CONCLUSION

David is a gifted and persistent storyteller, who most likely would have found some other way to make his stories heard if I had thwarted his attempts to manipulate sharing time to meet his needs. But what about the other children's powerful voices that are yet to be heard because there is no existing public space for their yet unknown way of making sense and reasoning? I thought that I had created a classroom that would encourage these myriad ways of making sense. But after watching David persistently pursue a new genre of storytelling for this classroom, pushing through unwritten rules and constraints, I realized that the type of talk that was allowed in the classroom was constrained in ways invisible to me as the teacher. What other constraints are operating in my classroom that are still unknown to me, effectively inhibiting children's full use of their endowment of language and reasoning skills? My work as a teacher must include developing my receptivity to the countless ways that children think and express their sense making to others. I can't know how all children talk, or how they think, because in listing the ways I think they do this, I immediately exclude the ways that are not on my list. Instead, I need to develop structures and an openness that somehow will allow these different ways to appear, and to feel welcomed in the classroom, which should result in a richer experience for all the children.

CHAPTER 3

Reading Storybooks with Young Children: The Case of *The Three Robbers*

CYNTHIA BALLENGER

When I read a storybook to my preschool students, like most teachers of young children, I talk about the book with them as well as read the text. I do this both after the book is finished and sometimes while we are reading the story. I believe that talking with them keeps the children interested and engaged. More important, I believe that this talk helps them to connect with the book by relating it to experiences in their own lives.

Cochran-Smith in *The Making of a Reader* (1984) explains the kind of talk I mean; she characterizes the talk that teachers value in these situations as talk that involves a sort of mental movement from the child's life to the experiences depicted in the text. For example, I might ask a question like, "Do you have a doggie at your house?" as I am reading a book about dogs. The child is then expected to think of his or her own dog, or to think of people who have a dog, and to use knowledge of this familiar situation to make sense of the book. The children learn to bring whatever relevant experience they have and connect it to the book's topic.

I have been told that I read stories well. I think about which books we should read and what activities we might do with them, but I rarely worry about how we should talk about the books as we read. The kinds of questions I ask, the remarks I make, seem almost natural to me, as a teacher, as a devoted reader myself and as a parent. I expect the chil-

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dren to imaginatively and emotionally enter the book, to rejoice when the story leads that way, to worry or grieve when it is sad, and to care about the story and the characters.

In this chapter I want to describe an experience of teaching where I found I did have to worry about storybook reading and talk. In this experience, I encountered ways of talking about books that were unfamiliar to me. The children didn't do what I expected, and because they didn't, and because I couldn't easily teach them to, I was forced to reconsider and to question my practice of storybook reading.

MY CONCERNS

I taught for 3 years in an early childhood classroom of Haitian children. The children were 4- and 5-year-olds, and many of them were born in Haiti. Some were born here of immigrant parents. Their parents all spoke Haitian Creole. Since I also speak Haitian Creole fairly well, although not perfectly, we used both English and Creole in this classroom.

I knew that these children did not regularly hear bedtime stories at home. I also knew that the bedtime story plays an important part in preparing children for the tasks of school literacy (Heath, 1983). I hoped to help my students to become familiar with books and to love them as I did.

The Three Robbers by Tomi Ungerer (1991) was the book that the children loved above all others. From the first day we read it, they talked about it, pored over the pictures pretending to read, and carried it around with them during the school day. I could see clearly that it was important to them. And yet it was a long time before we ever managed to finish it. As I read, they would constantly interrupt. The discussion would go far afield and although I tried to bring us back to the book, I rarely succeeded. The children were too excited, too interested in what they were talking about.

I brought my problem to the BTRS. I was frustrated. I explained to my colleagues that the children didn't know how to listen to storybooks. They were so excited when I read to them that they just talked and the book was forgotten. The response I received was an example of one of the important practices of the seminar. Rather than trying to help me fix this situation, to teach the children to listen better, they wanted to know what was going on. Before we tried to fix anything, we needed to know, and to reflect on, what the children were saying and doing. The rest of this chapter is an account of what we learned from this.

