

Nancy Drew: Girls' Literature, Women's Reading Groups, and the Transmission of Literacy

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This study focused on a women's reading group that organized for the purpose of discussing popular books from the Nancy Drew collection. Audiotapes of discussions, interviews, and questionnaires provided information that led to an in-depth analysis to address two research questions: How did the participants become engaged in the specific genre of Nancy Drew mysteries? and What can be learned from interactions that were part of the group discussions (in a noninstructional setting) that can inform the field of literacy about the processes and values of such discussions for adult participants' literary engagement? Key findings of the study are that (a) "literacy agents," such as mothers and aunts, were influential in persuading participants to read Nancy Drew as a child and (b) the discourse patterns of the group, although they were similar in some ways to typical school literature discussions, departed from these patterns at key points. When the participants were collaborative rather than hierarchical in their discussion stances, they constructed unexpected knowledge and expressed divergent views. They also made personal responses, both relevant and tangential to the text, and humorous observations. The implications of these findings for conducting literature discussions in classrooms are explored.

IN THIS PAPER, I REPORT FINDINGS OF MY STUDY of an adult reading group that organized specifically for the purpose of discussing favorite childhood books from the Nancy Drew collection. What follows is not a full-scale analysis of the participants' childhood reading practices. Instead, I have focused on two specific research questions that emerged over the course of the study:

1. How did the participants become engaged in the specific genre of Nancy Drew mysteries?
2. What can be learned from interactions that were part of the Nancy Drew reading group discussion (in a noninstructional setting) that can inform the field of literacy about the processes and values of such discussions for adult participants' literary engagement?

My study joins a research tradition of examining the reading practices of individuals in contexts outside of school in the hope that such research will provide a deeper understanding of what it means to be literate and how it is that literacy is acquired, encouraged, used, and supported by members within a given community. My interest in more "natural" settings, where individuals engage in meaningful literacy activities, comes from an understanding that reading is a complex process involving more than the mere acquisition of decoding skills (Heath, 1991; Smith, 1988; Taylor, 1983). Traditional school literacy instruction focuses mainly on the cognitive aspects of literacy processes. Out-of-school settings offer an opportunity to study literacy activities that have not been constrained by school definitions of literacy. In pursuing my study of the Nancy Drew book group, I hoped to deepen my understanding of the ways individuals both inside and outside of classrooms engage in authentic *literacy events*. "Literacy events are activities involving people reading and writing for real purposes" (McGee & Richgels, 1990, p. 8). Such events are likely to illumine the varied factors associated with literacy learning. Strong engagement is often a very prominent feature of these out-of-school settings, and engagement is a very important goal of in-school instruction.

Book groups are a documented reading practice of past generations and seem to be an effort of the upper and middle classes to enhance their literacy experiences beyond what is taught and learned in schools. Participation in literacy events such as literary societies, book clubs, oratorical competitions, and public lectures and readings are activities people engaged in at the turn of the century that supported their literacy development (Blair, 1980; Graff, 1987; Heath, 1991; Sichertman, 1989). Today, some scholars maintain that direct involvement in activities of this kind contributes to an individual's successful participation in the literate cultures of particular groups and classes (Graff, 1987; Heath, 1991; Long, 1992). Understanding how individuals are initiated into literate cultures outside of traditional instructional settings may shed light on what "promotes readers' engagement in literacy activities" (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993), thus bringing us closer to identifying those factors that motivate individuals toward a lifetime of reading for enjoyment and self-improvement.

About Adult Reading Groups

Studies of women's participation in literacy events throughout Europe and colonial America show that women have been active promoters of reading. Women founded libraries and established literary societies, reading clubs, and self-study groups mostly as a way to help induct their members into particular literate cultures. They also used these groups to improve their own lives through exposure to new ideas by reading and discussing classical as well as popular literature, current political writings, and religious texts (Blair, 1980; Heath 1991; Sicherman, 1989). Reading groups of this kind not only stimulated interest in literature and ideas, they dramatized the central controversies of the day and extended reading from a private pleasure to an occasion for action through community service (Blair, 1980). Research on women's book clubs also suggests that many found reading emancipating – a way of escaping the confines of gender and class by defining oneself through the many possibilities and other sources of fulfillment presented in literature (Long, 1986, 1992; Sicherman, 1989).

Current research on adult reading groups documents the varied benefits these groups have on their membership. Reading groups provide a forum for members to freely explore new ideas, learn about themselves and others, and attain a broader knowledge base about the world (Flood & Lapp, 1994; Florio-Ruane, 1994; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995).

The success of these reading groups may have something to do with the social homogeneity of their members, who often share similar interests, values, and attitudes toward reading as well as similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Graff, 1987; Long, 1986, 1992; Marshall et al., 1995; Sicherman, 1989). Although some research points to the longevity of these groups as a benchmark of their success (Long, 1986, 1992), the work of Jim Marshall and Michael Smith (Marshall et al., 1995) suggests that “friendships form quickly and existing friendships deepen” in adult book groups (p. 115). Achieving a sense of community with like-minded individuals appears to affect the success of these groups and seems to facilitate the kinds of interactions between and among members that motivate them to continue reading.

Recent research has taken particular interest in the kinds of talk that occur in these adult book groups to determine how “grand conversations” of literature are mediated (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Adult reading groups often feature talk that is based on a personal response to literature, where the participants read self-selected texts and share insights based on their personal experiences and reactions to the texts (Flood & Lapp, 1994; Long, 1986, 1992; Marshall et al., 1995). Hence, the quality of talk that takes place “between the reader and the text and among the reader and other readers” (Flood & Lapp, 1994) is of significant import because it appears to increase individual self-awareness and understanding of others inside and outside the group's parameters. In addition, the nature of the talk in such groups may influence the quality of engagement. Research on adult reading groups holds great promise in helping educators establish alternative models for conducting literature discussions in classrooms that may

eventually facilitate students moving from passive, spectator roles toward more active roles where self-expression is encouraged, thereby intrinsically motivating students to read (Oldfather, 1995).

About the Study and Nancy Drew Series

The Nancy Drew book group was organized as one component of the Nancy Drew Conference (NDC) held at The University of Iowa in the spring of 1993. I chose to study the proceedings of this group because I wanted to document the various social and cultural factors surrounding the participants' childhood reading of Nancy Drew and their present involvement in the discussion of these texts. That is, I wanted to find out what attracts individuals to read certain literature and what motivates them to participate in organized reading groups. This goal evolved to include the research questions addressed in this paper.

The original impetus to devote a conference to the study of Nancy Drew was somewhat controversial. To some librarians, educators, and literary critics, Nancy Drew is the bane of good reading. Many view the series as offering its readers only pleasurable, mindless escape and regard these books as a deterrent to reading "real" literature. Avid supporters, however, credit the adventurous heroine with encouraging reluctant girls to read. They see the Nancy Drew series as a stepping stone in instructing young readers in the skills needed to critically interpret and respond to more sophisticated literary works (Romalov, 1993).

Despite the controversy surrounding the literary weightiness of the Nancy Drew series, it has dominated the popular market for more than 40 years. Under the direction of an astute publisher named Edward Stratemeyer, the series was launched in 1936. To some,

Nancy is a model of early feminism, breaking the mold of the helpless female image that dominated so much of children's fiction of the time. For others, she is just the opposite, a suburban princess who never really challenges the patriarchal, classist, and racist *status quo*, but whose job it is to restore and maintain that order. (Romalov, 1993, p. 20)

Whatever your opinion of her may be, one thing is clear, she is and continues to be an American popular-culture heroine for many. The tremendous interest in Nancy Drew books by both older and younger fans eventually led a group of scholars to organize the NDC and related events such as the Nancy Drew adult reading group.

