and engagement during reading

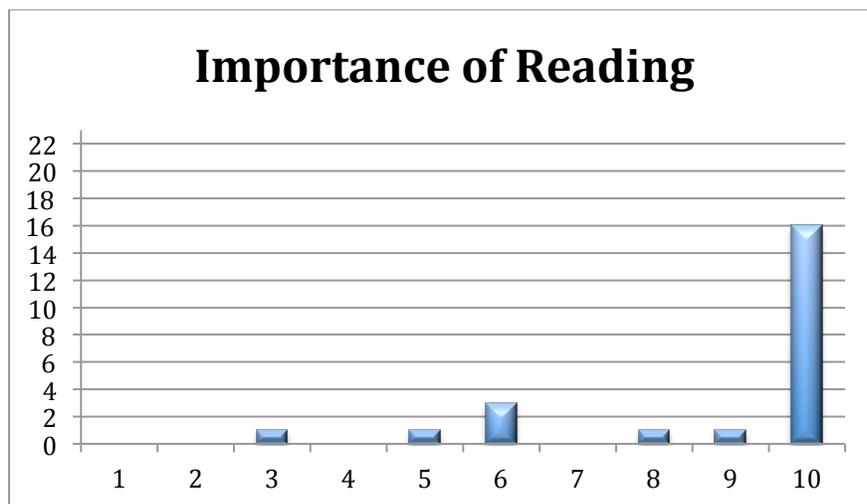
class. While many students were enthusiastic about reading, it was obvious that many were apprehensive, and this was also visible in their pre-survey when I asked them to rate certain aspects of reading on a scale from one to ten.



*Figure 8. How much I like reading (independently) (pre-survey). A bar graph displaying how much students enjoy reading on their own (1 being not at all, 10 being a lot). Bars represent the number of students.*



*Figure 9. How much I like reading (with someone else) (pre-survey). A bar graph displaying how much students enjoy reading with someone else (1 being not at all, 10 being a lot). Bars represent the number of students.*



*Figure 10. Importance of reading (pre-survey). A bar graph displaying how much students think reading is important (1 being not at all, 10 being a lot). Bars represent the number of students.*

Overall, it seemed as if students preferred reading with someone else instead of reading on their own. I was hopeful that my first read-aloud would go well then, since we would be reading it together as a whole class. It saddened me to see so many students rank reading low in importance; however, I was also excited at the chance to show students a new purpose for reading, to show them how the lessons within each story could be used to deepen their values, to help them through their lives.

The students already knew that they would be reading books with morals in them. They also understood that they would be reflecting upon their values as they relate to each story, discussing their thoughts with one another and writing in their journals. Yet, despite preparing my students for the start of this study, I

could not help but worry about the effectiveness of my study. What if my students do not latch onto the morals in each story, or what if they find the books irrelevant and boring? Will they internalize the values brought up in their discussions, and will they write reflective journals that demonstrate this? With these concerns in mind, I began to read the first story.

*Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* is about a small mosquito that, for unknown reasons, decides to tell a nearby iguana a tall tale about a farmer's yams. The iguana then shoves sticks in its ears, so as to silence the mosquito's nonsense. Relieved to be away from the mosquito and its lies, he saunters off, still with sticks in its ears. This causes a chain reaction of events with other animals, ultimately leading to the death of a baby owl. The mother owl, who is beside herself with sorrow, is too sad to wake the sun, so the land remains in eternal darkness. The king lion rallies all the animals of the land to unravel the chain of events, leading to their discovery of the mosquito's lie. When called to come forth and face its punishment, the mosquito hides. The mosquito, ridden with guilt, now spends its days buzzing in people's ears, asking if the animals are still mad at it.

Sitting together on the carpet, we began to talk about the plot of the story. I was apprehensive to begin talking about morals and values just yet, so beginning the conversation with something familiar seemed like the safer route. Marco was quick to raise his hand. He said that the mosquito was a liar, and his lie was like a snowball that kept getting bigger and bigger as it rolled down a hill. Marco is

what I like to call a “hit or miss” student with answers. Sometimes, he is exactly right with his understanding. This would be an example of one of those times. Yet, there are times when he sits there, silent, confused, throwing out a random reply just to satisfy the silence that might precede him. I often wonder how his fluency in both English and Spanish affects his understanding, and how my own word choice as an English-dominant speaker adds to this conundrum. I gave Marco a congratulatory smile at his response, and he was quick to raise his hand again. He asked, “Mr. Lesh, do mosquitoes really ask if people are mad at them?” Another student, Jacob, said he was wondering the same thing. A hit and a miss.

A hit and a miss on my part as well. I realized that, especially for my ESOL and learning support students, the concept of a lesson within a fable or folktale may be too abstract for them to grasp without the proper pretext. My thoughts were quickly interrupted as Sandy interjected.

Sandy: Mosquitoes go near your face to suck your blood, like a vampire.

They can’t talk. They made that story up.

Mr. Lesh: You got it, Sandy. Many of the stories we will read are going to be just like this story, where the people didn’t really know why something happened in life, so they made up a creative story to explain how it came to be.

Marco: *Oooooooooohhh!* I get it now.

Mr. Lesh: Now, I want you all to think about the morals in each story we read. I'd like you to talk about them with each other in small groups starting tomorrow, to figure out what they mean and how they connect with each of your in your regular, daily lives. For example, I might ask, "Have you ever been like the mosquito, or seen anyone else act like –"

*The girls begin whispering to each other.*

Mr. Lesh: What's wrong?

Amy: Oh we had that problem a *lot* last year. All the girls were spreading rumors last year about each other.

Sandy: Yeah, it was across both classes!

Mr. Lesh: Really? In 2<sup>nd</sup> grade?

Macy: Yeah, it got really bad. We had to all sit together and talk with the guidance counselor in our classroom and talk about how spreading rumors and lying is bad and hurts everyone.

Mr. Lesh: Wow, well, I'm sure that you'll be able to talk about the mosquito quite a bit tomorrow then in your groups!

*The students nod in reply.*

Hearing this news, I started feeling giddy with excitement. You might wonder, "What sort of teacher delights in hearing about students' previous misbehaviors and problems?" My biggest fear going into this research study was that my students simply would not need the character building discussions I had

prepared for them this year. After all, I began designing this study as a result of *last year's* student misbehaviors and concerns. I worried that this year's students may not require as much time and opportunity to analyze and develop values systems, to build a classroom community. This relieved my greatest fear, and better yet, I had selected a relevant book to lead students into this line of moral thinking and analysis.

### **Creating Groups**

The next day, I placed students in groups of 4 and 5, and we decided on comfortable and productive places to work during discussion groups. I explained the rules of working and talking with one another in a small group. At each meeting, a student would be chosen as the reader for each set of questions, and everyone within the group would participate in the discussion. However, while I encouraged students to share their feelings and opinions, I was clear in noting that not every student had to share, especially if a question reminded them of a personal experience that they did not feel comfortable sharing. However, I stressed that everyone must make sure to be a good listener who does not interrupt.

Reflecting back on my previous mistake with assumptions involving Marco and mosquitoes, I decided to model how a group should interact and respect one another. I asked Devon, Lynne, Jacob, and Destiny to join me at the carpet in a circle. I asked Devon to be the "question reader," letting him ask

pretend questions to his group members. I felt that Jacob would greatly benefit from this experience, especially as he was one of the students confused earlier by the concept of a lesson within a story.

Everyone in the group listened respectfully to Devon's made-up questions, and they listened as they each, in turn, shared their responses, one by one. I praised them for their cooperation, noting that this is the sort of teamwork I would like to see within each discussion group.

However, I could not help but notice, in the corner of my eye, Jake, fidgeting in his chair. Rocking back and forth on the flexible plastic, Jake was trying to balance his feet on the metal legs as he lifted them off the ground. Was he paying attention? His eyes shifted back and forth from our group on the carpet to his legs, making sure he would not fall, as he usually does, drawing inappropriate attention to himself. I asked Jake a clarifying question, to which he responded after a slight pause.

Again, I must be mindful of what I am doing within this study. In addition to targeting the values within these stories, I am hoping to inspire, engage, and interest students. Obviously, I failed to capture Jake's interest with this activity. The thrill and entertainment of Jake's balancing act was far more interesting for him than watching us demonstrate how to interact in our groups. I need to be especially mindful of students like Jake. In his case, Jake needed to feel like he is a part of this, a vital and important player in our classroom community. Thus far,

he has only been a passive witness in teacher-led activities and discussion. With the introduction of student-led discussions, it is my hope that he will become more engaged and focused among his peers. He sticks out in my mind as the perfect “question reader” for his group, and I hope that this responsibility will bring out a side of him I long to see.

### **Let’s Talk About Mosquitoes!**

Later that day, students got into their discussion groups. I passed out discussion questions, selecting a question reader among each group. I reminded students, “Everyone is respectful of each other’s thoughts, even if they aren’t the same as your own. Make sure you give each other time to finish what they have to say, and everyone helps the group by being great listeners. You don’t always have to share for each question, but you all participate in the group by listening to one another.”

I told students that I would be walking around the room, listening to their conversations, but holding back my own thoughts for now. I wanted to allow students sufficient time to express their thoughts and talk about their values without my own opinions guiding their thinking. If this study is to be truly successful, then they cannot just say what they think the teacher wants to hear. Knowing the theories related to character education (Edgington, 2002; Kohlberg, 1975; Kohn, 1997; Prestwich, 2004), I wanted to pursue a values clarification and analysis approach at first, giving students time to clarify what values they

considered important in each story and character. I designed questions that would encourage students to occasionally examine other possibilities and consequences of people's actions in the stories, allowing them the opportunity to analyze their values. Defending a character's moral choices in the story or justifying a change to the story would certainly help students develop a stronger, clearer image of the values they appreciate. I would reserve a values inculcation approach for the rare instances when students' moral thinking seemed off-course, such as making a generalization that all kings are evil and selfish. I would weigh in on students' discussions more once we met together as a whole class, providing my input only after students had been given time to accomplish this on their own and with their peers.

With all this in mind, I asked students to begin. I heard each reader go over the first question. And then, it came...

*Woooooosh!* Awkward silence swept over the room.

My normally-outspoken students seemed at a loss for how to begin this new activity. Again, a new experience, this time not just for Marco and Jacob. I went to two groups, hoping to encourage them to share their thoughts. I read aloud the first question again, "What is the moral to this story?" They seemed more comfortable once I was with them, as a member of their group. They began sharing their ideas, and I quickly pulled away, moving to another group that seemed stricken with silence. Once I got their conversation flowing, I noticed that

the other groups had begun talking to one another as well. I began to think about the level of independence I had planned for my students with these discussions, and I realized that they might need more encouragement from me before I would really see their groups flourish.

I moved around from group to group, listening to what they had to share. These are some of the conversations I was able to observe with the remaining questions:

Table 3

*Mosquito Question #2*

<b><i>“Why do you think the mosquito told the lie?”</i></b>
<p><i>Maria:</i> The mosquito wanted attention from the other animals, so he tried bragging.</p> <p><i>Jamie:</i> The mosquito probably liked to brag.</p> <p><i>Fred:</i> The mosquito wanted the other animals to blame each other.</p> <p><i>Sandy:</i> The mosquito wanted them to get mad.</p> <p><i>Finn:</i> Maybe the mosquito just wanted to have a friend. Like, he tried bragging to get more friends to like him.</p>

I wanted to see how students would explain the mosquito’s actions, and hopefully gain a little insight into their own values systems. Many stories cast their characters as either “good” or “evil,” so it would be very easy for a person to automatically align the mosquito under the latter category. Fred and Sandy both seemed to think that the mosquito had bad intentions from the start, that it was some sort of malignant plotter of doom. I expected this sort of response from

students, but I was impressed by what Maria and Jamie said. They interpreted the story differently, and instead of seeing the mosquito as a pure antagonist, they saw him as someone who wanted to be noticed. This is a more sympathetic view of the character, especially considering that its actions led to the death of a baby owlet. Finn was even more understanding and insightful, constructing a background story for the mosquito that justified its actions.

I was very impressed by the level of thought students put into this simple question. I also cannot help but see these responses through those students' personal lenses. Their thoughts were expressive of their own lives. Maria, for example, is a girl who is typically ignored at home by her family and seeks out the attention of her classmates and teachers. Her interpretation of the mosquito seemed almost like a reflection of her own situation. I could say the same of Finn, who has confided in me before that he frequently has no one to play with at recess and feels lonely.

Already, I felt as if these questions would be very telling of students' personal experiences, and, as I hoped, provide a more comfortable setting for talking about their concerns. My questions that follow these conversations would need to be carefully crafted to fit the needs and developing values of my students.

Table 4

*Mosquito Question #3*

<b><i>“How could the mosquito have made things right, or changed the story?”</i></b>
<p><i>Vanessa:</i> He could have told the truth.  <i>Jamie:</i> He could have apologized right away.  <i>Sandy:</i> It would have been best if he had never lied in the first place.</p>

This question did not elicit as much of a response as I had hoped, but perhaps that is also telling. I wanted to give students the chance to recreate the story, to change it in a way that would allow for a happier ending. However, students were very quick to address the main problem of the story, the lie, and point out that it must be fixed. Students seem to have a very clear understanding of honesty. This is also supported by the pre-survey data, which showed honesty as being of utmost importance to students. Sandy was especially expressive of this, stating that the lie itself should never have happened.