TALK AROUND BOOKS: MY STUDENTS' VIEW

The following conversation is taken from the transcript of the very first time we read *The Three Robbers*. Text from the book is italicized. Text in parentheses is translation of what was said in Haitian Creole, and I have used Xs to indicate unintelligible speech. The material in brackets gives additional useful information.

Eveline: Three robbers, I'm three, I'm three, I'm three.
Cindy: Yeah, 1,2,3. be quiet sit down. Si ou ta vle tande, pa pale, OK? (If you would like to hear, don't talk, OK?) It says the three robbers [pointing at title]. *Once upon a time there were three fierce robbers. They went about hidden under large black capes and tall black hats.*
Jean: One eye XX only one.
Cindy: Yeah, it looks like he's only got one eye he's got his hat down here.
Jean: Only two eyes XX [evidently referring to himself].
Cindy: Yeah, I think this guy has probably got two eyes but his hat is down. You know he's hiding so nobody knows who he is cuz he's bad.
Jean: Why?
Jeanson: Bad guy!!!
Cindy: *The first had a blunderbuss.* You see this kind of a gun.
Jean: Gun gun.
Cindy: *The second had a pepper-blower*, you see that? It puts piman in people's eyes, you see that, pepper.
Jean: Pepper?
Cindy: Yeah, pepper, it's piman.
Jeanson: My daddy eat piman. I eat piman.
Cindy: You eat piman too?
Tayla: My daddy eat piman.
Jean: Everybody eat piman.
Cindy: Do you like it in your eyes?
Many children: Daddy piman. I like it. No. Food. Daddy. Mommy. Not my brother.
Cindy: But in your eyes?
Jean: No. No eyes.
Tayla: Cindy, I eat in my eyes [laughing].
Kenthea: I drink my medicine myself. Cindy, I drink my medicine. My mother take medicine too.
Suzanne: My mother give me my medicine, green medicine.

The children are initiating all the talk here and they are talking to each other. They're building on one another's remarks. They're having a wonderful time. To me, however, they seem to be ignoring the book, and I try to bring their attention back to it. I find myself holding up the book to the children's view as if I thought they had forgotten it, or me.

With the help of conversation in the seminar, I began to explore this conversation. I found that I recognized more than one of the children's seemingly random remarks from other moments in the school day. Eveline responds to the word *three* in the title, *The Three Robbers*: "I'm three, I'm three, I'm three." She is 3 and she will fight anyone who believes that he or she is also 3. She greets the number, not by exploring its role in the text, but by saying something important about herself with it.

Jean contrasts his situation with the robber's—the robber has only one eye (or so it appears from the picture), while Jean has two. In fact, Jean's reference to eyes is a recurring theme in his play and conversation. A few days before we read *The Three Robbers* he had told a story about throwing sugar in a dog's eyes. His interest in eyes and maybe in his body's symmetry reapppears a few days later when he is finding a partner to walk outside with.

> *Jean:* Cindy, hold my hand?
> *Cindy:* I only have two hands, Jean [both are already being held].
> *Jean:* Two hands, two eyes, one mouth [with evident satisfaction].

Jean remains concerned with aspects of this issue throughout the year; the final appearance I note is in a version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* that he dictated near the end of the year.

> Once upon a time there was zombie.
> Zombie no wanta eat Jack.
> Jack want some food.
> And big giant in the house.
> Mother say, "No, big giant in the house and big zombie."
> Jack have a rock.
> Jack throw the rock in the zombie's eyes and zombie's eye get out.
> Only one eye stay.

Neither eyes nor the number 3 is a main theme of *The Three Robbers*. Eveline and Jean do not appear to be moving from their experience

back to the text, as Cochran-Smith suggests they should. And yet, even though Eveline presumably already knows her age, and Jean the number of his eyes, one senses a great force behind their statements. These are the sorts of comments that teachers of young children puzzle over all the time—statements of completely obvious facts, made with enormous conviction and pride.