About the Group and Its Members

The purpose for organizing the adult reading group, as determined by the NDC

steering committee, was to get members from communities surrounding the conference site involved in the NDC. As a result, the NDC steering committee organized three reading groups in different communities. I studied one of these groups, which was situated in a small Midwestern town. A local bank, the state's historical board, "friends" of the public library, and the state library association contributed resources and materials for the reading group. To give the reading group some focus, the NDC steering committee contracted a scholar, Dr. Nancy Romalov, who taught a course on American girls' fiction in which Nancy Drew was a subject of study. Her involvement with children's literature as a writer, teacher, researcher of American girls' series fiction, librarian, and children's bookstore owner made her a likely choice to lead the group. Romalov was to provide the group with important historical information on the events leading up to the development, production, and marketing of the Nancy Drew mystery series. She was also to guide the discussions of the texts read. Advertisements appeared in the local newspapers announcing the event, dates and times the reading group would meet, and where to obtain registration forms and books.

The Nancy Drew reading group first met in early April 1993. A second meeting was held exactly 2 weeks after the first meeting and 1 week after the NDC. The group met in the lecture hall of a public library in the early evening on the dates scheduled; the meetings ran for approximately 2 hours.

A total of 14 women registered for and attended the reading group. Information gathered from the registration forms indicated the participants were all White, middle- to upper-middle-class women. The women ranged from approximately 21 to 60 years of age. All the participants had high school diplomas. Eight had college degrees. Nine of the women reported being acquainted with at least one other person in the group prior to registering.

The women focused on six books from the Nancy Drew mystery collection. The scholar selected the books based on their capacity to illustrate distinct phases in the series' development. During the first meeting, the women discussed three books from the original series: *The Secret of the Old Clock* (Keene, 1930), *The Clue in the Old Album* (Keene, 1947), and *The Clue of the Velvet Mask* (Keene, 1953). The remaining three books discussed at the second meeting were from the contemporary Nancy Drew Files. These included *The Flying Saucer Mystery* (Keene, 1980), *The Case of the Disappearing Deejay* (Keene, 1989), and *Sisters in Crime* (Keene, 1989).

Data Collection and Analysis

As I mentioned earlier, the women met on two evenings in April 1993. Before the start of the first evening's discussion, the librarian introduced me to the women and explained my presence and purpose for joining the reading group, as well as that of an assistant. Hence, when the first person plural "we" is used here to report the data collection procedures, it refers to both of us. However, when the

first person singular “I” is used, it normally refers to me and is used in situations where I acted singly.

The collection and inductive analysis of the data used both ethnographic and other qualitative methods (Agar, 1980; Merriam, 1988; Peacock, 1986; Sanjek, 1990). The first task was to audiotape the scholar’s lectures, which were followed by small group discussions on the assigned readings. To facilitate the discussions, Dr. Romalov divided the women into two smaller groups on both nights. My assistant and I each audiotaped one of the small group discussions of the texts, took fieldnotes, and made occasional remarks during the discussions without becoming focal participants so the women would feel at ease with us. Our aim as participant-observers was to minimize as much as we could our presence as “outsiders,” thereby allowing as natural a conversation as possible to take place among the women. In addition, we conducted interviews with the group participants. Two questionnaires provided personal background information about the participants and their reading habits. We also gathered relevant newspaper clippings, lecture handouts, and information from registration forms. Drawing on these multiple sources for triangulation, I later analyzed the data that specifically addressed the questions posed by this study.

Fieldnotes

In an effort to “reconstruct events” that transpired during the women’s group meetings, we generated approximately 30 pages of handwritten fieldnotes. Our fieldnotes contained specific details about the group meetings, descriptions of the participants and lecture hall, seating arrangements, scholar’s comments on the Nancy Drew books, and informal chats with participants (Sanjek, 1990).

To make sense of the notes, I developed an index using Ottenberg’s (1990) method for categorizing passages from fieldnotes. I arranged the notes according to six categories: physical descriptions, lectures, feminist perspectives on Nancy Drew, informal chats with participants, organizing the adult reading group, and nonverbal behaviors. The following example comes from a compilation of the fieldnotes. The numbers in parentheses next to the subcategories identify page numbers in the fieldnotes where information on these topics is found.

Lectures

Librarian’s comments (2, 7, 12)

Scholar’s preparations (15, 16, 22)

Scholar’s comments on:

Nancy Drew mystery series (2, 8, 9, 18, 19, 24, 28)

Stratemeyer Syndicate (3, 4, 9, 10, 19, 20, 23, 24, 26, 27)

Ghost writer, Mildred Writ Benson (3, 5, 10, 11, 17, 19, 23, 26, 27)

Nancy Drew Conference (12, 15, 19, 22, 23)

Handouts and small-group procedures (5, 10, 14, 24, 30)

Developing the index allowed me to organize the data into key categories and

subcategories. Although many data fit several categories, the main purpose of the index was to facilitate the retrieval of specific information as well as denote how much data was available on a particular topic.

Lectures and Small Group Discussions

In the course of transcription, I reviewed approximately 300 minutes of audiotape several times in order to render each speaker's contribution accurately. The transcripts included dialogue from the scholar's two lectures and four small group discussions.

I began by studying the transcripts of the first meeting's small group discussions and focused on the content of the episodes in the discussions. An episode is a series of speaker turns on one identifiable topic within a larger discussion (Marshall, 1989). Studying the discussion episodes led to the inductive development of tentative categories that addressed the questions posed by this study. Because the second meeting's discussions focused on comparing the original Nancy Drew series with the contemporary Nancy Drew Files, I was able to make minor modifications in the categories developed for the first transcripts into which subsequent episodes of discussion could be sorted. For example, the initial definition for the Nancy Drew "lifestyle" category included episodes that referred to Nancy's school activities, social outings, and household responsibilities. However, after I analyzed the second evening's transcripts, I modified the definition by adding international travel to the category. Broadening the definitions of categories facilitated the logging of episodes from the first and second evening's transcripts.

Initially, I used nine broad categories to identify recurring regularities in the data as they emerged. These categories were an intermediate step in the data analysis and addressed the first question posed by this study regarding the initial engagement of the women in the Nancy Drew genre. The categories included (1a) Nancy Drew's character traits, (1b) Nancy Drew's lifestyle, (1c) other Nancy Drew characters, (1d) male/female roles, (1e) memories of reading Nancy Drew, (1f) mystery genre techniques, (1g) personal connections to texts read, (1h) the social dimension of reading, and (1i) historical information about the development of the series.

Once the data were sorted into the above categories, I reviewed the episodes within each category looking for patterns in the kinds of talk the women engaged in during their discussions of the Nancy Drew texts. This process led to the development of two additional categories that focused on the study's second question about the role of dialogue in creating and promoting engagement. The two main categories that emerged included (2a) collaborative stance and (2b) personal engagement along with their respective subcategories. These additional categories resulted in the dual classification of some episodes. For instance, an episode in which the women talked about the character traits of

Nancy Drew's friends that appears in this paper under the collaborative stance category also showed up under the category about other Nancy Drew characters.

Interviews

Only 6 of the 14 women who participated in the Nancy Drew adult reading group agreed to be interviewed. We interviewed the participants individually. The interviews, which we conducted before and after the adult book discussions, were approximately 15 minutes in length. A semistructured interview format allowed us to follow-up with additional questions that probed deeper into the women's responses when needed (Merriam, 1988). Three basic questions guided the interviews: (a) What motivated you to join the Nancy Drew adult reading group? (b) What do you recall about reading Nancy Drew as a young girl? And (c) Have you ever encouraged anyone to read Nancy Drew mysteries? If so, please describe the circumstances. As part of this process, we recorded the interviews, which I later transcribed. I then coded the women's personal "perspectives" according to the categories developed for the transcripts (Merriam, 1988).

Questionnaires

The women completed an initial questionnaire consisting of eight questions in April 1993. These questions asked the women to explain how they learned of the Nancy Drew reading series, what motivated them to join the reading group, which of the assigned texts appealed to them and why, who read Nancy Drew while growing up, memories they had about their childhood reading of Nancy Drew, what texts they recalled reading as young girls, and what they liked about the NDC. Of the 14 women who attended the adult reading group, 12 responded to the initial questionnaire.

A follow-up questionnaire sent out approximately 1 year later in April of 1994 consisted of 40 questions (Radway, 1984). Of the 40 questions included in the questionnaire, 16 pertained to their childhood reading of Nancy Drew mysteries, 8 to adult mystery genre reading, 6 to current general reading practices, 8 to demographic data, and 2 inquired about their participation in this study.