Table 5

*Mosquito Question #4*

<b><i>“Have you ever seen someone be a mosquito? Did it create a bigger problem?”</i></b>
<p>Cris related a story about how his sister once lied about breaking something in the house. She blamed him, and his parents ended up grounding Cris for the lie. It made Cris feel bad for a while and get upset with his sister. Other students also mentioned stories of their siblings getting them in trouble with their parents.</p>

Once groups approached this question, it was as if the room became charged with energy. This question really launched students into discussion, and it reminded me how important it is to connect a lesson with students' personal lives. While I was only able to hear a few of the conversations, I could tell by the focused looks on each student that this was a point at which engagement had really flourished. For Cris, who is normally hesitant to share his feelings with others, this gave him a safe opportunity to contribute to class discussion.

Table 6

*Mosquito Question #5*

<b><i>“Have you ever seen anyone be a good mosquito?”</i></b>
Lynne told a story about her younger brother, who normally misbehaves at home, doing a good deed. Lynne complemented her brother for the good act in front of their parents, who then began to praise him more on future good deeds. This led to her younger brother acting better in the house for a long time. Destiny mentioned getting a good grade on a test. She was rewarded with a trip to New York City for getting good test grades after that.

Again, students really flourished with the above question. Whereas with the previous question I was asking students to compare the mosquito with someone they knew, with this question I was asking them to think of a personal experience in which one's words had a reversing effect. When I first read *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*, I immediately picked up its emphasis on the power of words. While the mosquito's words caused a negative chain reaction to occur in the story, I did not want students to think that words could only be used

for bad purposes. So, I asked them this question, in the hopes that they would also see the positive power of words. What a wonder it did! I was especially impressed by Lynne's response, who provided a perfect personal example of how her words helped influence the behavior of her brother in a positive manner.

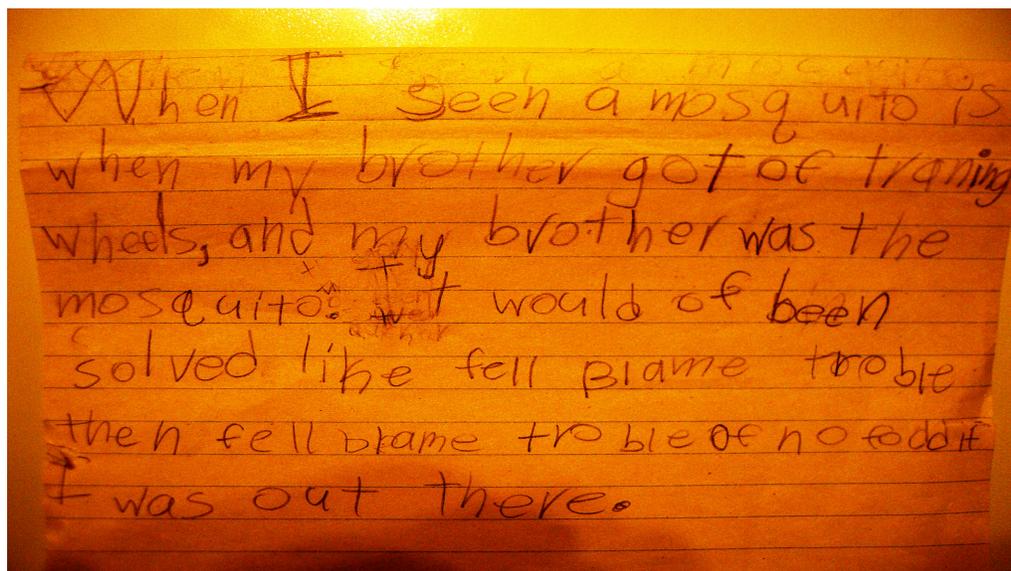
When the groups concluded, I asked that they all meet with me at the carpet to report on their conversations. I was immediately impressed by *how* they sat down at the carpet. Normally, my students try to find the "perfect" spot at the carpet. For some, that means sitting as close to the teacher as possible. For others, it means the exact opposite. *How far can I sit away from the teacher, before he asks that I rejoin the group*, is the thought I imagine them thinking. Others slide themselves around, positioning themselves perfectly between their two best friends, while a select few might cramp themselves up half under a desk or against the bookshelf and wall.

However, this time, students sat down right away. They did not fidget or slide, or hang far in the back. Their eyes showed me that they were ready to share their work with me, and their body language expressed engagement and focus.

We shared their stories briefly again as a whole class, recounting what was said in each small group. We spent some time talking about getting attention in good ways versus bad ways and related this to their personal stories. Everyone agreed that it feels much better to get attention for doing something good. They came to the conclusion that it is not worth it to get attention from lying or doing

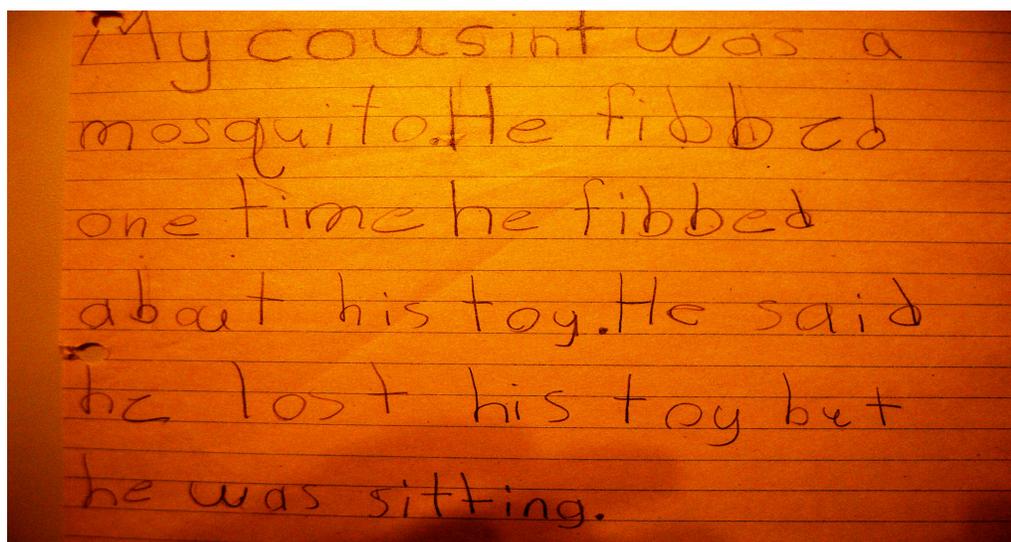
bad things if they can instead do something good for attention. I kept thinking, “This is exactly what I wanted to see!” Students were focused and engaged in their conversations with one another, and they were clarifying their values systems. However, I still was doubtful and cautious, as I wondered if this level of engagement would be consistent throughout the study.

The following day, I asked students to write a journal response. I asked my students to look over the questions from yesterday again and write about one of them. Students’ writing mirrored what was said in class discussion, with some students writing about family stories in more depth. However, some students struggled to write, in particular my learning support students. Martin, Kristina, Maria, and Jacob each needed help with spelling and had trouble putting their thoughts down on paper. This emphasized the importance of differentiating instruction for this study. Fortunately, the discussions we had the previous day helped get everyone started with ideas, but it became clear to me at this point that most of my students would best be able to articulate their thoughts through discussion rather than writing.



When I seen a mosq uito is  
 when my brother got of tranning  
 wheels, and my brother was the  
 mosquito. It would of been  
 solved like fell blame trouble  
 then fell blame trouble of no add if  
 I was out there.

Figure 11. Jake's mosquito writing. Jake's journal response.



My cousint was a  
 mosquito. He fibbed  
 one time he fibbed  
 about his toy. He said  
 he lost his toy but  
 he was sitting.

Figure 12. Monte's mosquito writing. Monte's journal response.

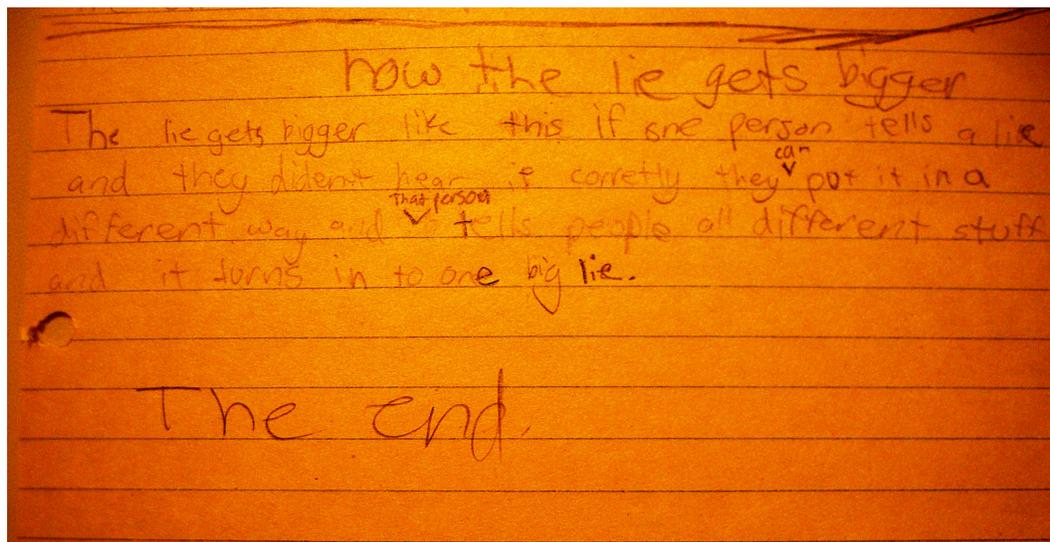


Figure 13. Amy's mosquito writing. Amy's journal response.

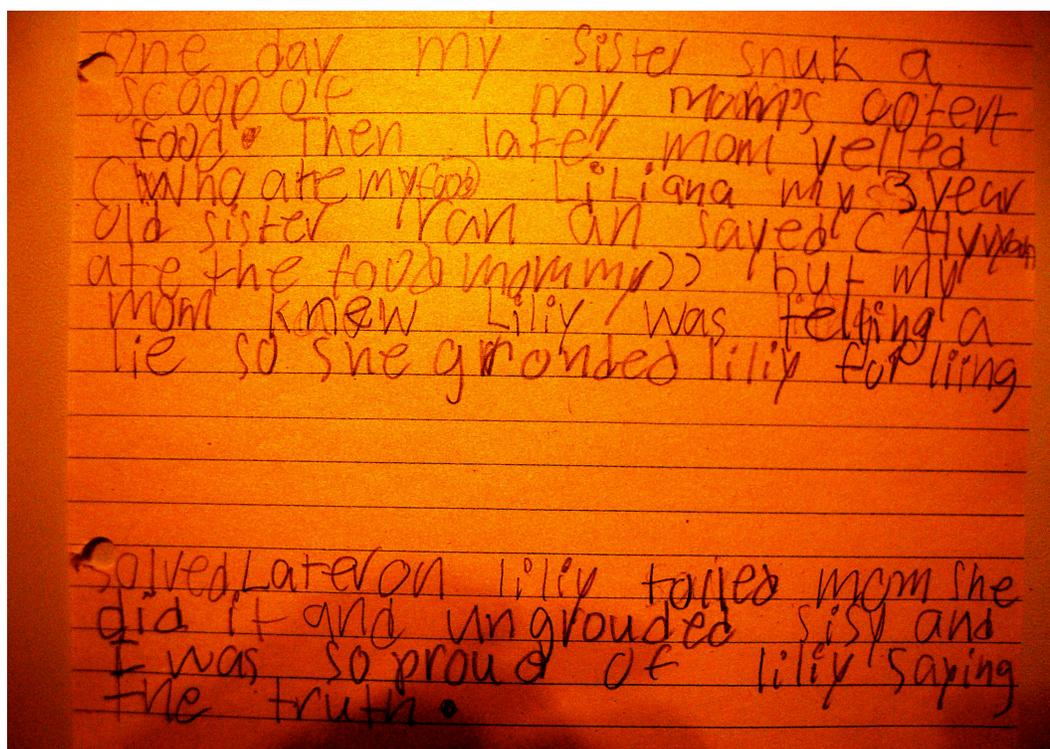


Figure 14. Destiny's mosquito writing. Destiny's journal response.

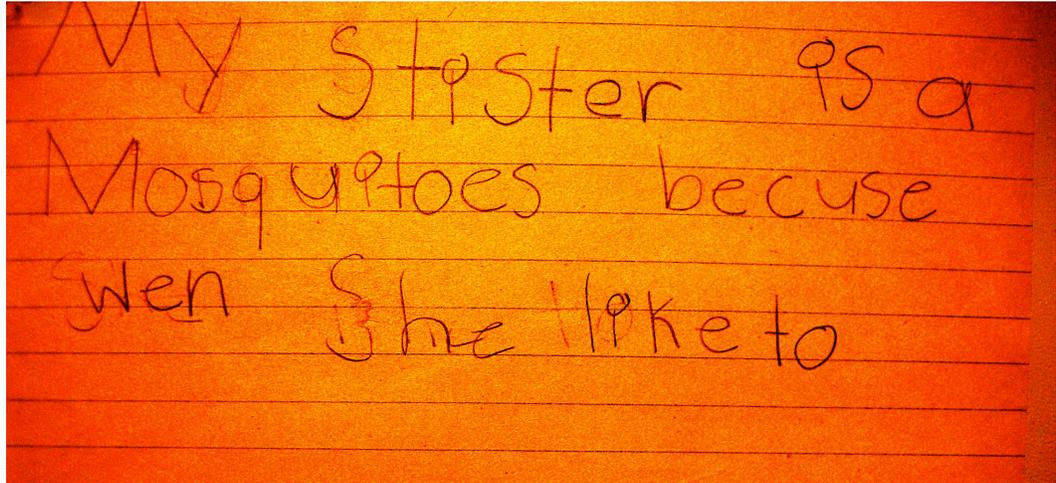


Figure 15. Maria's mosquito writing. Maria's journal response.