The discussion about piman (pepper) has a similar feeling of engaged and excited public pronouncement. In the book, pepper is sprayed into the eyes of horses that are pulling a stagecoach to make them stop. Then the robbers rob the passengers of the stagecoach. But in their conversation, the children are talking about something else, something they are coming to know further as they speak. This is the meaning of pepper in Haitian culture. Piman is an important spice in Haitian cooking. An adult Haitian is expected to eat food with piman, hot food; for children, however, the piman often is left out. When I serve the children unfamiliar food, they often question me, "Pa gen piman?" (It doesn't have piman?) before they are willing to taste it.

Jean introduces the theme, "My daddy eat piman." Tayla seconds this. Jean then makes the generalization, "Everybody eat piman." I intervene, in typical teacher fashion, by asking them to connect their discussion with the story line, "Do you like it in your eyes?" I was concerned with bringing the discussion back to the book. This sort of remark, in many classrooms where I have taught, would have brought the children right back to the book. Here, after Jean answers me, the children all together and with great enthusiasm summarize their experience of piman. From what I can understand of that segment, they are mentioning various people who eat piman and others who don't. Then Tayla says, "Cindy, I eat in my eyes," and laughs as she says this; I believe she was making a joke by joining my focus, "pepper in the eyes" with theirs, "eating." Finally Kenthea brings up her ability, and her mother's, to take medicine by herself, a point that Suzanne seconds.

The children were identifying the place of piman in their world and in their fathers' world. Piman is for adults. It is a sign of maturity. In their view it is particularly fathers who like the very hot food, so pepper is a sign of masculinity. Perhaps it was no coincidence that it was two girls, Kenthea and Suzanne, who brought up medicine. I believe they were making an analogy between taking medicine and eating piman. Both piman and medicine are signs of power. Mothers are the ones who handle medicine, and fathers are able to eat piman. Through this conversation the children have begun to interpret, for themselves and for me, the meaning of piman in their families and

their culture. They are helping me know them, and discovering something for themselves as well.

However, their interpretation of the role of piman in Haitian culture is not a part of the story of *The Three Robbers.* The book is not the center of this conversation. The children are aware of the book in various ways, but they are focusing on issues situated in their world. In Cochran-Smith's terms, they are not moving from life to text, but the other way. Nor am I the center. They are talking to each other. This conversation, like so many others I experienced that year, left me feeling rather out of control and frustrated, and yet impressed with the children and their lively engagement. The children themselves seemed enormously pleased with what they had done.

TALK AROUND BOOKS—MY COMMUNITY'S VIEW

I was afraid we would never come to understand the book. How would they manage in first grade? I was nevertheless impressed with their seriousness, and I think it was this that led me to my next step—exploring the conversations I had with my friends when we talked about books. I listened carefully to what people said whenever a book was mentioned. What I found was not what I expected. I found that the practice of literate adults, even teachers, when they were talking about books outside of school, was not the same as the practice of the same people in school. It was, in fact, more similar to the way my students incorporated the book as part of a larger conversation. When the people I listened to brought up a book in conversation, comprehending the book was rarely the goal that organized the conversation; the book was discussed in relation to its usefulness in the task of understanding important aspects of life. A book that contained a terminally ill character, for example, led to a recounting of experiences in this area. A book that contained a divorce, led to a discussion of divorce. We would take events or characters from the book and use them in the arguments and stories we were developing on our own topics, as the children did around "piman" or eyes. And this happened whether or not these situations were part of the central themes of the book.

I was recently in a conversation about a book in which two of the characters were cousins. The conversation turned to recollections of various kinds of trouble the participants had gotten into as children with their cousins and then to speculations as to why cousins appeared to get into more trouble together in childhood than nonrelations. One of us, a very responsible adult, had gotten into significant trouble with his

cousins as a child, and the conversation was a serious one as he tried to understand himself as a child. And yet this was not a central theme of the book. The goal of this adult discussion was not to comprehend the book, but rather to use the book to understand ourselves. We used the book to address concerns of our own. And yet, the book changed through these conversations. It gained more life from the context of these concerns. I told a cousin story or two to this group of friends, as each of us did, and now, when I return to this book, I think of it as another cousin story. That the author made the two characters cousins now has more resonance for me, literary resonance and resonance from real life.