Of the 11 women who provided mailing addresses, 6 responded to the follow-up questionnaire. Five of the six women who responded participated in the group I directly observed. Four were between 21 and 40 years of age, and two were in their 50s. Four had college degrees. Only one woman had not read Nancy Drew while growing up. All but one of the respondents acknowledged having a prior acquaintance with at least one other group member. As you may recall, the original group of 14 women ranged in age from 21 to 60 years; 8 of the 14 had college degrees, and 9 of 14 had an acquaintance with at least one other participant. From this information, I concluded that the respondents had enough similar de-

mographic characteristics to those women in the group who did not respond to the questionnaire to consider them representative of the group.

Upon receipt of the questionnaires, I studied the responses and coded the information according to the categories used for classifying data from the transcripts where appropriate. I also constructed some additional categories to account for new information generated by the two questionnaires. Categories used to sort the information taken from both questionnaires that did not fit pre-existing categories included engagement in the Nancy Drew reading group, reading practices specific to Nancy Drew, general reading practices, adult mystery genre reading practices, and NDC observations.

Discussion of Findings

The data gathered from the registration forms and questionnaires provide an interesting portrait of the women who attended the Nancy Drew reading group. As mentioned above, the registration forms indicated the participants were all White, middle- to upper-middle-class women.

Of the 12 women who responded to the first questionnaire, 4 learned of the Nancy Drew reading group through the newspaper, 6 from their public library, and 2 through NDC committee members. The women also expressed several reasons they were attracted to the reading group: 5 thought the topic was interesting, 7 wanted to talk to other Nancy Drew readers or wanted to learn more about the Nancy Drew phenomenon. Eleven of the 12 women claimed they liked the original better than the contemporary Nancy Drew series. At least 9 of the women who shared specific memories of having read Nancy Drew mysteries while growing up talked about associations they had with others who were equally intrigued with the girl sleuth.

The second questionnaire revealed additional information about the women not gleaned from the other sources. For example, the women who responded stated they spent between 3 to 16 hours a week engaged in pleasure reading. Although all said they read a variety of genres, half said they preferred reading adult mysteries. Of those women who responded, all reported having joined another reading group following the conclusion of the Nancy Drew reading group.

The information obtained from these and other data sources allowed me to answer the questions posed by this study. I discuss my findings below.

How Did the Participants Become Engaged in the Specific Genre of Nancy Drew Mysteries?

The findings of this study suggest the women became engaged in reading Nancy

Drew as young girls through their associations with individuals acting as *literacy agents*. The evidence also suggests the women shared similar experiences, values, and attitudes about reading which may have led to their engagement in the adult Nancy Drew reading group. The desire to exchange ideas and acquire new knowledge also appears to have motivated the women to join the reading group.

Literacy agents promote engagement. The initial questionnaire revealed that 11 of the 12 women who responded had read Nancy Drew during childhood. Although some of the women in the group could not remember who inspired them to read Nancy Drew, those who could remember often credited librarians, aunts, cousins, mothers, siblings, and peers for having exposed them to the popular girl sleuth.

The small group discussions confirmed the initial questionnaire's findings. For instance, Mary, a woman in her early 40s, recounted how she really did not like the Nancy Drew character as much as she did Trixie Belden, a protagonist in another popular girls' mystery series. However, her classmates and friends often passed around the "blue Grosset and Dunlap hard-covered Nancy Drews in fifth grade," and that is how Mary was persuaded to read Nancy Drew. Heidi and Jan also mentioned how their friends had gotten them to read the Nancy Drew books. Heidi recalled that it was her best friend who gave her *The Clue of the Leaning Chimney* as a gift. She said, "It was the first book I ever owned. I kept it for years." Jan, on the other hand, shared how she traded Nancy Drew mysteries with her best friend: "We'd both read a different Nancy Drew mystery and when we were finished with the books, we'd trade with each other." Pat, an avid Nancy Drew reader, explained, "I read Nancy Drew mysteries as a youngster. I must have read as many as 30 Nancy Drews mostly by trading them with neighbors and cousins." Sue, another woman in the group, added, "I, too, remember trading Nancy Drew books with my friends. I also remember my mother reading Nancy Drew to me while I scratched her back. I could always get her to read one more chapter that way." Deborah also shared how Nancy Drew was read in her home. She said, "When I was a kid, my mom used to read to us. I have an older sister who read Nancy Drew and she was the one who brought them home [to us]." According to both Judy and Carol, it was their aunts who gave them their first Nancy Drew mystery. Carol claimed she still had "a shelf full of Nancy Drews" that her aunt gave her. And finally Barbara, a woman in her early 50s, told the group the following: "Although I lived in a small town, our library had several Nancy Drew books in its collection. It was the librarian who first pointed them out to me and I'm glad she did."

At least 9 of the 14 women who remembered reading Nancy Drew as girls shared stories that included accounts of special relationships forged around the reading of these texts. The bonds that developed between these women and their mothers, siblings, aunts, peers, and other Nancy Drew aficionados appear to have motivated the women to read and made their childhood reading exciting and meaningful.

Reflecting on his own learning-to-read experiences, Mike Rose (1989) noted how important being connected to others is in becoming literate. He wrote:

To be sure, the development of my ability to decode words and read sentences took place in school, but my orientation to reading – the way I conceived of it, my purpose for doing it – occurred within the tight and untraditional confines of my home an excitement and curiosity shaped by others and connected to others, a cultural and linguistic heritage received not from some pristine conduit, but exchanged through the heat of human relation. (pp. 224–225)

As Rose pointed out, mastering basic literacy skills allows a person to delve into the world of print, but it appears that generating excitement for *and* sustaining interest in reading involves more than the mere acquisition of decoding skills. Like Rose, some of the women in this study developed close associations with individuals outside of the classroom that sparked their interest in reading. As we have come to understand from the women's accounts of their childhood reading, it seems that peers, sisters, cousins, mothers, and aunts shared more than their interest in and affection for Nancy Drew. They shared with the women their love of reading.

Acting much like Hollywood agents whose primary function is to sell the talents of rising stars, these reading mentors, whom I refer to as *literacy agents*, influenced the women's childhood reading habits. Based on the women's memories of reading Nancy Drew, it appears these literacy agents often promoted the mystery series and the girl detective to the point where even uninterested readers were drawn into Nancy's world. As Mary pointed out, "It was really my friends who coaxed me into reading Nancy Drew. I never liked these books terribly much. I mean, I read them because they were the thing that went around." Clearly, these literacy agents not only acted as the catalyst that got some of the women enthused about Nancy Drew at a young age, but they also drew the women into a special circle – the circle of readers.

Fond memories of reading Nancy Drew are perhaps the main reason why many of the women continue to persuade others to read books from this collection. As a result, some of the women in the group perpetuate Nancy Drew's popularity by cajoling their own daughters, nieces, and other young girls into reading these books while at the same time inculcating them into that larger community of readers.

In follow-up interviews, two of the women spoke specifically about the opportunities available to them for exposing young readers to Nancy Drew. For example, Heidi mentioned how she hoped to introduce her nieces to the girl detective in the near future. She said, "I do have nieces. One niece is eight now so she's approaching the age where she might start to enjoy reading some Nancy Drew mysteries." And Carol, whose aunt had given her several Nancy Drew books, told how she had actually encouraged a niece to read Nancy Drew. She stated, "I tried to get my niece to read Nancy Drew. At first she was reluctant, but then she read her first Nancy Drew mystery. I knew she was hooked when she asked me if I had any others."

On a similar note, Mary explained during a small group discussion that in her home Nancy Drew mysteries are read as "breakfast books." She told how her

daughters have gotten into the habit of reading a Nancy Drew book while they eat their breakfast. Mary also reported that when she arrived home with a stack of Nancy Drew books she was to read for the adult reading group, one of her daughters saw the books and immediately exclaimed, "Oh, a new Nancy Drew book!" Mary added, "My daughters love reading them. They read them over and over and over again. They'll not only read them at the breakfast table, they can read them anywhere for a fifth or sixth time."