### **The Magic Gourd**

The next week, we began our second story, *The Magic Gourd*, by B. W. Diakite. This folktale is about a starving rabbit that helps a chameleon, and in return, the chameleon gives the rabbit a magic gourd that can fill with whatever the user wishes. The rabbit uses the gourd to feed his starving family, but soon, a greedy king finds out about this gourd and takes it from the rabbit. He uses it to create infinite wealth, but the rabbit eventually tricks the king into returning the magic gourd and giving the rabbit his entire kingdom. However, the rabbit ends up being merciful toward the king, and he leaves the palace with only his magic gourd. The king learns his lesson, deciding to be a more generous king in the future.

I told my students to focus on instances of generosity or sharing, and kindness to others as they listen to the story. I noticed that they identified with the

morals to this story very quickly, perhaps because I had prefaced the read-aloud with which values they might see in the story, or maybe because they were getting better at this type of activity with practice. In either case, they seemed very eager and determined to find its morals.

The following day, we began talking about the story in discussion groups. I read through each question with them, asking them to think carefully about each question before starting in their groups. I decided to reread the story again to make sure that all students felt comfortable and had the story fresh in their memories. Surprisingly, some of my students were chanting along with parts of the story as I read it this time. They were extremely focused, even on a second read-aloud of the same story! Parts of the dialogue had been left in a different language, which students seemed excited to repeat as I read it to them.

Once we had finished rereading the story, students moved into their groups. Again, conversations seemed to start out a bit slowly but quickly became livelier.

Table 7

*Magic Gourd Question #1*

<b><i>“What is the moral to the story?”</i></b>
<i>Jamie:</i> You should never be greedy, and always share with others. <i>Kristina:</i> It’s all about caring about others.

Conversation was still starting out slow, but I noticed students were beginning to share more quickly than the first time. Students all agreed that sharing and kindness were important in this story.

Table 8

*Magic Gourd Question #2*

<b><i>“Why do you think the rabbit let the king keep his gold and food?”</i></b>
<p><i>Cris:</i> The rabbit wanted to be nice and share.</p> <p><i>Monte:</i> The rabbit was trying not to be selfish.</p> <p><i>Jake:</i> The rabbit was trying to be a responsible person, like for his family and for being nice to the king.</p>

I wanted to challenge students to think about the characters in terms of their values, and they did an excellent job with this. They agreed that the rabbit was trying to be selfless, responsible, and kind.

Table 9

*Magic Gourd Question #3*

<b><i>“What might have happened to the characters if the rabbit HAD taken the food and gold?”</i></b>
<p><i>Francis:</i> The rabbit would, like, have no friends because he would become the greedy one in the story.</p> <p><i>Peter:</i> The kind would probably have tried to get revenge, and then everyone would be in trouble and get hurt.</p>

I also wanted to encourage students to think about alternate endings to the story, to consider how it would end if the rabbit did not possess strong, good

values. They made very elaborate conclusions, ranging from the rabbit becoming friendless to an all-out war starting between the rabbit's family and the king.

When we discussed this as a whole group later, we talked about how this could happen in real life if people did not "turn the other cheek." We compared this to being kind to neighbors so that the community might slowly improve, and to ignoring minor problems at recess so that everyone can have a good time while playing.

Table 10

*Magic Gourd Question #4*

<b><i>"Have you ever been the rabbit or seen someone else be the rabbit?"</i></b>
<i>Vanessa:</i> I was the rabbit when I shared some of my spare pencils with people who didn't have any.
<i>Francis:</i> I once gave some money from my mom to a homeless person on the street.
<i>Kristina:</i> My brother bought ice cream at the store for himself, but then he decided to share it with all of us.

Students enjoyed relating the story to their personal experiences. I saw the most engagement when they were sharing stories with one another. When we met together as a whole class to talk, we connected being "kind rabbits" to improving the classroom and our neighborhood community.

The next day, students wrote a journal prompt to the question, "Why do you think the king was a greedy person?" I wanted to give my students a question that would give them a potential opportunity to recast the king in a new light, and

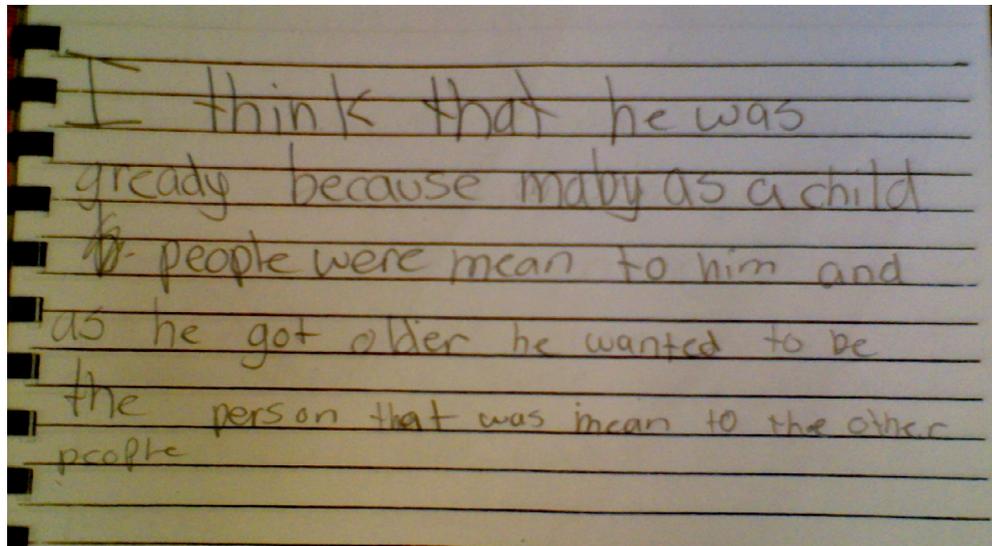
possibly to see him as something other than a one-dimensional antagonist. I wanted students to think of reasons why the king might have become greedy, instead of assuming that he had always been a bad person. Thinking back to my interview and survey data, I wanted to help students break the generalizations and stereotypes they had come to assume, such as smart people are always good. Even though the king in this story was an antagonist, he changed at the end of the story, which was an important part of the story as well as a strong comment on human nature. Some students really seemed to struggle with this prompt, and again, I worried that my aim might be too high with this writing response. However, Monte was quick to blurt out his thoughts, which, for better or worse, helped guide the class's thoughts on the king.

Monte: The king might have been poor growing up and wanted to have good things!

Jake: Ah yeah! And he kept wanting things as a kid until he became a greedy king!

Many students latched onto this idea and began writing about how the king may have been poor, his parents may not have given him many things growing up, and he may have even been bullied about being poorer than other children. They wrote that the king might have dreamed about being rich one day. I was very impressed with the level of sympathy they expressed for the king in their writing. This was a good exercise in helping students to be more compassionate

and understanding toward others. Of course, I also worried if students simply copied Monte's verbal outburst, especially if they were struggling with what to write beforehand. However, students articulately personified the values of the story in this activity, displaying a highly developed understanding of compassion and character analysis. Even if some of them needed a bit of a push, this is exactly what I wanted to happen, and more.



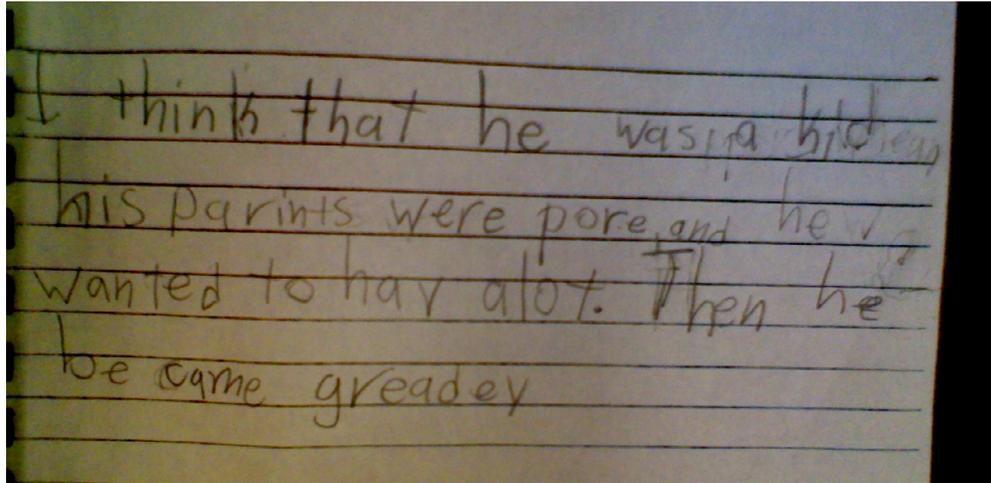
*Figure 16. Amy's magic gourd writing. Amy's journal response.*

A photograph of a piece of lined paper with handwritten text in brown ink. The text is written in a cursive, somewhat informal style. The paper has a spiral binding on the left side. The text reads: "I think he was greedy probably because his has all always been jealous of rabbit and always will be so no matter what the king is going to plan his revenge!"

*Figure 17. Destiny's magic gourd writing. Destiny's journal response.*

A photograph of a piece of lined paper with handwritten text in brown ink. The text is written in a cursive, somewhat informal style. The paper has a spiral binding on the left side. The text reads: "Because the king never had gold. And he wanted to. Feel what it would feel"

*Figure 18. Monte's magic gourd writing. Monte's journal response.*



*Figure 19. Jake's magic gourd writing. Jake's journal response.*

### **Unexpected Surprises**

Almost a week passed before I was able to begin another story. Changes in schedules and the distractions that occur in an open concept environment prevented me from moving forward, yet, it was during this time that I noticed other changes occurring in my students.

During library, Fred, Macy, and Amy each checked out fables and fairy tales. I asked them why they chose those books, and each of them said it was because they were having a lot of fun reading and talking about the books from the study. I was really pleased by this new enthusiasm! Even more interesting was what Fred said later, which was that he was going to try and figure out all the lessons in the story. I felt like I was giving my students a new reason for reading, a purpose that both focused and excited them.

The next day, I decided to place the books we had read aloud thus far in our classroom's library book bins so that my students could reread them for fluency. Later that day, we had time for independent reading, and almost immediately, students ran to the bins to grab the books. Fred shouted out, "Dang, Mr. Lesh, those books are hot!" It was so heartening to see students' enthusiasm. Usually, read-aloud books do not get picked out from the bins so eagerly. Yet, these books have become special and coveted.

Another surprise came about at recess. Several girls from my class and the other third grade class were arguing with one another. Apparently, they had been trying to make up stories about each other and spread rumors. I talked with Maria outside, who was one of the people hurt by the rumor spreading, and I asked her, "Why do you think she said that about you and the other girls?" She paused for a moment, and then said, "I don't know . . . she's like an annoying mosquito, I guess." I was amazed by Maria's comment, connecting the story we had read a few weeks ago to something happening in the present. This really showed me how much these stories have already begun to affect students' thinking and values. Since she started an impromptu conversation about values, I decided to follow up by asking, "Well, why do you think she's a mosquito? What is she doing?" Maria quickly responded, "Well, she's just looking for attention, like with that mosquito. I kind of feel bad for her." Again, what powerful words coming from a girl who had nothing to say just a few weeks ago. "Wow, that's great thinking, Maria. Why

don't you go find some good mosquitoes to play with, someone that isn't spreading lies for attention." After that, Maria had a perfect recess, avoiding the girls who had started the disputes. This served as such a superb example of how moralistic stories can concretely affect students' lives in a positive way with their decisions in life and moral development.

### **Bickering Spiders**

The next story we read was *Anansi the Spider*, by G. McDermott. In this African folktale, Anansi is caught in danger, and each of his sons must work together to save him from peril. As a reward, Anansi gives his sons a beautiful glowing orb. However, the sons cannot agree on who deserves the orb, and thus, the beautiful orb is placed up in the skies, awaiting a day when the spiders can finally agree on who deserves it most.

Ironically, my students were like bickering spiders this week. Discussion groups posed some problems. Several students, including Maria, Kristina, and Cris had trouble working with their groups. They argued over who should answer each question and told me they were being excluded from their groups. In allowing students to freely discuss the questions, some students, like Sandy and Monte, tried controlling the conversations, allowing only certain people to answer each question. They took over the role of "teacher" in their group, but in doing so, they also excluded others from participating. They argued that they were trying to make it easier to go through the list of questions, without everyone

talking at once, since some students were not raising their hands to say something next or letting others finish their thoughts. I could not help but look at this from a Freirian perspective, in which students unintentionally assumed the role of oppressors and oppressed in deciding who was allowed to speak. I, myself, am guilty of that as well, selecting students to answer questions during regular instruction. I often wonder if students view me in this light, or if they were perhaps emulating my own performance as teacher and leader in discussion.

I felt like this was a large step backward in the study. The idea that students were arguing with one another in their groups went against the very nature of the study. After addressing each individual issue, the rest of the discussion went smoothly, yet I could only hope that my students would apply the morals from this story to the problems they now faced in their discussion groups.

The conversations I heard about this story seemed less developed, perhaps because of the issues students were having with one another. The flow of the activity was definitely broken, although there were still some insights made into the story's morals and characters.

Everyone agreed that the values this book tried to illustrate were teamwork and sharing. When students were asked to relate this story to something in their lives, they each recounted stories about sharing food and toys with their siblings, how they felt good when they shared with them, and how they felt upset when they were denied the chance to share.

I tried to ask them clarifying questions about the plot as well, in the hopes that I would strengthen and better define their moral stances.