THE SOURCES OF INTERPRETATION

But is that all we do? Can we follow our own lead and the vagaries of our connections and still end up understanding the book as written? As I listened and thought about my own ways of reading, I realized that it isn't only that we wrest control from the book and go our own way. We also, as we read, let the book take us places we haven't been, didn't know about, couldn't have gone without it. In this case we read in order to incorporate the imagined experience of the novel into our own experiences, to make sense of people and events with the help of experiences we've gained from books, to learn about people we otherwise might not know. So, for example, someone reads a memoir of the childhood of a very rich boy and realizes something of the loneliness of her husband, whose background was similar. A novel that includes a very religious character helps a reader who lives a very secular life to understand something of the character of religion.

Were my students using literature to imagine experiences they had not had and were unfamiliar with? Were they willing to let the book lead them places they hadn't been? I was very concerned about these questions since I was afraid that the answer was no. My students, it seemed to me, refused to give up control to the book. Not only did they travel far afield in their discussions of books, but they actually on occasion refused to believe the text as written. Listen to Giles, for example.

Giles was perhaps a little narrow in what he considered worthy themes for literature. He preferred that all stories include a mother, and his idea of a plot usually revolved around danger to the mother. His own mother was about to have a new baby and perhaps Giles was placing some of his own worries into the literature we read. Here he proposed a way to make sure that his theme was included in *The Tortoise and the Hare.* I was almost to the end of the book when I closed it in

order to respond to a discussion about whether we had school the following day. Giles then took over:

> *Giles:* Cindy, Cindy, lemme talk.
> *Cindy:* OK, let's listen to Giles.
> *Giles:* Open da book [I open it to our current page, a picture of the hare, which we are calling a rabbit].
> *Giles:* [staring into the book] The rabbit mommy's dead. The bad guy get knife and he XX. Another one rabbit get a knife [I start to close the book while listening to him]. Open da book [I reopen the book] and the bad guy rabbit XXXXXX.

This was only one of several times that Giles attempted to include in my reading a piece of plot involving the death of a mother. This time, however, he was particularly insistent that the book be open as he told his part of the story, and as he did so, he stared fixedly at the book as if he were finding something in there.

Like the others, he seemed to find in literature a context for considering the themes that absorbed him in the rest of his life. If the story did not speak to his concern, Giles was willing to insert his concern among the book's characters. I was concerned that he did not understand the role of print in reading. He seemed to think that I simply was making up words to say as I read, just as he did.

My concern in this regard was strengthened by the students' unwillingness to accept the ending of *The Three Robbers* as written. In the book three robbers rob stagecoaches; they use a pepper-blower to blow pepper into the horses' eyes, a blunderbuss to scare the passengers, and an axe to chop up the stagecoaches' wheels. Then they steal the passengers' money and jewels. However, one night there are no rich passengers to plunder. The only one in the coach is an orphan named Tiffany who is going to live with a wicked aunt. The robbers decide to take her back to their cave where they put her cozily to bed. The next morning when she wakes up, she sees all their treasure. She asks them what the treasure is for. The robbers evidently had never realized that there might be a purpose for all their wealth. They quickly decide to set up a home for all the lost and abandoned children in the world and they become "kind foster fathers." This was the plot as I understood it. My students, however, did not accept the idea that the robbers had become good. The book's authority was not sufficient. My authority was not sufficient. Robbers are bad and they don't change, the students said.

Did they think they could change what was written? How could I help them understand how text really worked? We read the book over

and over, and I did tell them frequently that the robbers had become good. I would tell them that the book said so and point to the print. I felt bound to convey to them the authority of the text. They, however, had gone to work finding what they needed in order to understand me and it was nothing I would have known to provide.

The concerted effort they put into making sense of our disagreement probably began with their interest in bad people. They became very focused on "bad" people. One book, in which a peripheral character is put in jail, was known as "the bad guy book," despite the book's main theme having to do with a lost apple. Another book, *The Red Balloon*, which contained bad boys, was called "the bad boy book." Whenever we read storybooks, the children were eager to identify all the bad characters. Jérémie and Paul were as serious as the others in their condemnation of bad behavior by trolls and wolves and boys. But I also began to notice that they regularly queried me about my belief that the robbers were not bad. I noted Jérémie's interest in my field notes.