The availability of "breakfast books" in this household appears to be a move on Mary's part to establish reading as a valued family activity she and her daughters can engage in even while eating breakfast. Whether conscious of her agenda or not, Mary's daughters are drawn into the world of books every morning, and Nancy Drew is there. Their increasing appreciation for reading appears to be intertwined with the apparent joy and satisfaction the girls get from reading the Nancy Drew mysteries as a family.

It is, however, important to note that not all of the women who tried to influence the reading preferences and habits of young girls were successful. Jan, whose daughter is now in her middle 30s, remembered how hard it was to get her daughter to read Nancy Drew. She shared the following account during one of the small group discussions: "My daughter wouldn't read! She read a few Pippy Long Stockings (a contemporary of Nancy Drew), but she wouldn't read much else. She couldn't be bothered [with reading]. She was too busy doing other things she liked better." Later, in an interview, Jan described her daughter's present reading habits: "She's a reader now and it's been within the last, let's see now, 10 years perhaps, that she's begun to read on a regular basis. She was more interested in having fun back in those days. But there were books all over the house; everybody but her was reading. And so I think because of our example she finally picked up reading about 10 years ago. I recently asked my daughter, 'Do you remember reading Nancy Drew?' And she replied, 'No, I wouldn't read anything then.'"

Although this example documents Jan's unsuccessful attempt to get her daughter to read Nancy Drew mysteries, we know that some of the other women in the group were able to exert some influence over a new generation of Nancy Drew readers. Moreover, we begin to see how the women's memories of reading Nancy Drew cast light on how close associations form between readers and their literacy agents and how these associations affect young readers' literacy development and motivate them to read.

Similar experiences, values, and attitudes about reading lead to engagement. In reviewing the women's comments about how their affiliation with the Nancy Drew reading group occurred, we begin to understand why they were motivated to join the group and the effect their group discussions had on their literacy learning. To begin, all but one of the members in the reading group were brought together by a single shared experience: the joy of having read Nancy Drew during childhood. As Deborah explained, "I just had a lot of enjoyment

reading Nancy Drew when I was young. And I think I would have missed out on something had I not read her.”

Embedded within this shared experience is the women’s basic appreciation of reading. This observation was verified by the women’s responses to the follow-up questionnaire, which indicated that several women in the group spend between 3 and 16 hours a week reading on their own. Comments shared by two women in follow-up interviews also supported the questionnaire’s findings. In this particular instance, Jan mentioned how much she enjoyed reading and talking about the Nancy Drew books with other women in the group. She said, “You know, it was a friendly bunch. I mean, people that came *wanted* to talk about books. You could tell they liked to read; they liked to talk about books.”

In an interview with Shelly, another Nancy Drew participant, it became apparent that gathering with others who also value reading and discussing books was a primary reason why 10 of the Nancy Drew women eventually joined another reading group offered by their public library. Shelly explained that when that reading group ended, the women continued to meet over lunch for several months afterwards to exchange titles of books they had recently read and to talk about “everything else under the sun” until only 5 participants of the original Nancy Drew group remained.

Finally, the desire to discuss books with other equally committed readers led this core of women to reconfigure their reading group. Armed with a reading list that included the works of Tony Hillerman, Lois Duncan, Walter Mosley, and other popular adult mystery writers, these and other interested women met in the fall of 1994 to engage in conversation about the books on their reading list. As of this writing, their reading group continues to meet at the same public library on the second Wednesday of every month to discuss adult mystery novels. Of the original Nancy Drew reading group, three remain active members in this newly formed group. From the women’s preceding comments, it appears then that joining a reading group affords its constituents the opportunity to gather with others who have similar reading preferences.

As Smith (1988) suggested, people join clubs or groups they believe reflect their own beliefs, attitudes, and values. According to Smith, individuals usually seek membership in clubs that espouse values and opinions similar to their own and in which learning almost invariably takes place. Gaining entrance into what Smith calls the “literacy club” is much like joining any other club or group. He offers the following explanation:

We join the clubs of people whom we see as being like us, who see us as being like them. Always there is the same exclusiveness. We reject clubs if we do not see ourselves as belonging to them, and differentiate ourselves from others whom we do not accept as belonging to our clubs. If we do not want to belong to a particular club, or if we are deliberately excluded, then we learn not to be like the people in that club.

None of this learning stops with childhood. It continues throughout

our adult lives, although it is so common, so inconspicuous, that we are usually unaware that it is taking place and may be reluctant even to call it learning when it is pointed out to us. (p. 5)

Various studies on adult reading groups (Long, 1986, 1992; Sicherman, 1989) confirm Smith's observations. For instance, in a study conducted by Long (1992) on how members of adult reading groups interpret texts, she found that "reading [*sic*] groups often form because of a subtext of shared values, and the text itself is often a pretext (though an invaluable one) for the conversation through which members engage not only with the authorial 'other' but with each other as well" (p. 194). Hence, the present study's findings confirm Long's position, which points to the mutual valuing of specific readings as one reason why such groups form. But this is not the only reason individuals seek membership in reading groups.

Exchange of ideas and acquisition of knowledge lead to engagement. Literary societies, reading clubs, and other similar groups have played an important role in promoting literacy. Historically, these groups have facilitated the transfer of cultural values, encouraged literate behaviors that help individuals interpret texts in critical ways, and highlighted the interpersonal and interdependent aspects involved in the acquisition of literacy in addition to serving as centers for learning (Blair, 1980; Heath, 1991; Sicherman, 1989). "Since the days of Cicero," Heath wrote,

those who have been most literate have also been drawn to create opportunities to organize themselves into communities of literates and to talk within these groups about what they learned from what they read and ... [to] spread knowledge and promote actions among others These close communal associations around texts – especially those of religious or legal content – have encouraged individuals to pursue their own private reflections about the life of the individual within the state and, indeed, within the cosmos. (p. 4)

Like the women of the past who gathered to exchange ideas acquired through reading, the women in the Nancy Drew group shared a genuine desire for gaining knowledge through reading and conversation. Information taken from the first questionnaire revealed that seven women participated in the reading group because they wanted to "talk with others about books" or to "learn more about the Nancy Drew series." Jan, who read Nancy Drew mysteries at the ages of 11 and 12, offered the following insight: "My reason for attending the adult reading group was motivated by my desire to learn more about the background of the Nancy Drew series." Deborah, Maggie, Sue, and Judy all wrote similar comments, indicating they came to "learn more about the books" and "to meet other women who liked Nancy Drew." Heidi's statement clearly articulated her reason for joining the group. She wrote, "I had an interest in the subject and I expected the scholar for this series would have plenty of interesting things to say

about the historical, psychological, and social context of the Nancy Drew phenomenon. I knew I could learn from her.” And Heather, the youngest woman in the group, expressed that although she had never read any Nancy Drew books, she “thought it would be a good idea to get some background information” on the series before she attempted to read her first Nancy Drew mystery. These women’s statements suggest they joined the group in part to advance their learning, which confirms Blair’s (1980) claim that such groups often serve to elevate the intellectual position of its members by increasing their self-perceived knowledge base. In the next section, I discuss how participation in groups of this kind promotes literacy learning.

What Can Be Learned From Interactions That Were Part of the Nancy Drew Reading Group Discussion?

To understand how the women in the Nancy Drew reading group benefited from their book talks, I have selected excerpts from their discussions that illustrate the kinds of talk that occurred. Generally speaking, the women responded to the texts by thinking and speaking in ways customary to classroom talk about literature (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Marshall, 1989; Marshall et al., 1995). That is to say, the women asked for clarifications, referred to the text to prove a point, gave their interpretations of events, offered hypotheses, made evaluative remarks, and summarized book content much like students do when they participate in discussions of literature. Although such discussions can be lively and intense, they are often characterized by a mechanical quality that suggests lack of engagement.