Table 11

*Spider Question #3*

<b><i>“Is there any way the spiders could have shared the orb?”</i></b>
<i>Juan:</i> Each day they could have the orb, so that each spider gets the orb for one day out of the week.
<i>Lynne:</i> The spiders should try and cut the orb into sevens. Then it would be fair and equal for them all.

I was impressed by the creative responses I heard from students. Other students shared in Juan’s and Lynne’s decisions, saying that either solution would allow for the spiders to feel better about the problem.

The final question they discussed was one that I followed up with in a whole group discussion. I had asked them, “What if some of the sons were bad sons, but they all still helped save the father. Would they deserve the orb as well?” Students universally agreed that all the sons would still deserve the orb. They reasoned that they all still earned the gift, despite how they may have acted in the past. Again, it seems as if students are looking at characters from more complex perspectives, not just in terms of pure good or bad. I decided to push further, to see if I could budge them on their concept of fairness in this scenario. I asked them, “Are you sure they would all deserve the orb? What if they were really, really bad . . . do they still get it for this one good deed?” I was curious to

see if they would back down from their stance, and submit to saying that bad people should not ever get rewarded. There was a brief pause before they answered; however, they stood firm, again saying that the spiders earned a reward for the good job they did. Devon said that his mom rewards him for something good he's done, even if he was bad that day, so the spiders should get a reward as well. As a class, we agreed that people should get rewarded for their good actions, regardless of past mistakes. A few other students said that their parents do the same thing. This test of moral reasoning was a great exercise, and I think it helped students see that characters are not just black and white in terms of morality. Now, if only they could apply the morals from this story to their discussion groups like Maria did with the mosquito at recess!

### **Snakes Who Do Not Bicker**

As the next week approached, it was time to begin a new story with a new moral. This story was *Verdi*, by J. Cannon. In this story, a young snake, named Verdi, loves his vivid colors and stripes. Verdi also loves doing exciting tricks, which is detested by the older green snakes of the forest. Verdi does not want to become like the "old greens," who do nothing all day, so he goes on a quest to try outrunning and tricking himself out of becoming green. In the end, Verdi must accept his adulthood, and he realizes how beautiful the world is around him, once he is stopped to appreciate it.

As students got into their discussion groups, I was a bit worried. The last time they had worked together in this format, they broke out into arguments over who would lead the group and participate. I felt like their conflicts over these issues were like rising tides. Sure enough, it happened again. Students began to argue over who would answer each question. My attempts to fix their problems last week failed. And moreover, this went against the very heart of my study's purpose. Knowing that my last attempt was fruitless, I backed away from their arguments to assess the problem, but while taking time to think of how to better help them, I noticed a change begin to sweep over the students.

They were resolving their problems. Independently, without me. Jake's group was the first to quarrel over roles in the group, but then I saw them quietly throwing their hands toward each other. I went over to ask what was going on, and Jake said, "We're tossing an invisible ball to each other so we can take turns talking. Whoever's got the ball talks." They kept doing it, and it was working! I had never seen them so focused on one another's thoughts. They continued to pretend holding a ball in their hands as they talked, and I could see that Maria's and Monte's groups were looking over at them, pointing to what they were doing. Soon after, they were pretending to throw invisible balls to maintain their conversations as well. I saw another group raising their hands when they wanted to share something, and the rest of the group members were being respectful in allowing everyone to participate. It was amazing to see this change sweep over

the class. They had resolved their own conflicts, without the need for me to intervene. This was the first time I had ever witnessed third graders independently resolving peer conflicts in a peaceful manner that left everyone feeling included and good about the decision! I felt like the class had made a huge step toward developing a true classroom community and modeling the values they had been focusing on in the last several weeks. My students had triumphed where Anansi the Spider's children had failed.

Insights and surprises continued to occur as I listened to what students had to say about *Verdi*. I had my own ideas about how students would interpret this story, but it was really remarkable learning how much my students could surprise me with their line of thinking. For me, this story taught maturity and an appreciation for nature. However, for my students, it was a lesson on maintaining individuality and being a leader. At the end of the story, Verdi found a balance between adulthood and his younger self, and this is what students really absorbed. They saw him as a leader for future generations of snakes, showing them how to do tricks and move fast even after they had matured and aged.

Table 12

*Verdi Question #1*

<b><i>“What is the moral to this story?”</i></b>
<p><i>Sandy:</i> You shouldn't try to be someone that you're not.</p> <p><i>Fred:</i> Don't change unless you want to. Just be you.</p> <p><i>Amy:</i> You should be a leader, not a follower.</p>

Table 13

*Verdi Question #2*

<b><i>“What type of snake would Verdi be if he had stayed yellow?”</i></b>
<p><i>Devon:</i> Verdi would be like a kid still.</p> <p><i>Destiny:</i> He wouldn't have matured and grown up.</p>

Table 14

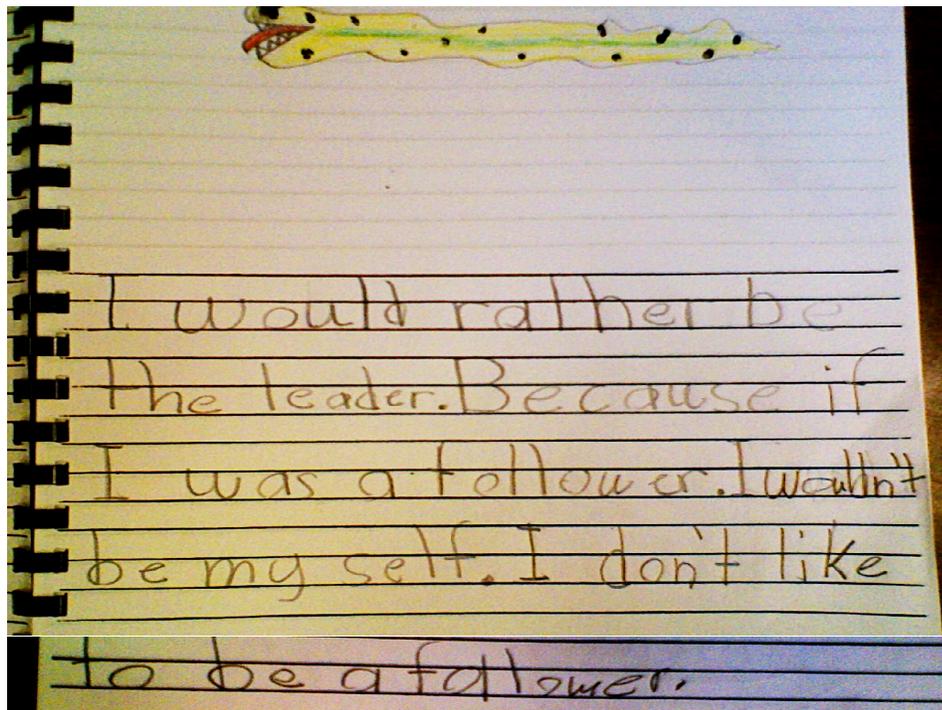
*Verdi Question #3*

<b><i>“When you get older, how do you think you will change? Will anyone influence you?”</i></b>
<p><i>Amy:</i> I'll always try to be myself, especially by listening to my parents and making sure to follow what they tell me to do.</p> <p><i>Destiny:</i> I'll try to stay myself, by being my very best, and I'll be respectful, and participate in things whenever I can, and be kind to others.”</p> <p><i>Vanessa:</i> I'm just going to keep listening to my family and my friends.</p>

In this story, students' thoughts differed from my own and their ability to solve their conflicts during these discussions really opened my eyes to their

potential, if only I step back and allow them to try. The more I retreated from the center of the discussion and the stage of the classroom, the more, it seems, that students have been able to grow. Teachers want to protect their students and give them the best education possible, yet it seems from these experiences that this can sometimes be best accomplished by letting the students be their own teachers. I could not help but reflect back upon Freire's idea of teacher-student and students-teachers, that I had allowed my students to add the "-teachers" role to their title and the "student" role to mine in the classroom.

Students continued to impress me with their written work, as they clarified and affirmed that they were leaders and individuals, not followers.



*Figure 20. Monte's Verdi writing. Monte's journal response.*

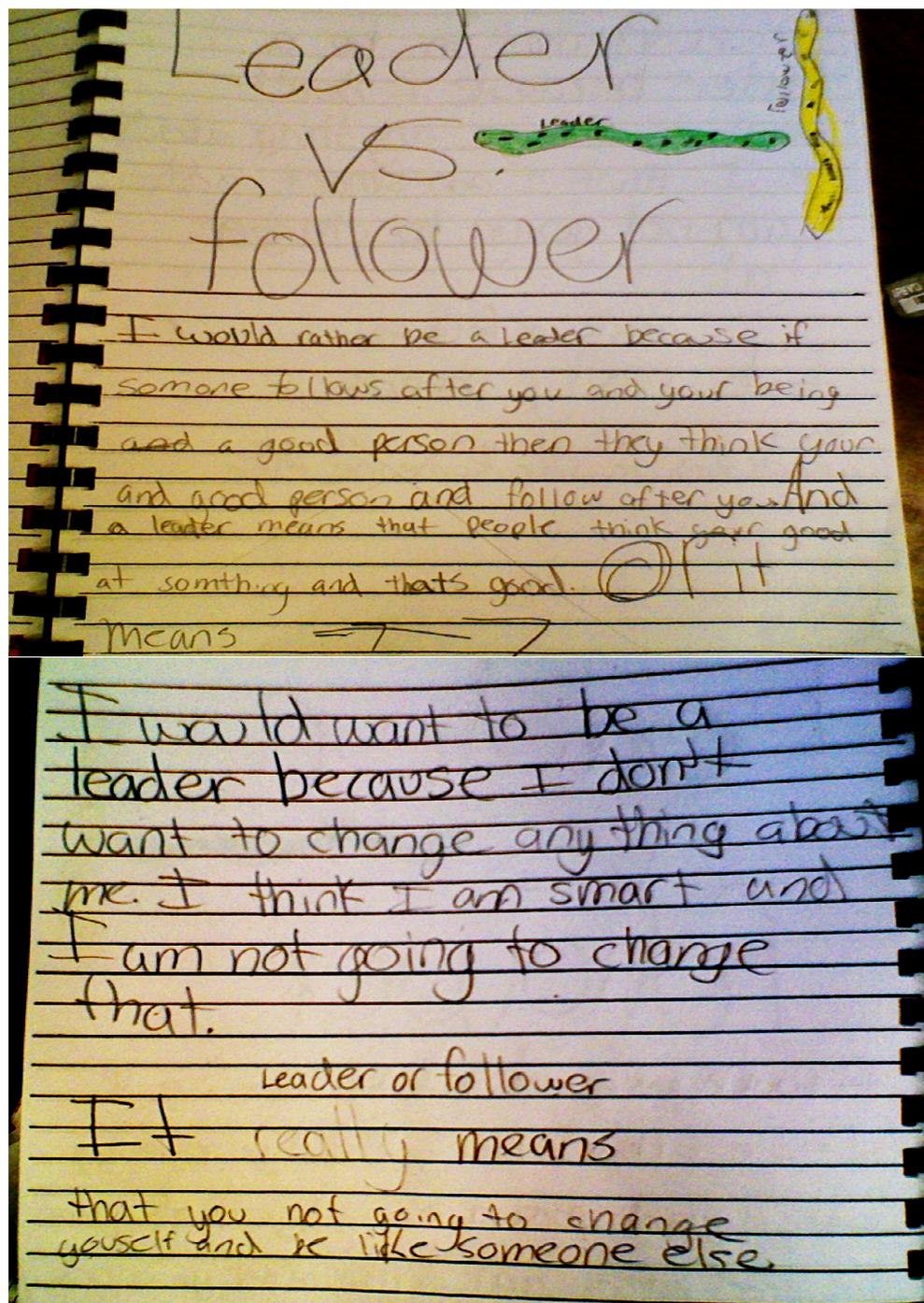


Figure 21. Amy's Verdi writing. Amy's journal response.

### **Master Swordsmen**

The next story we began was *The Master Swordsman*, retold and illustrated by A. Provensen. In this story, a poor boy's village is constantly raided by bandits, so the boy goes out into the world to learn from the fabled master swordsman. Finally, the boy finds the master, and he trains for years under his tutelage. He becomes frustrated by the master's unusual training style, who asks the young boy to help take care of his farm and throws things at him. Eventually, the boy realizes that he, too, has become a master swordsman, although his strength lies in the fact that he will never have to unsheathe his sword. He returns to his village, where he becomes a famous chef who spreads prosperity throughout his village.

Students were captured by the artwork in this story. This started them talking about the book even before they moved into their discussion groups. They began talking about the moral of the story, saying that it was about hard work, putting in a lot of effort to make something happen, and realizing that violence can be avoided. I was impressed by students' eagerness to start talking about the moral to the story, which has been a strong motivational factor with each of these stories. I was also amazed by how many morals they quickly identified in the story. It was so great to see students looking at these stories from different angles and getting excited about reading.

The next day, students got into their discussion groups to talk about *The Master Swordsman*.