> 4/91: Jérémie requesting a particular picture in *The Three Robbers*, identifies it as "when they change. Three robbers was going to be bad boys. Now they change."
> 5/91: Jérémie asking and asking how the three robbers changed. I could not really understand what he was getting at, but he was very persistent.

There followed a number of intense conversations whose significance I did not see at the time. I remembered them only because they were so odd. Jérémie showed me a paper towel that had been sharing his pocket with a leaky marker. The napkin had ink all over it. He told me over and over that it had changed. Another day he had something to tell me about a remote control and how it changed channels. Again I never quite understood him but he was very intense. He came to me with ice melting in his hand—and again said it was changing.

I understood what he had been concerned about only when I overheard the following conversation among Jérémie, Paul, and Giles. The boys were looking at *The Three Robbers* and Giles was trying to insert one of his usual episodes about mommys in it.

> *Giles:* And the robbers get this kid and the robbers get this mommy and they put them in the house.
> *Jérémie:* No, no.
> *Paul:* The robbers not gonna get her.
> *Jérémie:* Now the robbers is nice.

In this case Jérémie and Paul didn't allow Giles to use the text as the setting for the conversation he wanted to have. And they knew why—the robbers were now nice. How did they get there? And why was it so hard? I asked a number of American 3- and 4-year-olds what they thought of the robbers at the end of the book. Even the 3-year-olds knew that the robbers had changed and become good and could point at the picture where it happened. The 4-year-olds could explain why. American children evidently are brought up with a view of psychology as malleable and as open to events and environment. Bad behavior does not indicate bad character forever. Innocence and love, as represented by the orphan Tiffany, can change anything. These children recognized this plot and it fit with their view of the world.

Haitian children acquire a different philosophy. While children's mischief is actually both expected and tolerated quite easily, there is nevertheless an articulated belief that a child can be born bad, that some people are, and that there is not much one can do about it. It is much less common among Haitians than among Americans to hear explanations for why someone is bad. Haitian children hear fewer discussions regarding what the malefactor might have lacked, perhaps love or friendship, that would have helped him/her to act better. The more typical Haitian view is that one is supposed to act right whatever the circumstances. Character is not seen so readily as a product of the environment, not regarded as something that might change given different circumstances.

Jérémie and Paul, who probably had heard occasionally that their behavior was less than perfect, wanted to explore evil and to imagine what latitude there might be for ethical transformation. Perhaps it was interest in this issue that caused so many of the children to be deeply involved with this book. Jérémie focused on the way I was using the word *change*—he compared numerous versions of it. *The Three Robbers* offered him an experience he had not had with *change* and he wanted to understand it. Somehow he managed, by his various investigations of the word and what it meant, to imagine the kind of change exemplified in *The Three Robbers*. He was able to imagine that the three robbers were no longer bad by means of his talk about the stained paper towel, the melting ice, and the channel changer, and by looking at the picture in the book "where they changed." Perhaps he was making sure, by looking at the picture, that the robbers didn't change physically. I don't know. The way Jérémie used the resources at hand to make sense of the book, of my insistence, and of his various experiences is not something I could have orchestrated. My role in this was played out

over time in these odd conversations with him and some of the other children, in which I certainly did not know that we were discussing change in relation to moral development.

The children's response contrasts with an experience I had with a friend, a highly literate adult. I had just finished re-reading *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky. I had asked my friend to read it too, and she had begun, but put it down. I asked her why. She said, "Well, couldn't he just lighten up." The characters in Dostoyevsky are often overwrought by today's standards. They are always full of tears and regularly throw themselves at the feet of one person or another. It takes an imaginative leap to enter that world—it's not the way we see the world today. My friend didn't, at least at that point, have the drive that Jérémie and Paul had, the drive to imagine a foreign world and to enter it.