According to Marshall et al. (1995), students learn how to discuss literature by modeling their responses after teachers’ ways of thinking and talking about texts. For example, Marshall et al. (1995) found that teachers inform, question, and respond to students’ comments in ways that lend structure to but also limit students’ literature discussions. This kind of literary discourse is driven by the New Critical theory, which maintains that texts are objective constructs that can be studied using a set of principles that can lead to close, inductive investigations of literary works. It assumes that students can be taught to do close readings of texts that result in “accurate, sound, defensible interpretations” (Marshall et al., 1995). This kind of approach to teaching, reading, and analyzing literature “initiates students into the community of literary knowers who [inevitably] share the same approaches to, values about, and interpretations of the works they read” (Langer, 1993). Once learned, these ways of talking and thinking become ingrained and spill over into other literary discussion settings (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Marshall et al., 1995). This may explain then why parts of the women’s book talks contained discourse patterns similar to those found in classroom literature discussions: They learned how to talk about literature this way at school.

As previously mentioned, the scholar’s lectures included specific information about events leading up to the development, production, and marketing of

the Nancy Drew mystery series. In addition, the scholar situated the series within a historical context, which facilitated discussion on gender, racial, and socioeconomic issues as portrayed within the series. As some of the proceeding excerpts from the transcripts show, there were instances where the women's discussions revolved around topics highlighted by the scholar in her lectures. Furthermore, the questions she used to guide their discussions of the texts, which she presented to them in a handout, also appear to have influenced their conversations. It seems then that the scholar attempted to structure the women's conversations in much the same way that teachers in classrooms frame literature discussions by informing and questioning students in particular ways. These features (similar classroom patterns of talk and the scholar's teacher-like role within the group) make it possible to draw comparisons between the women's book talks and classroom literature discussions. However, the women's conversations at times took on a life of their own and deviated from classroom literature discourse in important ways.

The women raised questions and made provocative statements during their discussions that were not reflective of the scholar's ways of thinking and talking. This appears to have moved the women beyond the typical teacher-centered talk prevalent in most classroom discussions toward a more collaborative meaning-making stance. The more collaborative stance resulted in the women's construction of new knowledge and in divergent interpretations of the texts. A departure from teacher-centered discourse also involved the personal nature of the women's engagement with the text – sometimes in text-relevant discussions and sometimes in discussions that appeared tangential to the text. Finally, the women infused humor into much of their book talks, which gave rise to lively, engaging literary discussions. Such talk reflects more natural, free-flowing literary conversations seldom found in classroom literature discussions. Hence, by studying the transactions between the women and the scholar, we begin to understand how the roles and relationships between students and teachers might be reevaluated as we consider alternate ways of engaging students in literature discussions that move them toward a deeper understanding of and personal engagement with literary texts. The following representative examples drawn from the small group discussions illustrate how the women and the scholar accomplished this.

Collaborative Stance

A collaborative stance aids knowledge construction. In this first episode, coded in the "characters in Nancy Drew" category, Maggie asks why one of Nancy Drew's girlfriends has a boy's name: a question not identified by the scholar as a possible point of discussion. The following conversation took place on the first evening the women met. It came from the small group discussion led by the scholar and is typical of the women's collaborative meaning-making efforts.

121. Maggie: The other thing I couldn't help but think about, which I'd never thought of before, is why is Nancy Drew's best friend named George? That surely is not a common female name, is it?
122. Pat: Not back then it wouldn't have been.
123. Maggie: It's not Georgina or anything like that?
124. Pat: Well, it is Georgina. It's just short for ... (*voice trails off*)
125. Maggie: Is it Georgina? Oh, I've never seen that.
126. Scholar: No, that's not [in the book]. George makes it very clear when she says, "George is my name. It's not a short name."
127. Pat: Are you sure?
128. Scholar: Yeah, she did.
129. Maggie: Yeah, she did. She did. You're right.
130. Scholar: Yeah, she does. She says, "That is my one name. It is my name."
131. Karen: When ... Rose asks her, "George, that's a boy's name?" She says, "No, that's my name. And I'm a girl."
132. Pat: Oh, yeah. I'd forgotten that. She does. And I guess I'd just decided to accept it, but now I'm struck why that's in there. There's no point made of it for any reason. It's just there.
133. Karen: I always thought that there was some worry that Nancy was a little too outspoken so they put in somebody so ... it balances out Nancy's character.
134. Maggie: Oh, so George is too much of a ... tomboy. Bess is ultra-feminine and too timid, and Nancy's character is more in the acceptable range.
135. Karen: Yeah, so Nancy's in the range where she's just right.
136. Scholar: But the other convention that George is playing off of is that a lot of these earlier girls' books have heroines with boys' names. Although they are short names. For example, other heroines' names are Billie, even like Jo March, Tommie, Joni (*pronounced Johnny*). It was very common for these tomboy girls to have boys' names. George is even more interesting because she makes the point of saying Georgette is not her real name. It's George. And I think that's probably a good way of looking at it. She sort of represents that extreme end of what happens when a girl becomes maybe too boyish, too independent. She ends up seeming somewhat abnormal.
137. Women: Hmm.
138. Scholar: And Nancy's just right.
139. Women: Yeah, yeah.
140. Scholar: She's got it all.
141. Women: Yeah.

An important feature of the kind of talk that transpired in the small group discussions involved the more skilled participants within the group assisting their peers in knowledge construction as documented in the preceding episode. Beginning with speaker turn 133, where Karen responds to Maggie's query by hypothesizing about the purpose George's character may serve in the series, we see how Karen's insight gives Maggie a new perspective on the various roles played by Nancy Drew's girlfriends. Realizing that Karen has made an important contribution to the discussion, Maggie begins fleshing out her colleague's idea in speaker turn 134. As she does this, it becomes increasingly clear to Maggie that

they may have generated a plausible answer to her question. Shortly thereafter, the scholar adds to their meaning-making efforts (speaker turn 136) by providing the women with information that gives them insight into the formula at work within the genre. In the end, the scholar agrees with Karen and Maggie's explanation stating that George may indeed "represent [*sic*] that extreme end of what happens when a girl becomes maybe too boyish, too independent."

Of particular importance is the scholar's role in this discussion. Although the scholar exhibits patterns of talk often attributed to teachers (speaker turns 126, 128, and 130, where the scholar uses her turns to clarify faulty ideas by referring to the text, and speaker turn 136, where the scholar provides important information about the genre under study), she also deviates from teachers' traditional ways of conducting literature discussions. For example, the scholar, whose role is to guide the women in their discussions much like a teacher would, refrains from completely taking on a teacher-like role and instead acts more like a partner in knowledge construction. Of the 21 turns taken by the participants in this episode, the scholar speaks 6 times. This is contrary to what happens in classroom discussions of literature where the teacher often controls much of the talk (Cazden, 1988; Marshall, 1989; Marshall et al., 1995). Here the scholar waits to allow the women time to respond to and collaborate with one another as they make meaning of the texts, interjecting only when it is apparent her input is needed. By taking on a less assuming stance within the discussions, the scholar minimizes her role as the main purveyor of knowledge thereby conveying to the women that their contributions to the discussion matter.

A collaborative stance encourages divergent interpretations. This next excerpt illustrates the kind of reciprocal learning that occurred when the women expressed divergent interpretations of a text under study. In this episode, Pat posed a question that caused the women in the group to contemplate Nancy Drew's character flaws – another question not posed by the scholar. The following episode comes much later in the same discussion as the one presented earlier. Note how the scholar responds to some of the women's unexpected comments.