Table 15

*Master Swordsman Question #1*

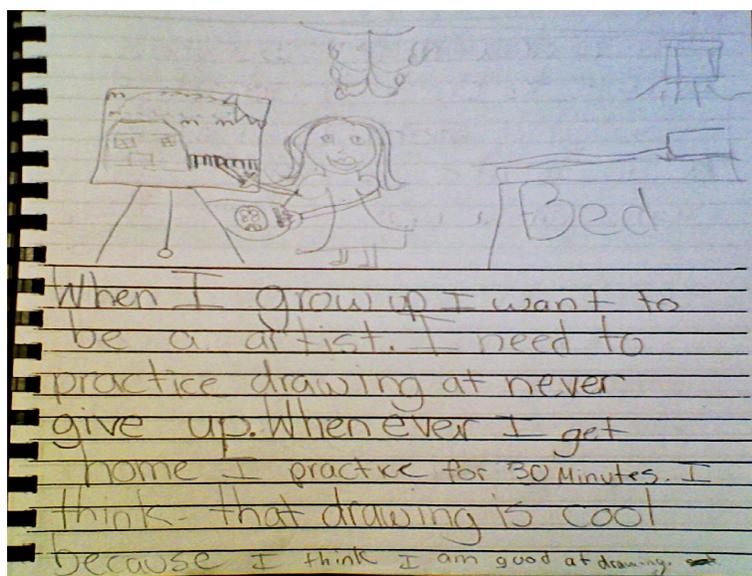
<b><i>“What is the moral to this story?”</i></b>
<p><i>Finn</i>: It’s like, about, working hard.  <i>Monte</i>: The moral is you put in a lot of effort to do something big.  <i>Devon</i>: You accomplish great things and do good in life when you work hard.</p>

Table 16

*Master Swordsman Question #2*

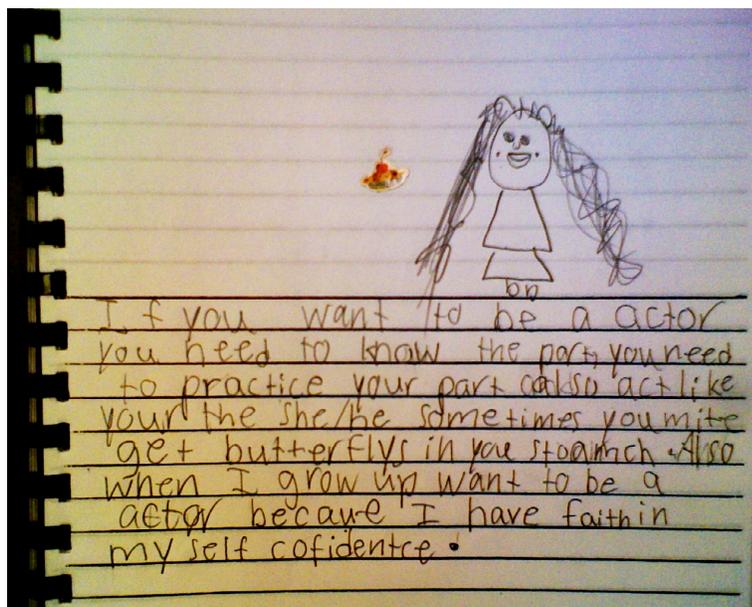
<b><i>“Talk about a time when you had to do a lot of work to accomplish something. How did it feel when you succeeded? Would you still have felt this way if it was easy to do?”</i></b>
<p><i>Lynne</i>: Once I had to save up for a lot of weeks for my brother’s birthday so I could buy him a gift, and mom didn’t think I’d be able to do it, but I did. It felt pretty good doing that. And my brother was really really happy.  <i>Amy</i>: Once I worked really hard to learn a dance I saw on TV, and it took a long time, but when I pulled it off, everyone was really happy and said I did a great job. If it was easy, I probably wouldn’t have worked hard on it, and it wouldn’t have felt as good to do in front of everyone.</p>

The third discussion question was, “What do you want to be when you grow up? What hard work will you need to do to succeed?” Since students were very eager to talk about this question, I let them write about it in their journals to express it further.



When I grow up I want to be a artist. I need to practice drawing at never give up. Whenever I get home I practice for 30 Minutes. I think that drawing is cool because I think I am good at drawing.

Figure 22. Amy's career writing. Amy's journal response.



If you want to be a actor you need to know the part you need to practice your part also act like your the she/he sometimes you mite get butterflys in you stomach. Also when I grow up want to be a actor because I have faith in my self cofidence.

Figure 23. Destiny's career writing. Destiny's journal response.

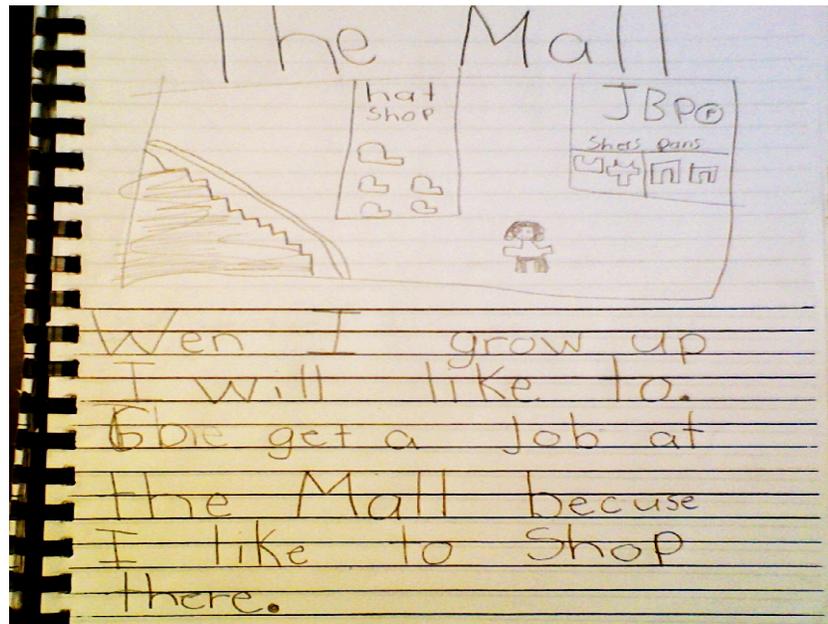


Figure 24. Maria's career writing. Maria's journal response.

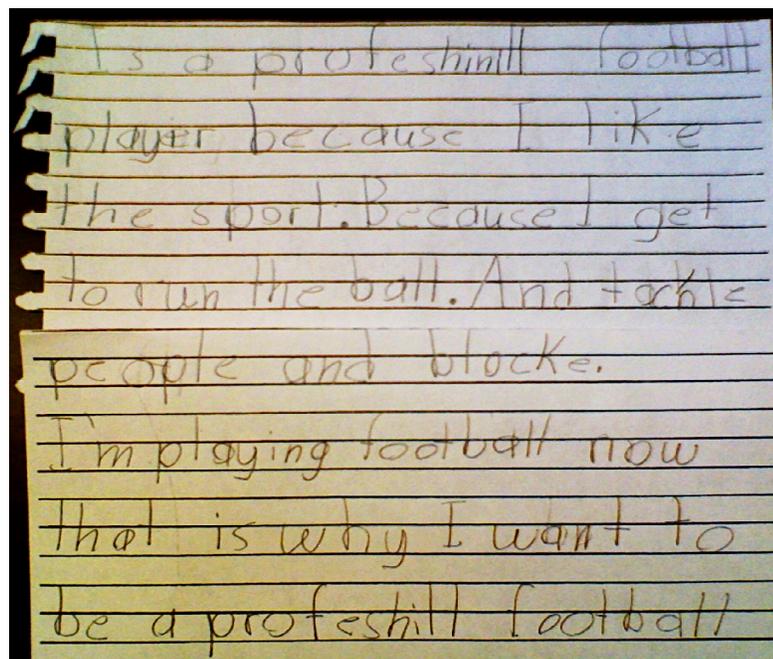


Figure 25. Monte's career writing. Monte's journal response.

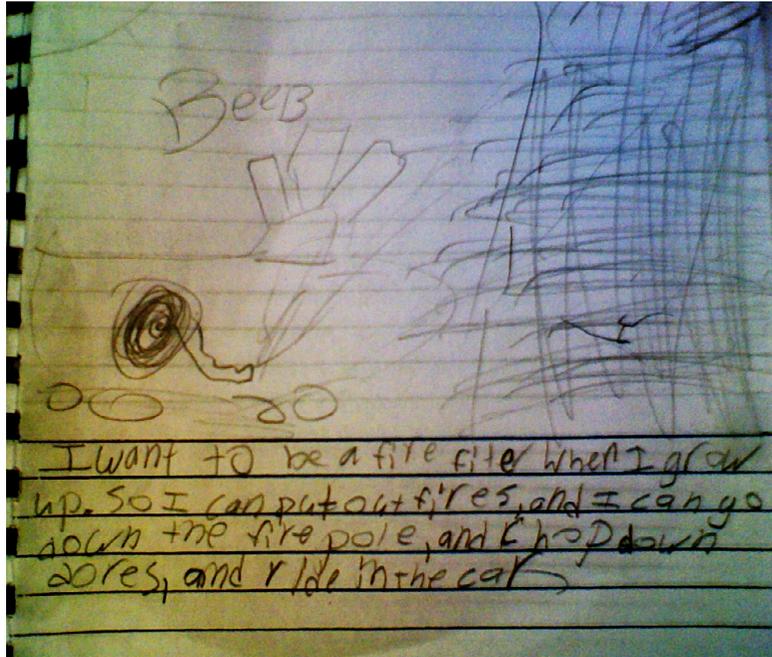


Figure 26. Jake's career writing. Jake's journal response.

### Tootling Flutes

The last story we read was *Tukama Tootles the Flute*, retold by P. Gershator. In this tale from the Antilles, Tukama is a mischievous young boy who likes to disobey his grandmother by playing out by the beach instead of helping at home. The grandmother warns Tukama to stop playing his flute by the beach, or else the two-headed giant might snatch him up. Sure enough, Tukama gets captured by the two-headed giant, who plans to eat Tukama for dinner. Tukama tricks his way out of the giant's cave by singing and playing his flute. He returns to his grandmother's house, vowing to be a much better behaved grandson.

As I read this story, I could tell I had selected a great story for my students. Several of my boys, including my reluctant readers, were chanting along with the repeating songs in the story. There was a really strong connection between the musical themes in this book and students' engagement. I had previewed this book with students a few weeks back, and the same students who had been indifferent toward the book were the ones chanting to the lines in the story. They related to the character's dilemma extremely well and loved the style in which the book had been written.

Students were eager to talk about this story in their groups. Invisible ball throwing started almost as soon as they found their places.

Table 17

*Tukama Question #1*

<b><i>“What is the moral to this story?”</i></b>
<i>Francis:</i> You should always listen to the grown-ups.
<i>Marco:</i> You should be a good son.
<i>Destiny:</i> Strangers could take you away if you aren't careful and being good.

Table 18

*Tukama Question #2*

<b><i>“Have you ever been in a similar situation to Tukama?”</i></b>
<i>Fred:</i> Once I got lost in Walmart. I saw a toy I really liked and went to get it, but then my mom disappeared. She had to call me on the big loudspeakers in the store. Now I always stick close to mom whenever we go out.

Table 19

*Tukama Question #3*

<b><i>“How could Tukama have avoided trouble in the story?”</i></b>
<i>Monte:</i> Tukama should never have wandered off in the first place. He should have stayed by his grandmother and been good.

With this story, both my students and I found that the moral was very straightforward. Students universally agreed that Tukama should have been a “good” grandson, although there were not any specific values they focused with this story, other than respecting and listening to your family. Afterwards, students talked about who were good people in the community to listen to and respect, such as parents, teachers, and police officers. They universally agreed that they should not listen to strangers, although Amy said that some strangers could be nice people, once you get to know them, but you can’t risk that in case they might be mean to you or hurt you. Students agreed with this.

This story became very popular in our library once I added it to the other books. Students wanted to reread the lines and practice singing the song Tukama had played. I felt like this was a fitting end to the stories in this study. Students had at this point come to see and develop strong values systems. With this final book in place, I felt like it was time for students to begin writing their own stories.

### **Self-Written Stories**

I sat with my students at the carpet to talk about the final part of my study: writing their own moralistic stories. We began by talking about what types of stories they could write. I wanted them to incorporate the values we had discussed throughout the year in their writing. All students chose one value to focus on in their stories that was important to them, and we brainstormed possible morals and lessons to connect with those values. Some students were even able to decide what types of characters and settings would be appropriate for their stories.

The next day, students began writing rough drafts of their moralistic stories. As students progressed with their writing, I shared some of their work on the overhead computer projector. Students seemed very excited about their stories, and everyone wanted to get their rough drafts onto the projector to share with the class. I saw disappointed looks on Sandy, Jake, Lynne, and Destiny when they were not able to share their work. I collected their work so that I could finish making comments and correcting it later. But, right before library, I noticed Lynne, Amy, and Sandy sifting through the pile of rough drafts, trying to find their work. When I asked them what they were doing, they told me they wanted to write more during library and share their stories with each other. Even though they had tried taking work to library without my permission, I gladly let them. I had never seen them so eager to write!

This excitement slowly began to sweep over the rest of the class as well. The next day, students continued their rough drafts. Students stayed focused and worked without talking for the entire time. Throughout the day, I saw students pulling out their stories to continue writing. Every time someone finished work early, I could expect to see a story pop out of the desk. Normally, I would have to repeatedly encourage students to read a book or redirect the talkative ones when they finished early, but now, writing their stories was like an automatic response to free time! The next morning, I saw Sandy, Amy, Destiny, Finn, and Maria whipping out their rough drafts to work on as soon as they copied down their homework. I was astonished! Of all people, Maria, my reluctant writer, was engaged in writing! I had done what I thought was impossible with this activity!

Students continued with this level of engagement and focus all the way through their final copies. I felt like a champion at this point. I had found a way to get kids really excited about reading, and now I had generated excitement among them about their writing, the most dreadful of dreadful things for many students in third grade. And better yet, I had found a way to help them expound on their values in this writing activity. I was impressed by the values and morals each student incorporated into their stories.