Had they allowed the text to take them somewhere they had never been before? Had they traveled with a book into new territory? Certainly, but their way of managing this had not been one I had seen before. My experience with literature and with helping children engage with it had not included the approach these children took to comprehending and interpreting the book. Looking at how far afield Jérémie went, it seems very likely to me that all the conversations about piman and about eyes and about bad guys and bad boys and mothers in other books were in fact crucial for the work these children did on whether robbers could become good. Talking about their knowledge of pepper provided a way to join this story with their own stories. It allowed a connection, which paved the way for others. The conversations I had with my friends about cousins functioned in a similar way. What appears off-topic may in fact add to the set of connections out of which the full meaning and a full response arise. My original sense of the kinds of questions to ask in order to help children engage with a story seems quite impoverished compared with what these children thought to do to bring storybooks into the stories of their lives.

Before ending, let us return one final time to Jérémie, who, despite initial reluctance, showed as the year progressed more and more interest in promoting the book's role in the conversation. By the spring, he frequently wanted to know what the book said. If the discussion had taken off, and I was silent, he would ask the other children to stop talking so we could find out. However, in the text below we see that he and his classmates nevertheless did not desert their accustomed style of participation. Their remarks formed a tapestry of connections from other moments of the day. I was again reading the *Tortoise and the Hare* when the children began to comment:

Jean: Rabbit bumped his head.
Jérémie: And camel has a ugly face.
Giles: And rabbit have a big big ear.
Emmanuel: Gade, li gen bel soulye (Look, he has beautiful shoes).
Jérémie: Cindy's turn.

Jérémie first included the word *ugly*, with which he was fascinated for a period of time, "Camel has a ugly face." We had been to the zoo and he had heard the camel called ugly. *Ugly* often is used in Jérémie's community to describe nasty behavior. For example, a sullen child may be called *ugly*, and perhaps Jérémie had heard this addressed to himself. Jérémie knew, in addition, that in my dialect it could describe things that were not beautiful—a camel's face certainly qualified. He had been investigating the meanings of *ugly* in various contexts with his usual persistence. He had made this remark about the camel's face several times before. The other children each add their remarks, each perhaps part of a comparable inquiry. Jérémie then returned them to me, the reader, and the text. Although the book had gained a larger role in the conversation in the last two examples, book reading remained the setting for exploring a variety of important issues. Jérémie and the others had not abandoned their earlier view of the value of books and book reading, but they had added to it.

Do I know how to teach literature now? Have I better ideas about how to discuss storybooks? Rather than a revised plan or a new set of objectives, I now have a more elaborated narrative of classroom life with books. My classroom story now includes these children and their view of books. Including them has opened up my own assumptions for scrutiny and thus deepened immeasurably my own ability to think about literature and stories and their uses. The base from which I respond as children talk about literature is made more conscious by experiences such as these. Furthermore, and perhaps most important, by looking closely at what the children are doing in this sort of situation where they are fully engaged, I have enormous respect for their thinking and the seriousness of their approach to schooling.

CHAPTER 4

Students Talking and Writing Their Way into "Functional" Worlds

CINDY BESELER

> As we walked down the street to [the hospital], the kids
> a "Cindy sandwich" on either side of me. They do not
> at school. Rebecca leaned on my shoulder and teased
> pretending to push me into lampposts. They would not
> to a teacher at school. The guys tried to follow suit a
> acted differently to a male hanging on my shoulde
> learned a very valuable lesson that they could not have
> out at school. [At the same time] I felt very unprofess
> know I'm respectfully honoring a very important kind o
> ing that develops only in private spaces. I just wonde
> not disrupting their learning in the public space.

I was accompanying four adolescents with special needs to their volunteer job during school hours when they made this "Cindy sandwich." Upon reflection, I began to see this as more than simply a physical act in an observational field note; it became a metaphor for how I repeatedly felt sandwiched between the different roles of "teacher." Over the past 10 years in the BTRS, I have examined what it means to be a teacher, to teach, to be a learner with special needs, and for students to learn from me as their teacher. I often have wondered how close to get to the students and how much distance to keep. Is it appropriate for me as a teacher to dismantle the power differential and use the role of friend or equal? Specifically, I wondered how much to get involved in oral or written conversations to model "appropriate communication"

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