285. Pat: Does Nancy have any flaws at all?
286. Karen: She judges people very quickly, but she usually seems to be right every time.
287. Sue: Nancy Drew didn't appear to have any flaws when I read her [during my childhood years]. I'm not sure if she has any now or not.
288. Pat: She was impetuous. She was always getting into danger. I don't know if that's a flaw.
289. Sue: Is that a flaw?
290. Pat: Maybe for a kid it's not. It's probably a virtue.
291. Karen: Nancy has flaws. She does border on doing illegal things. She goes to great lengths to get information that she has no right getting a hold of (*The women begin talking excitedly.*) For example, in the *Secret of the Old Clock*, Nancy says something like, "Well, Dad, you go talk to your lawyer friend and ask him if he ever made this guy's will." She not only bosses her dad around, but isn't that kind of information

- sort of confidential anyway? (*More simultaneous talk from the women.*)
292. Deborah: They wouldn't really be doing that. Would they? If they were reputable lawyers?
293. Pat: Well, not Carson Drew. He makes that clear.
294. Deborah: And they knew him in different towns, too. He was well-known and highly respected. I doubt he would do that if he wanted to keep his reputation intact.
295. Karen: Well, what do you think?
296. Deborah: Honestly, I think she had a flaw. She was almost too perfect.
297. Maggie: Yeah, even though I liked the stories when I was a kid, I never wanted Nancy to be a friend of mine.
298. Scholar: Oh really?
299. Deborah: I never wanted her as a friend either.
300. Scholar: I never thought about that.
301. Deborah: I wanted to be someone who could do the things Nancy did. I think it would be irritating to be with someone who was so upright, almost like Horatio Alger.
302. Pat: I wanted to be someone like that too. I guess I never did think about it like that. You know, you're right. You're right. I never thought of her as a friend.
303. Scholar: You know she could be arrogant too. I mean, think about the way she acted toward the Topham girls [in the *Secret of the Old Clock*]. She's very quick to judge them.
304. Deborah: And she does in the Topham's downfall. She's a bit cruel even though they were nasty and they probably deserved being cut out of the will, I began to feel sorry for them. You know, they were rotten. Well, Nancy Drew relished, even rejoiced in their misfortune.

In both excerpts presented thus far, it is clear that the women's collaborative efforts resulted in their gaining a deeper understanding of the texts under discussion. Furthermore, their book talks included differing interpretations of the Nancy Drew character as illustrated in the latter episode.

Again, it is important to look at the scholar's role and its effect on the women's discourse within this interaction. Much like the previous example, the scholar again resists the role of teacher as the primary discussant and conveyor of knowledge. Instead, the scholar chooses to listen to the women before entering the discussion. It is not until after Maggie's comment, 14 turns into this discussion, that the scholar actually speaks. By this time, many of the women have expressed their views citing various situations in which Nancy's character is interpreted as being either too judgmental, impetuous, bossy, or too perfect for their liking. The women's varied interpretations give Pat (speaker turn 302) and the scholar (speaker turns 298, 300, and 303) a new perspective on the Nancy Drew character. Here, the scholar, the most knowledgeable participant in the discussions by virtue of her in-depth knowledge on the subject under study, acts more like a fellow participant and learner, a role rarely taken by teachers in classroom literary discussions. Furthermore, the scholar's decision to wait and listen to the women's emerging viewpoints before speaking appears to have opened up the floor and given the women the time and space needed to express divergent

interpretations, a highly improbable outcome had she taken on a more teacher-centered role in the discussion.

Personal Engagement

Personal experiences inspire relevant connections to text. In their book talks, the women also drew on their personal knowledge and experiences to make sense of the texts, something students seldom do in their discussions of literature (Langer, 1993; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1993). Drawing on their knowledge of popular-culture heroines, the following example shows how the women made comparisons between Nancy Drew and Jessica Fletcher, a female detective from the contemporary television program *Murder She Wrote*. This discussion occurred on the first evening and involved the group in which the scholar participated.

17. Deborah: You were asking about [Jessica] Fletcher's tv show formula? [*referring to a statement made by Karen at the start of their small group discussion*]
18. Karen: Yeah, it's similar to the Nancy Drew formula.
19. Maggie: I never made that connection (*sounding surprised*).
20. Karen: Yeah, I thought of that. In fact, Barbara and I were even talking about that earlier today. The only difference is that Jessica Fletcher doesn't drive and Nancy Drew drives (*much laughter from the women*).
21. Maggie: Well, there aren't any murders in Nancy Drew, are there?
22. Scholar: No, not in her early books.
23. Deborah: I think there was one. I can't recall.
24. Scholar: There are no murders. Stratemeyer was very clear about not having any.
25. Pat: There are no murders? Okay, I thought there was.
26. Judy: There's very little physical violence. She's always threatened, but she's – there's something about getting hit in the head, but there's no maiming.
27. Scholar: She gets bopped over the head quite a bit.
28. Women: Yeah.
29. Scholar: But she bounces right back from it. There's no blood.
30. Maggie: And there's no blood in Jessica Fletcher even though ...
31. Judy: The only blood drawn was that one doll (*laughs*).
32. Women: (*several respond simultaneously*) Yeah, that's right, in *The Old Album*. Yeah.
33. Pat: The other thing I noticed was that the author let Nancy Drew get angry. In the last book, *Mystery of the Velvet Mask*, Nancy got very angry after talking to the guy who ran the warehouse. Those were some of the emotions I would have felt. Nancy's not like Jessica who never gets mad.
34. Judy: Jessica's very frustrated though (*much laughter from the women*).
35. Pat: Yeah, but Nancy is more human than Jessica, I think.

As mentioned above, the women in this episode compared Nancy Drew to

Jessica Fletcher by drawing on their knowledge of popular-culture heroines. Once again, the scholar used her turns to clarify faulty ideas (speaker turns 22 and 24) or provide information (speaker turns 27 and 29). Although this pattern of talk is similar to the way teachers conduct literature discussions (Langer, 1993; Marshall, 1989), the scholar's turns were fewer in number and briefer in nature. Of the 19 turns documented in this episode, the scholar spoke only 4 times compared with the women's 15 turns. This may be what allowed the women to contemplate the authenticity of Nancy's and Jessica's characters as they did.

As the transcript indicates, what began as a simple comparison of Nancy Drew to Jessica Fletcher eventually led one woman, Pat, to observe the differences between the two characters. In speaker turn 33, Pat not only makes a distinction between the two characters, but she also connects with the text on a personal level when she states that Nancy Drew's anger is consistent with the kind of emotion she believes she would have felt had she been in Nancy's place. According to Pat, the fact that Nancy Drew exhibited anger makes her character more human and believable. This type of comparison permitted Pat to connect on a more personal level with Nancy Drew.

Personal connections lead to tangential discourse. Not all the discussions involving personal levels of connectedness focused on the texts. At times, the women engaged in personal discourse that was only remotely related to the topic under discussion, as this next example demonstrates. This discussion occurred on the second evening the women met. It involves the group of women that the scholar did not interact with on the first night. The following discussion starts with the women's comparison of the types of crimes and violence presented in the original and contemporary Nancy Drew texts.

377. Heather: I think these books give a bad message to teenagers. I mean, I thought the *Nancy Drew Files* were a lot better. I wouldn't recommend these for kids to read just because a lot of the stories contain violence, especially with *The Nancy Drew Files*. These books are questionable and send the wrong message to teenagers.
378. Mary: When you think of the original ones, the crimes there were less violent.
379. Jan: Except I remember a girl was grabbed into a cab in the *Mystery of the Old Album*.
380. Barb: Oh, by the gypsies! That's right (*laughs*).
381. Jan: Gypsies were used to scare us when I was growing up. They'd say, you know, be good or the gypsies will get you.
382. Scholar: Is that what they told you? Who told you that? Was it your parents?
383. Jan: Uh huh, yeah.
384. Heather: I remember my grandmother telling me that when I was like 5 or 6 years old. I didn't go outside for a week and I refused to go out in the backyard and play.
385. Scholar: You were told that too?
386. Heather: Yes, and I'm 21.
387. Women: (*laugh*)
388. Heather: I remember being told the gypsies were going to get me. We