Some students wrote stories similar to ones we had already read, like Cris's story about a boy getting lost. I asked him if he was inspired by *Tukama Tootles the Flute*, and he said, "Oh yeah, but this also happened to me in real life.

So I used that and what happened to me to help write the story.” For many students like Cris, personal experiences had been the key talking point in discussion groups, and again, it served as crucial to helping him write his story. He pointed out to me later that the boy in his story learned a lesson about being responsible, which showed me that he had a strong understanding of the style of writing he was using.

Finn also wrote a story about the importance of being responsible. In his story, a little boy gets attacked by all of his toys and video games when he does not complete his homework. It’s only after the boy finishes his homework that his toys and video games relent.

Other students wrote about two characters learning to be nice to one another and becoming friends. For example, Kristina wrote a short story about a seal and a polar bear learning to become close friends. Francis wrote a story about a young boy who is saved by forest animals, and in return, the young boy helps protect the forest animals when he becomes an adult.

Other students wrote about the importance of honesty. Lynne, Janice, and Vanessa each wrote stories about girls telling lies. In each of the stories, the main characters get hurt by one another’s lies and must tell the truth in order to have a happy ending.

My students each wrote exceptional stories as well. Maria and Monte both wrote stories focusing on kindness toward others, Jake wrote a story about

fairness, and Amy and Destiny both wrote stories about being respectful toward family and listening to parents.

### Maria's Story

Once there was a vampire and a piece of garlic. The vampire hated garlic, and the garlic was afraid of the vampire. One day, the vampire asked the garlic to be his friend, and the garlic was happy. From then on, the vampire and garlic were best friends forever.

*Figure 27. Maria's story. Maria's moralistic story.*

### Monte's Story

Once upon a time there was a tiger. He had a lot of food. He was always eating food. But here comes the ox. He is starving. The ox asks the tiger for food, and the tiger says, "No."

The next day, the tiger woke up and there was no more food. He was starving! The ox came and found food in the forest. Now, the tiger asked the ox for some of his food. And the ox said yes even though the tiger was mean to him. The tiger learned his lesson.

*Figure 28. Monte's Story. Monte's moralistic story.*

### Jake's Story

Once upon a time this one boy was walking to school. A bully came by and said "Give me your lunch money!" The kid said "No never! You have money already!" and he told on the bully to the teacher. Then the bully got in trouble and didn't ask for lunch money and learned his lesson.

*Figure 29. Jake's Story. Jake's moralistic story.*

### Destiny's Story

One nice shimmering day there lived two children and a loving mother in a little cottage. Their names were April and May. They lived with their mother June.

One night the two girls were staying home while their mother went out to get ingredients on her grocery list: water, bread, flour, and eggs. She said, "Now be good and don't go into the dark scary woods," and she left but they couldn't help it so they packed some stuff to go into the woods.

They left a trail of pebbles behind them and up ahead they saw a gingerbread house. They went there and ate 2 gumballs and 2 chocolate bars and 2 more gumballs. All of a sudden they opened a big cabinet and there were 20 child pies inside. A witch popped up and tried to grab them but they ran all the way home. They quickly closed the door and fell asleep. By the time their mother came home April and May were asleep and June went to sleep too. They stayed by their mother and everything went back to normal again.

*Figure 30. Destiny's Story. Destiny's moralistic story.*

### Amy's Story

Once upon a time there was a girl, boy, and their mother. One day Matty the girl and Jake the boy asked their mother if they could go around the block. The mom replied, "Yes you can." "Be back soon!"

After they got their coats on they went around the block. Someone in a van came and swooped and picked them right up and put them in the van. Matty and Jake tried to get away, but the man in the suit locked all the doors. Jake said, "Oh no, mom is going to wonder!" They tried and tried to get out until the van stopped, and the doors opened. Jake and Matty knew where they were, so they hopped out of the van and ran as fast as a lion.

After that the man went in the back of the van but the two kids were not there. Then Matty and Jake were almost home. But then they saw their dad walking their dog Max. And they stopped and yelled for him. Matty said, "We got taken by a creepy person and he looked like our new next door neighbor."

Then they saw that same van arrived at the house and the dad handcuffed the bad guy and put in in a cop car and drove him to the cop station. Then the bad guy was behind bars. They all went back home and Jake and Matty learned that they should always walk with their mom or dad.

*Figure 31. Amy's Story. Amy's moralistic story.*

I had expected Amy and Destiny, whom I consider natural writers, to put a lot of effort into their stories, but I had not expected Maria or Monte to come up with such creative and complete stories. This activity was something very

personal and special to my students, and it showed in their level of dedication to writing. For many, it was a blend of personal experiences, stories read together, and discussion group conversations that helped to make these stories successful and easy to write. It was an engaging and fulfilling experience for every student, and a perfect ending to the study.

### **Surveys and Interviews**

After finishing the study with students' stories, I provided students with the same surveys I had given them at the beginning of the study. I wanted to see if their feelings in regard to certain values and their reading habits had changed over the course of the study. When I asked students to rate the importance of different values, I found that their opinions mostly stayed the same. The only two values that were ranked more important this time were sharing and fairness. Although it would have been ideal to see every value rise in ranking, it is important to remember that these two values were the lowest ranked in the pre-survey. Each of the other values were already highly important to the majority of the class.

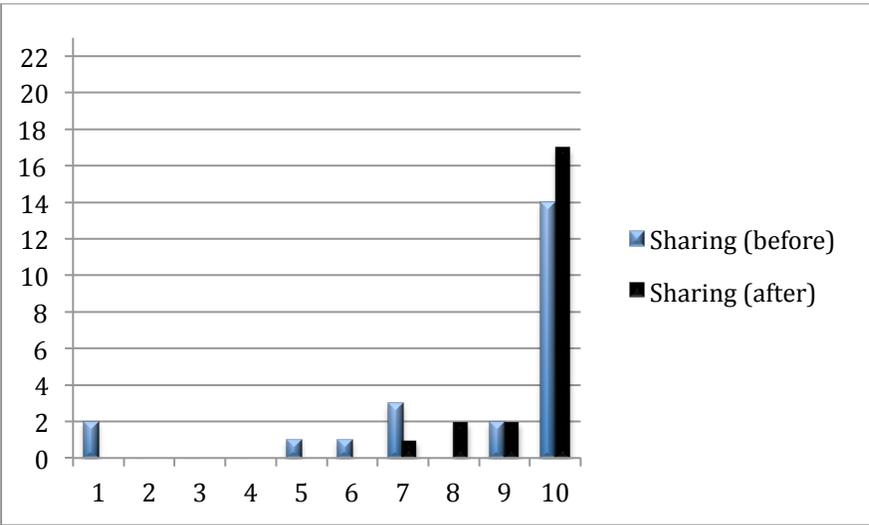


Figure 32. Sharing (post-survey). A bar graph displaying the importance of sharing to the class (1 being not important, 10 being very important). Bars represent the number of students.

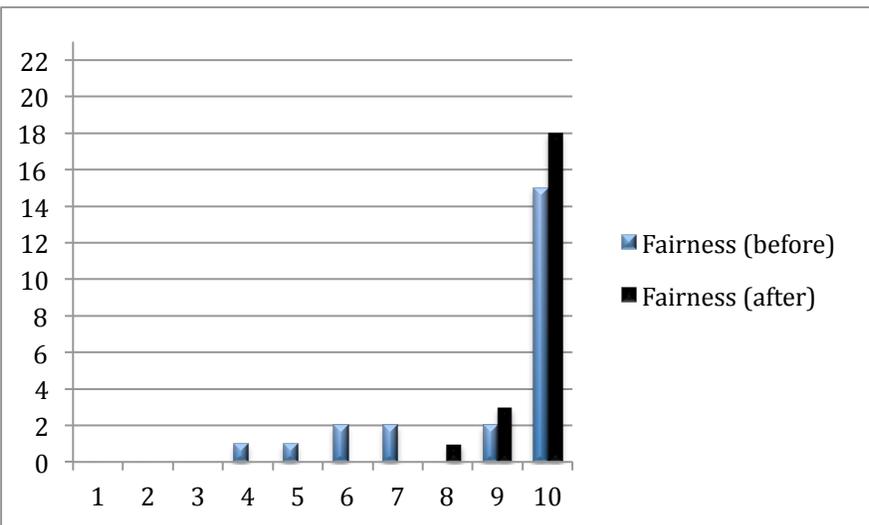
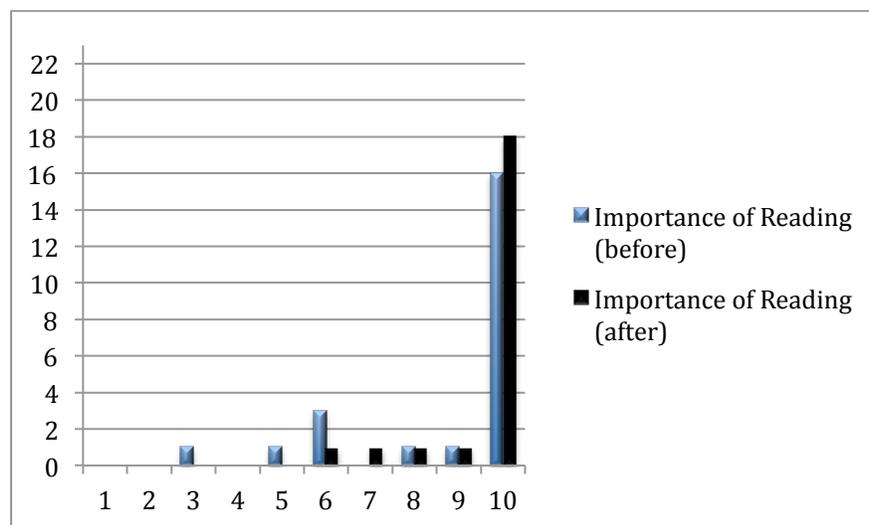


Figure 33. Fairness (post-survey). A bar graph displaying the importance of fairness to the class (1 being not important, 10 being very important). Bars represent the number of students.

The results from students' post-surveys regarding reading were similar to what they had shared in their pre-surveys. Students' ratings of how much they

enjoyed reading on their own and with a friend did not change. But, the importance of reading did improve, which supports the rise in engagement I had seen with each new story.



*Figure 34. Importance of reading (post-survey). A bar graph displaying how much students think reading is important (1 being not at all, 10 being a lot). Bars represent the number of students.*

I also asked students to respond to the same set of moralistic situations that I had given them at the beginning of the study. When I compared students' responses to what they had originally shared, I noticed that Maria changed her reactions to certain questions slightly. She would no longer push her brother back if she was shoved. Instead, she would tell her mother. She would also tell her parents about the broken glass. I was impressed by how much she had matured in her answers. Unfortunately, Monte's responses did not change, as he would still keep the iPod Touch, push his brother, and hide the glass of water. I was

disheartened by his responses to these questions, having hoped that he would display more of the values he had developed during the study. However, I must also keep in mind that these are hypothetical situations, and it is important to keep working with students like Monte who may not have grown as much as others during this experience. Yet, Monte also wrote a values-rich moralistic story, which shows that he may indeed have internalized and strengthened certain values, perhaps ones that were more important to him than others, during these weeks. Jake, Amy, and Destiny all maintained similar responses from the beginning of the study, which makes sense, considering that each of them had already shown a strong sense of values in their initial responses.

Table 20

*Student Open-Ended Responses (post-survey)*

<b>“You find an iPod Touch on the sidewalk in your neighborhood. What do you do?”</b>
<p><i>Jake:</i> I will find town hall and give it to them.</p> <p><i>Maria:</i> I would give it to the owner.</p> <p><i>Amy:</i> I would pick it up and tell my mom and go try to see who’s it was because it would not be nice to just take it.</p> <p><i>Monte:</i> Keep it. Because I like it.</p> <p><i>Destiny:</i> What I would do is pick it up and ask if someone had lost an iPod Touch.</p>
<b>“Your brother shoves you down on the ground. What do you do?”</b>
<p><i>Jake:</i> I’d tell on him.</p> <p><i>Maria:</i> I would tell my mommy.</p> <p><i>Amy:</i> I’d try to tell him that it’s not nice to push people and tell him to stop because that is very mean.</p> <p><i>Monte:</i> Shove him back, because there’d be no reason for him to shove me.</p> <p><i>Destiny:</i> I would tell my mom right away.</p>
<b>“You see someone being picked on out at recess. You aren’t close friends with the person. What do you do?”</b>
<p><i>Jake:</i> I’d run to the teacher</p> <p><i>Maria:</i> I would tell the teacher.</p> <p><i>Amy:</i> I’d tell that person to cut it out and help them because I don’t like seeing people get hurt.</p> <p><i>Monte:</i> Help him.</p> <p><i>Destiny:</i> I would tell the teacher on the bully.</p>
<b>“You broke a glass of water while your parents were out. What do you do?”</b>
<p><i>Jake:</i> I’ll show it to mom and help her clean it up.</p> <p><i>Maria:</i> I would tell them.</p> <p><i>Amy:</i> I’d call them in and tell the truth because if you lie you will get in more trouble than breaking the glass and saying sorry.</p> <p><i>Monte:</i> Hide it. I don’t want to get in trouble.</p> <p><i>Destiny:</i> I would tell my dad the truth and clean it up.</p>

One of the most insightful points in the study came at the very end with student interviews. I was looking forward to seeing how students' perceptions of characters in stories changed from the beginning of the study, but surprisingly, students' thoughts stayed mostly the same. Their responses to each interview question was mostly the same, except that when I asked them what qualities make for a good person (both in stories and in real life), they were far more articulate. However, students like Monte, who thought that being funny made someone good, did not change their responses to my questions. This would have really worried me, except that I decided to ask students an additional question with this last round of interviews, which was, "Were there any lessons from the stories we've read that helped you outside school or you've remembered really well?" I received a great deal of reactions from students.

FRANCIS

I think of Anansi and the spiders arguing over how to share the orb when students get into arguments over who should pitch the kickball and the teams they make, so I don't get upset about it no more.

MARIA

I try to be nice to friends and my family more because of *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* and *The Magic Gourd*. I want to be good like those animals.

LYNNE

I help with cooking more at home now with my mom since reading *The Master Swordsman*. I want to help my family like he helped his village.

***“Were there any lessons form the stories we’ve read that helped you outside school or you’ve remembered really well?”***

JAMIE

I listen more at home to my parents because of *Tukama Tootles the Flute*. I don't to make a bad mistake like Tukama did and get lost or get in trouble.

MACY

I don't listen to others if they say bad things now. Oh, and I try to be myself and less like my sister because of Verdi. Cuz Verdi wanted to be his own person.

DEVON

I should always stick together with my family, and I know that they are telling me the right thing to do since reading about Tukama.

*Figure 35. Post-interview responses on application of values. Students' responses during the post-interview about how the stories and their values affected them outside the classroom.*

I was floored by the amount of feedback I got from this question, and it really reassured me that my research study had a purpose that was met and was a valuable experience to students. I was so worried throughout the study that I wouldn't see enough change occurring in students' values systems, especially because it isn't something that is concrete or tangible, like a test grade. But, students' responses proved my fears to be unnecessary, as the stories had an impact in many of their lives that will hopefully last throughout their years.

### **Data Analysis**

For qualitative research, the purpose of analyzing data is an ongoing, continuous one (Hendricks, 2009). With my own study, analysis began right away as I started collecting and trying to make meaning of notes in my field log, participant observations, student work, student interviews, and surveys.

#### **Field Log**

My field log was used to record the daily happenings of my students and my own thoughts and reflections throughout the course of the study. I wrote in it and added data to it at the end of each day, including anything that might pertain to the study. I compiled all of this in chronological order to maintain organization. I wrote reflective memos for almost every new piece of data that was added. Many times I included my reflections within my participant observations and paired my thoughts with each piece of student work. However, at other times it made more sense to reflect upon data and events as a whole in stand alone memos. I also wrote reflective memos about my study in response to the educational teachings of Dewey, Freire, and Vgotsky in order to view my data through multiple lenses. I compared sections of my field log to each of these educator's teachings in order to help view my study through different perspectives. This helped me analyze my study in ways that would not have been possible otherwise and added to the fullness of my analysis and findings.

**Observations.** Much of my field log was comprised of my observations. I would write brief notes as I worked with students so that I could later write down what happened in greater detail. During student-led discussions, I had the luxury of writing down students' quotes and my own reflections in more depth. These observations later allowed me to analyze students' developing values, engagement, and transitional frustrations. These provided me with specific, accurate occurrences and quotes from students to help with my analysis.

**Student work.** I collected students' writing to understand how their values systems were developing and what sorts of insights they were making as they wrote. This included students' journal prompts following group discussions and students' own moralistic stories written near the end of the study. I looked at this work alongside my observations to see if students were consistent in their attitudes, values, and reflections. Students' moralistic stories also revealed which values had become important to them and strengthened over the course of the study.

**Student interviews and surveys.** I interviewed students and had them complete a survey both at the beginning and end of the study. This was done to help compare and contrast students' thoughts on reading and their values. I used this information to initially guide my study and draw conclusions about students' attitudes and values. These also allowed me to hear students' candid thoughts on reading and glean insights into students' personal values. At the end of the study,

my interviews with students also helped me find examples of when they had thought about their work outside the classroom and used the values they had strengthened during the study to assist them.

### **Codes, Bins, and Theme Statements**

All of these data needed to be organized in a way that I could understand it and make accurate connections. Once qualitative data have been recorded, it is important to analyze those data to discover patterns and themes inherent in the study (Hendricks, 2009). About halfway through the study, I began looking through all of my data for common, recurring themes. I made labels, or codes, throughout my field log and other data as I reread my work, so that I could more easily go back later to find these commonalities and eventually group them into larger categories of data (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). I wrote down the page numbers on which they were located in a master list of codes, or coding index, that I compiled.

When the study was nearly complete, I began looking at which codes appeared most frequently, as they would, most likely, be the most important. For example, many of my codes noted when students were engaged, when students critically analyzed stories and characters, and when students developed their values. Many of my codes were similar to one another, so I also wrote down which codes were related. For example, student engagement and student focus were similar in my coding index. Noting these related codes helped me later on

when I organized them into larger categories, called bins, which displayed groups of related codes (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997).

Once I had created and organized bins, it was much easier for me to make conclusions about my entire study. For each bin I created, I wrote a theme statement. Each theme statement captured a piece of the heart of my study, a key and important lesson I had learned from my students and this experience. The validity of these theme statements were ensured by the triangulation of data I had accumulated and analyzed throughout the study (Hendricks, 2009).

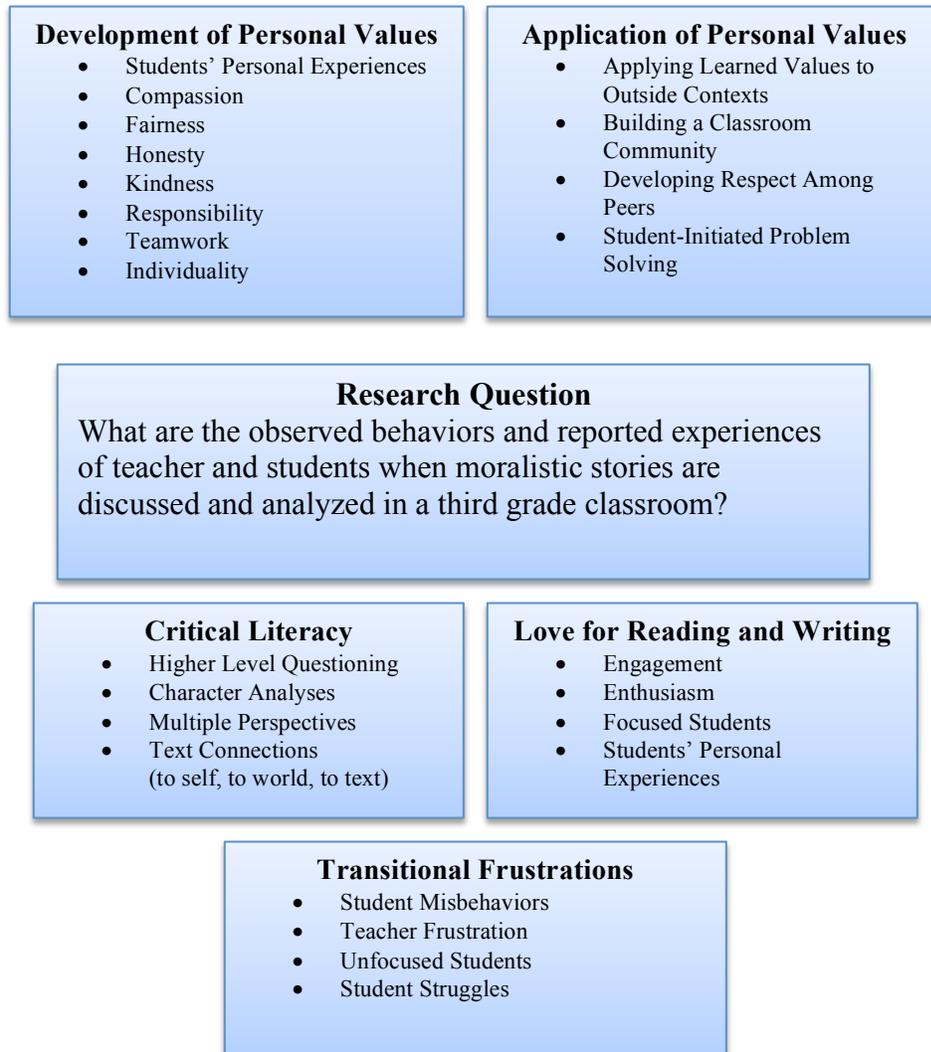


Figure 36. Codes and Bins. The organized codes and bins from my study.

### **Research Findings**

The purpose of this study was to discover an answer to my question, “What are the observed behaviors and reported experiences of teacher and students when moralistic stories are discussed and analyzed in a third grade classroom?” In particular, I was looking for how students’ values systems developed and how their interests in reading increased or decreased in relation to the morals we discussed and analyzed. The proceeding theme statements are some of the prospective findings I have discovered since the study began.

#### **Development of Personal Values**

*Students’ personal experiences are crucial to students being able to engage in relevant conversations with other students about their values systems and in allowing them to understand and develop their own values systems.*

Throughout my study, I tried to select stories from a variety of cultures, all of which touched upon students’ own cultures and backgrounds. Additionally, I tried to ask students probing questions that related the stories to their personal lives. I saw a surge in engagement and the quality of discussions on values when this happened. Students were eager to relate stories of how their siblings mirrored the characters in the stories or how they had been in similar situations. With these experiences, they were able to make predictions about and deeper insights into characters’ future actions and motivations throughout the story. For example, students felt sympathy for the king’s greediness in *The Magic Gourd* because they

had at one time or another wanted something that their parents could not afford or give to them. They believed that the king may have felt like this as a child, which motivated him to become greedy as king. In this way, they were able to strengthen their understanding of values like compassion and sharing. Relating their own personal experiences to the stories was critical to students' development of these values.

Focusing on students' personal experiences also allowed me to shift away from a values inculcation approach to students' values, and move more toward other forms of values education. Originally, I designed my moral discussions with students to conclude with the opportunity for me to directly approach students' values and help redirect them, if necessary, with my own values (values inculcation). However, I realized that I was potentially diluting students' values by showcasing my own values and beliefs above theirs, so I decided to stray away from using a values inculcation approach unless it seemed absolutely necessary. I did not want to simply give my students models of morality to emulate; I wanted them to become autonomous thinkers.

This drive to encourage students to come to their own personal realizations about their values systems, and my avoidance of a values inculcation approach is backed by Freire, who would argue that good educators want to help their students, but dropping ideas and information into their laps is the equivalent of treating them like oppressed charity cases, and has little or no effect due to lack

of relevancy and autonomy. In this way, teachers are like oppressors, who must allow the oppressed students to develop and internalize information and ideas in their own ways so that they feel empowered and capable of shaping their own future. So, too, was it important that my students develop their values systems in ways that they understood and found meaningful to their own lives.

As I continued the study, I found that the wrap up time wherein I could redirect student thinking was unnecessary. By connecting students' personal experiences directly to the stories, they were able to develop their moral thinking exceptionally well. I was never presented with a time when I had to worry about students misinterpreting a story's moral or a character's choices.

By the end of the study, it was clear that students had formed better understandings of their values systems. This was evident in their moralistic stories, which for many students was based as much on personal experiences as it was on the elements in stories we had read. The values and morals expressed in these stories were clear and obvious, even for students like Monte, who had begun this study unsure of what made for a good role model. Students' surveys and interviews also indicated that their values had strengthened, like Maria's, whose open-ended survey questions suggested that values of honesty and responsibility had become more important to her. Yet Monte, whose moralistic story was about kindness and friendship, did not change his original responses in those same open-ended questions. Based on his responses, honesty and responsibility were

not important enough yet to warrant him returning the iPod Touch he had found or admitting to breaking a glass of water. The values that grew in students were personally relevant to them. Perhaps no student gained a stronger sense of the same values in the same way as another, but the values they did identify with and build upon were much more meaningful and important.

### **Application of Personal Values**

*As students develop respect for one another within the classroom and build a classroom community based on certain values, there is an increased chance for students to bring these values into settings beyond the structure of the classroom.*

During this study, students developed a true sense of a classroom community. In discussion groups, students found ways to work out their differences and develop ways so that each member of the group could contribute and be respected among his or her peers. Initially, there were arguments over who should lead each group and who should share for each question, but students were able to independently find ways to allow everyone equal standing in their group. These were student-initiated acts, and because of that, it was obvious that students had begun to appreciate and take ownership of the classroom environment they were cultivating. This was one of the first and most powerful examples of students applying values, like sharing and respect, to real contexts.

The stories students read and discussed impacted their values systems, to the point where they were applying the values they had developed in class to

instances outside the classroom as well. This was obvious early in the study, when Maria compared the girls spreading rumors at recess to the annoying mosquito from the first story in the study. This helped her cope with the situation so that she was able to happily play for the rest of recess, unaffected by what other girls were saying about her.

Maria's application of her strengthened values was very obvious because it took place at a time when I was able to observe what was happening, but many other students told me during their interviews at the end of the study that they were also affected in a positive way by the stories they discussed. There was a plethora of feedback from students who were able to tell me specific examples of when they used the values and morals from a certain story to help them in another setting. For example, Edwin explained that he reflected upon the problem among the arguing spiders in *Anansi the Spider* to help with his own issues among other students in kickball during recess. Many students, like Kimberly and Joshua, told me that they learned to be more respectful and listen to their parents because of the lessons in *Tukama Tootles the Flute*. Olivia wanted to try to be more herself and less like her sister after reading *Verdi*. The list goes on. Each of these students were able to discuss and reflect upon the values in each story because they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts with one another in their discussion groups. After this reflection, they were able to successfully apply their strengthened values to new situations.