- lived in a small town in Missouri and the minute I was told that, it's like I am in the house and that's it. I didn't want to go outside after that.
389. Jan: And now you stop and think about how a child or children at an early age are told to be wary of strangers.
390. Heather: I think that's kind of what they meant, but it kind of didn't come out that way. I was [kind of a] Curious George style child. I had to explore everything around me. It's like ... my grandfather had left a radio downstairs and he came downstairs to find that I had taken it apart. And on the (*unintelligible*) I had assembled each piece in lines and rows as to the place they go in this thing and to this radio. Never could put it back together, but I had successfully taken it apart!
391. Mary: That's what I was going to say ... is, were you able to reassemble it?
392. Heather: No, but I did take it apart very successfully, every little piece of it. But I never got it put back together.
393. Jan: I was too busy climbing trees! I wasn't taking radios apart. I was climbing trees (*laughs*).
394. Heather: I was more mischievous than now. One of the first baby pictures they had of me was with the uh ... book in one hand and in the other hand I had a screwdriver. I used to you know, they were some of my favorite toys – either books or screwdrivers. Uh ... how do I take these apart? But I wasn't really reading. I started reading at 3 and so I think that ... (*unintelligible*).
395. Jan: They encourage that in boys you know – to take things apart. Did they encourage it in you?
396. Heather: I don't think so. I think it was more something that just – I picked up a screwdriver one day that my father had left out and the next thing you know I was taking apart anything that had a screw in it. Right from there who knows what else?
397. Women: (*laugh*)
398. Heather: And it's amazing to me because I had never – no one had ever gotten me a Nancy Drew because I started reading – I mean literally being able to read at 3 years old. And it's amazing that no one had at least by the time I was 5 or 6 had, you know, had a seventh- or eighth-grade reading level ...
399. Scholar: They should have given you a *Tom Swift*.
400. Heather: Yeah. It seems amazing that I hadn't read any of those books.
401. Jan: Did they have them in the library in your town?
402. Heather: Yeah?
403. Jan: Because I can remember Nancy Drews were not available in my hometown library.
404. Heather: I couldn't be sure if they did, but ...
405. Mary: Well, but as was said earlier uh ... just before the seventies there was a kind of drop off in interest in Nancy Drew [*returning to one of the topics raised earlier in the discussion*].

In the preceding episode, Heather began the conversation on a personal yet relevant note (speaker turn 377) when she expressed that the *Nancy Drew Files* might be inappropriate reading material for teenagers because of the type

of violence these books contain. This was a topic the scholar had expressed interest in having the women discuss and so invariably Mary followed up on Heather's remarks, adding that the original Nancy Drew mysteries seemed less violent in comparison to the *Nancy Drew Files*. Shortly thereafter Jan and Barbara (speaker turns 379 and 380) reminded the women that it was the gypsies who were responsible for most of the crimes in the original Nancy Drew mysteries. The idea of gypsies, however, appears to have been a turning point in the conversation.

For Jan, the thought of gypsies brought back childhood memories in which gypsies were often used to threaten unruly children into behaving (speaker turn 381). Curious to know if parents actually did this, the scholar asked Jan about her experience. It was then that Heather reentered the conversation. By recounting a personal experience similar to Jan's, Heather moved the women further away from their initial topic of discussion.

What is interesting about this exchange is that the scholar and the women appear to have deliberately encouraged Heather's tangential discourse. In retrospect, there may have been several reasons for this. For one, Heather was the youngest member in the group. At the time of the study, she was 21 years old, a mother with a high school education who had never participated in an adult reading group, and up until the point she joined the group, she had not read a single Nancy Drew mystery. Moreover, Heather had spoken very little during the discussions. This was in large part because she had registered just a few hours before the group's first meeting. As a result, she had not read any of the texts and did not speak much the first night the women met. The women were aware of this because the librarian had introduced Heather to the group as a newly registered, first-time reader of Nancy Drew. The women, eager to add yet another woman to their group of Nancy Drew readers, seemed pleased to have Heather among them, and they let her know this by applauding her and welcoming her into the group.

Although Heather was less articulate than many of the others in the group, the women seemed interested in what she had to say. For example, when Heather told the group she too had been told during childhood to be wary of gypsies, Jan responded by expanding on Heather's statement and reminded the group of the things parents tell their children today regarding strangers (speaker turn 389). Jan's remark seemed to affirm Heather's previous statement and may have encouraged her to continue speaking.

In speaker turns 390, 392, 394, and 396, Heather shared a personal anecdote, telling the women of the time she took a radio apart at age 3. Although Heather's personal recounting of this experience had little to do with the Nancy Drew texts, Mary's genuine curiosity led her to ask Heather whether she ever put the radio back together or not. With each succeeding turn, it appears that the women as well as the scholar were making an effort to include Heather in their discussion. They did this by acknowledging her input (speaker turns 385 and 389) and asking her questions that allowed her to expand on her thoughts

(speaker turns 385, 391, 395, and 401). They also appeared to have encouraged Heather by laughing with her (speaker turns 387, 393, and 397). The women and the scholar, giving Heather an opportunity to hold the floor for an extended period of time, showed their willingness to draw her into their discussion.

Considering that this is the most Heather spoke during the book talks, it seems safe to assume that her prolonged engagement in the discussion was made possible because the group allowed her to explore her thoughts through tangential discourse. For Heather, this type of discourse permitted her to contextualize the texts on her own terms. It placed her in the center of the talk where there was little chance her contributions would be inaccurate because the topic of discussion was herself. Such talk, which many teachers view as unproductive to literary discourse (Roller & Beed, 1994), may have given Heather easy entry into the discussion and helped build her confidence as a valued participant in the women's book talks.

Personal humor produces lively exchanges. Sometimes the women engaged in humorous, lively exchanges. In the following excerpt, the women's attention was momentarily diverted from the Nancy Drew texts when Jan and Barbara reminisced about their childhood librarians. As the transcript indicates, the amusing details of Barbara's digression generated a fair amount of enthusiastic response from the women. This episode comes from the first evening's small group discussion in which the scholar did not participate.

211. Jan: I remember my librarian as an older woman (*laughs*). I don't know how old she was. She wasn't young (*women laugh*).
212. Barb: She was probably our age now. She just seemed old at the time (*laughs*).
213. Jan: Probably (*laughing*). But it just seems like [the librarians] were very respectable and very conservative in that era. There wasn't as much fun in the library. You had to be quiet (*some laughter from the women*).
214. Barb: We had fun in our library. It was a small town library and our librarian wore her leather bedroom slippers to work (*more laughter from the women*).
215. Mary: Well that's *hilarious*.
216. Barb: She shuffled around. Yeah, she sat on the arm chair and she had whiskers. She was a character (*laughs*). We loved going there.
217. Jan: Our librarian was very strict and very sssh sssh! So you just got your books and got out.
218. Barb: Oh, our librarian was that way with some of the kids, but we were kind of her favorites. We always knew when a new Nancy Drew book had arrived because she'd hold them back for us.
219. Jan: Oh, I see. Maybe I was too (*unintelligible*).
220. Carol: That's not odd in the 1930s and 1940s. Like Jan said the times have changed and we've gotten away from librarians being (*unintelligible*).

As previously mentioned, there were occasions when the women's discussions departed from the Nancy Drew texts. At times the women's departures fo-

cused on humorous remarks, anecdotes, or jovial banter, which were remotely related to their discussions. After studying these digressions, it is apparent that humor was an important feature of the women's discussions for several reasons.

First, humorous digressions like the above example appear to have helped the women feel more at ease with one another. Humor provokes laughter and laughter relieves anxiety. It also invites informality. By laughing with each other, the women quickly reached a level of comfort that allowed them to express themselves more freely. Moreover, humorous discourse may have helped relieve any pressure the women felt to correctly interpret the texts under study. These humorous digressions also provided the women an easy entry into the discussions. Although teachers often view humorous discourse as off-task behavior that adds little to students' interpretations of literature (Roller & Beed, 1994), this type of discourse seems to have fueled the women's enthusiasm for reading and talking about the Nancy Drew texts.

The discursive episodes presented above demonstrate how important social interaction between individuals can be in interpreting literary texts. According to the social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1986), learning is enhanced through interactions with more highly skilled partners. Literary interpretation and meaning construction like other aspects of literacy instruction are first introduced and modeled in public and social settings. It is within this public arena that the more proficient learners help their peers by sharing information and ideas, offering differing perspectives, and asking questions that aid the learning process (Vygotsky, 1986).

As the preceding examples suggest, the women's participation in the Nancy Drew reading group publicly defined them as readers and confirmed their membership in the "literacy club," which reinforces Long's (1992) claim that "the act of joining a reading group proves an occasion for people to define who they are culturally and socially and to seek solidarity with like-minded peers" (p. 197). Ultimately, it was the women's love of reading, their desire to learn, and their affection for Nancy Drew that brought them together and motivated them to discuss these texts.