### **Critical Literacy**

*When provided with an open forum for discussion of texts, given a certain amount of guidelines and appropriately leveled questions, students are more freely able to delve into instances of critical literacy, such as developing detailed character analyses, looking at the text from multiple perspectives, and making text to self, world, and text connections.*

I was amazed by the thoughts and reflections among my students. By giving students the opportunity to freely discuss each story, they were able to reach new levels of reflection that may not have been possible if I were steering their conversations for them. It was important that I provide basic guidelines for what was discussed in each story, but allowing students the freedom to talk in more depth about the morals and issues gave way to deep insights.

Students were exceptionally successful at analyzing characters. They were able to identify character traits that described each of the stories' main characters, and they were able to make conclusions about the backgrounds and motivations of these characters. For example, students determined that the mosquito from *Why Mosquitos Buzz in People's Ears* was seeking attention, which was the reason why it was spreading lies in the beginning of the story. Monte and many other students concluded that the greedy king in *The Magic Gourd* must have been poor or had very little as a child for him to become so greedy. It was impressive to see

students looking beyond stereotypes of “good” and “bad” characters and see them in more complex, multidimensional ways.

Students made a great number of connections between the stories we read and their own lives and community. In many ways, students looked at this from a social perspective, beginning first by comparing the story to their own lives and family, and then to the larger community. For example, when discussing *The Magic Gourd*, students discussed how being kind to those who hurt them creates more positive change than hurting them back. They started by sharing stories of how this happened in their families, and then we talked about how this could change their neighborhood if everyone “turned the other cheek” when wronged. Rather than judge others, students gravitated towards sympathy for those individuals. Similarly, after reading *Tukama Tootles the Flute*, students shared personal experiences about getting lost and separated from their families, which led into a discussion of how this relates to their community. Amy brought up that, when lost, strangers could be nice people, but you cannot risk asking strangers for help as a kid. They listed the types of individuals, like teachers, parents, and police officers, who would be safe to ask for help. They agreed that everyone has the potential to be a good person, but as a kid, one cannot risk assuming anything. Students also broadened their understanding of their values at the same time they came to understand their community better when we discussed *Anansi the Spider*. Students came to the conclusion that, in life, all people should be rewarded for

their good deeds, regardless of past mistakes. Rather than label people as “good” or “bad,” students realized that people are multidimensional and do not always fit into a single category with their values.

The open forum of discussion I provided for students was what allowed my students to reach these deep levels of understanding and reflection. Giving them the power of thought uninhibited by my own opinions or constant guidance allowed them to think critically about the text, its characters, and how to better live in and improve our society.

### **Love for Reading and Writing**

*Students' levels of engagement, focus, and enthusiasm for reading and writing increase when students' personal experiences are connected to the curricula.*

Dewey (1939) believed that students' love for learning was the first desire that should be nurtured by educators in the classroom (p. 48). From the start of the study, I knew that this would be a challenge. For some of my students, such desires to learn had already been trampled. It was clear from my field log that several students already dislike reading. In students' pre-survey on reading, George wrote that he only read at home for one minute to satisfy my daily reading assignment, Monte wrote that he likes “nothing” about reading, and Noemi sarcastically wrote, “It is fun?”

Yet, as my study progressed, I noticed that these same students became more thoroughly engaged in reading and writing. In my field log, I noticed that

students were far more participatory in discussions once they were asked to relate the moralistic stories to their personal lives. As I coded, I frequently noticed students' engagement and focus alongside instances of personal experiences being discussed. The conversations were also much more enthusiastic and worthwhile. The same was true for students' writing. They maintained high levels of engagement and focus when asked to relate the stories to their lives. The pinnacle of this correlation occurred when students wrote their personal moralistic stories. Students' stories were something special to them, formed from their value systems. They had great ownership over their work, as their stories embodied the most important values they had come to appreciate during this study. There was constant engagement and focus amidst the classroom, as even my struggling writers, like Maria, Monte, and George, constantly added on to their stories during free time. The potential to boost student engagement and focus by using their personal experiences and values was one of the most important lessons I learned from this study, and it is something I continue to implement with my students to help encourage a love for reading and writing.

### **Transitional Frustrations**

*The transition from teacher-led to student-led discussions and activities, coupled with irregularities in scheduling, will cause initial teacher and student frustrations until routines are established.*

This study did not start out as strong as it finished. It took time for students to adjust to their new roles as leaders of their own groups, and for me to get used to letting go of command over discussions. I worried when students argued with one another in their groups, fighting to become the “leader.” Despite my best efforts to encourage students to share responsibilities in their groups and take turns, many individuals continued to argue. I was again reminded of Freire and the roles teachers and students play as oppressors and the oppressed. Freire (1970) writes, “The oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both” (p. 44). I spent time reflecting on my own position as oppressor and oppressed in the educational system, and I was witness to my students playing both these roles within their discussion groups. For example, Grace and Monte each wanted to be in charge in their respective groups, and by doing that, they chose who got to speak and share thoughts. By doing this, they excluded certain students who would otherwise have shared their opinions. This is when their groups began to argue and fight for control of discussion. I worried that this would get worse as the study continued, especially

as I had limited time to work with my students due to scheduling conflicts and the distractive factors in the open-concept environment. I was concerned that these inconsistencies would create further problems. Fortunately, these groups resolved their internal conflicts by finding unique ways to restructure their discussions so everyone could share their thoughts. They found a way to rise above their conflicts and restore the classroom community. As Freire said, my students became “restorers” of the classroom, avoiding the roles of oppressors and oppressed.

### **Next Steps**

Although my research study may have finished, my efforts to build upon students' values and their interests in reading continue to be important. Each student develops his or her values in differing ways and at varying rates, so continuing these discussions is vital to each student's growing understanding of personal values. The conclusion of this study does not mark the end of my work with students on these important matters. I have continued to discuss and analyze moralistic stories with students, and, as I look toward the future, I must also make plans for how to improve upon this study in future years.

My students continue to enjoy reading stories with morals in them. They are eager to discover the lessons in each story and expound upon them in both discussion and writing. I have created a separate section in my personal classroom library to make room for these books, so that students may more easily access them. They continue to be "hot" in the eyes of my students. Since they have become such a popular genre, I must often times ask that students not take out four or five books at any one time, or else others will not be able to enjoy them. Additionally, students often bring in fables and folktales to share with the class that they have found in the city's public library. All of this shows me that this is still something important to students, and it has carried over into their lives beyond the classroom.

Next year, I plan to coordinate with the school librarian in featuring this genre of books in our school library. I would like the librarian to showcase some of the books from this genre in her weekly read-alouds with students, so that even students outside my own classroom may engage in relevant and value-building discussions.

In future years, I plan to continue this work with my students; however, I would also like to pursue more innovative ways of doing this. In particular, I plan on combining my background as an English major in my undergraduate studies with my work as an artist to create children's books. I would like to write stories with relevant morals in them that relate to my students' lives. It would be important that my students are a part of this process as well, as their values and personal experiences would undoubtedly guide me in my writing process. This would both satisfy my professional aspirations and also provide my students with a more powerful and motivating experience that builds upon what I have started with them.

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## Appendix A – HSIRB Confirmation

7/18/12

To HSIRB Moravian

The Effects of Reading and Discussing Fairy Tales, Folktales, and Fables

Mark W. Lesh

> From: [hsirb@moravian.edu](mailto:hsirb@moravian.edu)

> To: [leshteacher@hotmail.com](mailto:leshteacher@hotmail.com)

> CC: [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu)

> Date: Tue, 17 Jul 2012 11:50:17 -0400

> Subject: RE: HSIRB Proposal and Documents

>

> Dear Mr. Lesh,

>

> The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has accepted your proposal, "The Effects of Reading and Discussing Fairy Tales, Folktales, and Fables." A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Co-Chair, Dr. Adams O'Connell, for the duration of the time of your study and for up to one year from the approval date indicated by the date of this email.

>

> Please note that if you intend on venturing into topics other than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be. Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this email notification, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation, awaiting HSIRB approval of the changes.

>

> We do still need to collect your electronic signature, so please respond to this email with your name and project title in the subject line. Dr. Shosh can provide his electronic signature by replying to this email with his name in the subject line. Your replies will serve as your signatures.

>

> Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

>

> Good luck with your research!

>

> Sincerely,

>

> Dr. Virginia Adams O'Connell

> Co-Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board

> Moravian College

> (610) 625-7756

> [hsirb@moravian.edu](mailto:hsirb@moravian.edu)

> [voconnel@moravian.edu](mailto:voconnel@moravian.edu)

## Appendix B – Principal Consent Form

September 5, 2012

Dear [REDACTED]

As you know, I have been taking courses at Moravian College, working toward a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction. A major requirement of the program asks that I implement and study the effects of a new strategy in the classroom to help improve my students' learning experiences and understanding. For my study, I will be incorporating more discussion and writing into our reading curriculum through the use of fairy tales, fables, and folktales. I am hoping that students will be able to make connections to the morals in these stories, thus shaping their own moral perspectives, and gain a better appreciation for reading. I may need to modify parts of this strategy to better meet the needs of students, but my focus and goal will remain the same.

I will be studying the effects of using fairy tales, folktales, and fables from September 10<sup>th</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012. During this time, I will be collecting data to observe how student learning and perspectives change. I will be gathering information to support my study through student work, teacher observations, student surveys, and student interviews.

I would like to ask your permission to collect data from my classroom for my research. Although everyone will be participating in reading, discussing, and writing about these stories, I will only use data collected from children whose parents have given permission. All students and their work will remain anonymous throughout the study through the use of pseudonyms. Parents may choose to withdraw their child from my teacher research study without penalty at any time. Finally, all research materials will be kept in a secure location in my home.

If you have any questions for me throughout this process, please feel free to email me, give me a call, write a note or ask in person. My contact information is still the same at [mlesh@beth.k12.pa.us](mailto:mlesh@beth.k12.pa.us). You may also feel free to contact my advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh at Moravian College if you have any questions about the study I'll be doing. He can be reached at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu) or (610) 861 1482.

I give permission for Mark Lesh to conduct an inquiry research study in his classroom. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form as well.

I do **not** give permission for this inquiry research study to be conducted.

\_\_\_\_\_  
signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

Thank you for your support!  
Sincerely,  
Mark Lesh

## Appendix C – Parent Consent Form

September 6, 2012

Dear Parents,

As some of you may know, I have been taking courses at Moravian College, working toward a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction. A major requirement of the program asks that I implement and study the effects of a new strategy in the classroom to help improve my students' learning experiences and understanding. For my study, I will be incorporating more discussion and writing into our reading curriculum through the use of fairy tales, fables, and folktales. I am hoping that students will be able to make connections to the morals in these stories, thus shaping their own moral perspectives, and gain a better appreciation for reading. I may need to modify parts of this strategy to better meet the needs of students, but my focus and goal will remain the same.

I will be studying the effects of using fairy tales, folktales, and fables from September 10<sup>th</sup> to November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012. During this time, I will be collecting data to observe how student learning and perspectives change. I will be gathering information to support my study through student work, teacher observations, student surveys, and student interviews. These are available to review, if you would like, before signing this form.

I would like to ask your permission to use your child's data in my research. Although everyone will be participating in reading, discussing, and writing about the stories, I will only use data collected from your child given your permission. All students and their work will remain anonymous throughout the study through the use of pseudonyms. You may choose to withdraw your child from my teacher research study without penalty at any time. Finally, all research materials will be kept in a secure, locked location outside the classroom and will be shredded a year after the completion of the study.

If you have any questions for me throughout this process, please feel free to email me, give me a call, write a note, or stop by the door after school. My contact information is still the same at [mlesh@beth.k12.pa.us](mailto:mlesh@beth.k12.pa.us) or (610) 868 6441. You may also feel free to contact my advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh at Moravian College if you have any questions about the study I'll be doing. He can be reached at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu) or (610) 861 1482. Our principal, [REDACTED] has approved the study and may be reached at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the guidance counselor, [REDACTED], with any concerns at [REDACTED].

- I give permission for my child's data to be used in Mr. Lesh's study. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form and that I may ask that my child's data be withdrawn at any time during the study.
- I do **not** give permission for my child's data to be used in this study.

---

Student's name (print)

---

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Thank you for your support!

Sincerely,

---

Date

Mark Lesh

### Appendix D – Survey Questions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Pre and Post Survey

Rate the following values on the scales below. How important are they to you?  
Circle your answer.

---

<b>Honesty</b>									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Important							Very Important		

---

<b>Kindness</b>									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Important							Very Important		

---

<b>Generosity [Sharing]</b>									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Important							Very Important		

---

<b>Fairness</b>									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Important							Very Important		

---



Your brother shoves you down on the ground. What do you do? Why?

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You see a classmate getting picked on out at recess. You aren't close friends with the person. What do you do? Why?

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You broke a glass of water while your parents were out. What do you do? Why?

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## Appendix E – Interview Questions

### Student Interview Questions

*What do you think makes a character “good” in a story? Why?*

*What do you think makes a person good in real life? Why?*

*Do you think that the characters in stories can be role models?*

*What’s your favorite story to read?*

*Which character do you like the most from these stories? Why?*

*Were there any lessons from the stories we’ve read that helped you outside school or you’ve remembered really well? (post-interview only)*

*Do you have anything else you’d like to share?*

**Appendix F – Sample Discussion Group Questions**

**Discussion Groups Questions**

Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears: A West African Tale, by Verna Aardema

*What is the moral to this story?*

*Why do you think the mosquito told the lie?*

*Why do people sometimes make fibs like that?*

*How could the mosquito have made things right, or changed the story?*

*Have you ever seen someone be a “mosquito?” Did it create a bigger problem like in the story?*

*Have you ever seen anyone be a “good mosquito,” and do or say something that made bigger, good things happen around them?*