Implications

Findings from this study support existing research that acknowledges the affective and social dimensions of reading. For example, Radway (1984) suggested that although women who read romances rarely discuss them with more than one or two individuals, it appears the romance itself permits its reader the experience of feeling cared for thereby "providing [women] with another kind of female community" (p. 96) capable of giving them the affective support they need to continue fulfilling their roles as nurturing, caring wives and mothers. On the other hand, Sichertman (1989) found that the women of a late-Victorian

American family formed “a sort of reading club” in which their shared passion for books and “emotional intensity” associated with friendships formed around childhood and adolescent texts made reading pleasurable for them well into adulthood. Likewise, Long’s studies (1986, 1992) suggested that friendships formed among members of adult reading groups can exert some influence over one another’s reading preferences mainly because of “intimate and reciprocal knowledge of taste in books and because of personal trust” (Long, 1986, p. 600). Although the present study focused on a “public event” (Handelman, 1990) that transpired over a brief period of time and involved adults reading one specific genre, its findings contribute to our understanding of what motivates some adults to maintain a prolonged interest in reading.

As the findings of the present study suggest, the social and affective dimensions of the reading played an important role in the women’s literary engagement. As these new insights from the women’s childhood memories of reading Nancy Drew suggest, learning to read can be affected by associations formed with literacy agents. Although it appears these relationships have the potential for motivating, supporting, and enhancing an individual’s participation in literate cultures, little is known about the interpersonal dynamics at work when readers and their literacy agents interact. Just how and where are these kinds of relationships formed? How are texts selected and what are the conventions that govern book sharing? And finally, can these relationships be used to motivate reluctant students in classroom settings to read and if so, how?

Clearly, more research needs to be conducted with individuals from varied backgrounds to determine what role, if any, literacy agents actually play in the process of young readers becoming literate. Perhaps by shedding light on these relationships, we may gain some insight into additional ways reading can be supported inside and outside of school. The comments of the women in this study about how and why they read Nancy Drew as children may help us understand current childhood literary fads such as the reading of the *Goosebumps* and *Babysitter* series books.

Likewise, research on adult reading groups has educational significance, because it allows us to view how mature readers engage in literary discussions outside of school settings. Although the women in the Nancy Drew reading group displayed a level of commitment to the book talks not always present among students, a review of the factors affecting their commitment may help teachers consider alternative ways for motivating students to participate in literary discussions.

Freedom of choice, homogeneity, and peer-centeredness are all striking features of the Nancy Drew book group that are frequently absent in school literacy instruction. To begin, the members of the Nancy Drew book group chose to participate in the group. They also chose to focus on texts that genuinely appealed to their interests. Second, the women shared similar values, habits, and attitudes toward reading. We know from the questionnaires that many of the women spend significant amounts of time reading in their leisure time. Also, all

but one of the women experienced reading Nancy Drew during childhood. Their backgrounds were similar: all were White, middle- to upper-middle-class women. Finally, the discussions had a focused yet flexible agenda where the women, not the scholar, controlled the discussions. Free choice to participate in the discussion of favorite texts, shared values and common backgrounds, and the women's ownership of the agenda appear to have motivated them to raise genuine questions, share personal information, and engage in lively, humorous discussions.

By contrast, we know that students have limited choices in the kinds of literature classes they take and even less choice in the literary texts they read (Applebee, 1993). Furthermore, students do not always possess the same level of literacy decoding skills and critical thinking abilities to interpret texts in similar ways. Students have varied experiences from which to draw and they often represent diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. However, several recent innovations in literacy instruction address each of the issues raised here. First, the importance of choice in selection of reading and writing topics has been emphasized in the literature about process and workshop classrooms. For instance, the Group-Read-Group or Group-Write-Group structure of workshop classrooms allows children to participate in whole-group activities based on the individual choices of reading and writing topics they make during their independent reading and writing times (Roller, 1996). However, choice must not be automatically reified. Lewis (1995) suggested that individual choice of reading material may be powerfully influenced by gender, race, and class status. As choice increases engagement, will it reinforce existing social and cultural boundaries?

The issue of homogeneity is even more difficult. The many striking similarities found among the participants of the Nancy Drew adult reading group and other similar groups (Blair, 1980; Flood & Lapp, 1994; Long, 1986, 1992; Marshall et al., 1995; Sicherman, 1989) leads me to question how we view the building of community in classrooms and, in particular, how we conduct literature discussions. In the extant literature, as in this study, it is difficult to disentangle interest in a topic from social homogeneity. Are the groups homogeneous because people from certain backgrounds have a tendency to share values and like similar activities? Would it be possible for a person with a similar interest in Nancy Drew but from a very different sociocultural background to have participated in and enjoyed the group discussions? Are book groups simply a tool used to construct literate cultures that support existing divisions based on gender, race, and class? Can groups be constructed across such divisions to help create more democratic classrooms?

In our desire to address diversity in our classrooms and to assimilate students into the school's literate culture, we often consciously assign children to democratic groupings. We must consider such practices very seriously. Is inculcating children to our classroom literacy cultures equivalent to the broader societal goal of assimilating "other people's children" to middle- and upper-class

values (Delpit, 1995)? When we establish purposefully diverse subgroups in our classrooms, are we diminishing the powerful benefits that homogeneous groupings can have in literary discussions? Although I do not advocate grouping students based on intellectual, gender, cultural, or linguistic ability, there may be occasions where *students* choose to participate in such groups. Are such groupings useful “natural groupings” that can be powerful tools in increasing literary engagement? Or are they simply another way that schools replicate existing social and economic conditions? Can they help to build self-esteem and motivate students to read in ways we are just beginning to understand? Can we create strong diversely constituted groups that have the same power as the homogeneous ones reported in book-club research? Just how and when and whether homogeneous or heterogeneous groupings for literature study are constituted is an issue that begs for resolution.

The work done by Raphael and McMahon (1994) on school book clubs addressed ways to minimize the effects of gender, ethnicity, and reading ability by helping students “learn the difference between their preconceptions about book discussion and authentic discussion that arises when readers are engaged with their texts” (p. 105). Through reading and writing activities, community share, and instruction in reading comprehension and vocabulary building strategies as well as analyzing transcripts of their book sharing sessions for things that worked well and ways they could improve, students in these book clubs were able to achieve a deeper understanding of the texts they read (and there was evidence that children from different cultural backgrounds were productively engaged in these activities). On the other hand, there is conflicting evidence that suggests small discussion groups do offer opportunities for enacting social prejudices (Lewis, 1995).

Finally, classroom discussions of literature are typically less student centered (Cazden, 1988; Langer, 1993; Marshall et al., 1995). As previously discussed, this may be due in part to the influence of New Critical theory and related instructional practices that aim to engage students in close readings of texts. Research shows this approach to literature interpretation often limits how students think and speak about the texts they read (Langer, 1993; Marshall et al., 1995; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1993), which may be one explanation why students’ motivation to read and discuss texts diminishes over time (Oldfather, 1995).

However, many recent efforts to improve literacy discussions have focused on ways to make classroom literature exchanges more student centered. Allowing students to engage in literary discussions where personal responses to literature are valued and students’ voices are honored may help students “gain a sense that their ideas are worthy of being heard, of being taken seriously. In doing so, students [*sic*] may experience personal ownership of the learning agenda for literacy” (Oldfather, 1995, p. 422). On the other hand, work by Lewis (1995) illustrated the powerful influence sociocultural forces can have in reproducing existing social orders in classrooms which may exert an even more powerful influence over small peer-led literature discussion groups where the teacher is not available to guide children as they deal with issues of race, gender, and class.

As we look outside classrooms for alternative models of how to engage students in literary discourse, let us remember the impact relationships formed around reading can have on an individual's motivation to read and also how the patterns of talk of the women in the Nancy Drew reading group fostered engagement. If our goal is to have free-flowing exchanges of ideas that help students gain insight into their own lives and that of others, we need to find ways to create contexts in classrooms that are more like the contexts we find in adult book groups. We can also rethink and restructure our classroom literature discussions in ways that will promote students' literary engagement. We must, however, be alert to the ways in which that goal may contribute to the reproduction of existing social conditions; and we must not approach this task in simple-minded ways that disregard the powerful influences of sociocultural differences on children's participation in classroom discussions.

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