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## Book talk in a thematic literature unit

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### Abstract

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The theme of survival was chosen to promote book talk. A web was created that visually mapped the different aspects of the topic. The book *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen, was chosen to introduce the unit and was read aloud to all children. This book became a foil against which subsequent books were compared. The related books chosen for small group reading and discussion were *The River*, by Gary Paulsen; *Brian's Winter*, by Gary Paulsen; and *The Terrible Wave*, by Marden Dahlstedt. These books provided opportunities for students to see the multifaceted nature of the theme.

Book Talk in a Thematic Literature Unit

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
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by

Cathy E. Dickerson

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## Abstract

Discussions of literature may be viewed as a part of the social environment in which students can work together collaboratively to construct meaning. Book talk, or discussion, in a thematic unit encourages students to focus attention on the important ideas in their literature experiences, thus moving them beyond literal comprehension to inferential thinking.

The theme of survival was chosen to promote book talk. A web was created that visually mapped the different aspects of the topic. The book Hatchet, by Gary Paulsen, was chosen to introduce the unit and was read aloud to all children. This book became a foil against which subsequent books were compared. The related books chosen for small group reading and discussion were The River, by Gary Paulsen; Brian's Winter, by Gary Paulsen; and The Terrible Wave, by Marden Dahlstedt. These books provided opportunities for students to see the multifaceted nature of the theme.

Readers can extend their interpretations of literature as they share their responses with others. Thus, their thinking-language abilities and personal-social abilities are fostered (Harst, Short, & Burke, 1988).

Discussion groups, sometimes known as book clubs, are one means of encouraging children to interact with others concerning the ideas they have generated while engaged in the reading process. These peer book sessions involve small heterogeneous groups of students in discussions that connect listening, speaking, and reading as they exchange ideas and respond to others' interpretations. Such arrangements provide opportunities for every member of the group to speak and to be heard. The discussions can be either student-directed or teacher-guided. In such discussions, the teacher acts more as facilitator, nudging through comments and questions, which is sometimes termed "scaffolding," to assist children in extending and clarifying their interactions and interpretations (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996).

Book discussions focus on readers and their responses to a text or texts. It is through these shared insights that each participant's view is enhanced. Effective discussions are an ongoing process of inviting and sustaining children's responses as they carry out their need to connect with others, to understand their world, and to reveal themselves as part of it (Lindfors, 1990).

Discussions are enhanced when the books considered are related to the themes of instructional units. When more than one book is related to a common theme, the reading and the subsequent discussion are an intertextual experience. While students search for common patterns in a thematic unit, they can develop insightful comparisons and contrasts. These discoveries can be incorporated into a webbing of related ideas (Peters, 1995). Such experiences can influence students to focus attention on the important ideas in literature experiences and move beyond literal comprehension to inferential thinking (Donham, van Deusen, & Brandt, 1997).

#### Thematic Unit on Survival

Our school system adopted a new reading program, Scholastic Trade Books, initiated in the 1998-99 school year. This new series has a variety of paperbacks, of various genres at all grade levels, to facilitate the goals of our school system. The goals are to develop independent strategic readers who read for meaning, to use critical thinking abilities to interact with the author's meaning, to maintain flexibility in choosing reading strategies, and to develop lifetime readers. These goals were to be met by presenting children with many different types of literature experiences and opportunities to discuss their experiences with their teacher and peers. I developed this

thematic unit as an approach to provide more quality reading experiences and opportunities for discussions.

### Introduction of Theme

The topic of survival emerged from a unit on perseverance in the previously adopted basal reader series. Through the years, my fifth grade class showed an interest in what makes characters persevere in spite of considerable odds. I began thinking about all the appropriate books that were available to support this theme in the different genres of chapter books and realized there were numerous quality works available to extend the theme of survival.

As the theme was introduced, the teacher assisted the students in developing a web with major ideas related to survival. These ideas were included in the web: mechanical accidents (e.g., airplanes and ships), natural disasters (e.g., tornadoes, fires, and earthquakes), human error (e.g., getting lost), serious illnesses (e.g., diseases and physical handicaps), survival in school (e.g., bullies), family problems (e.g., divorce, abusive parents, and abandonment), community difficulties (e.g., homelessness), and war-related trauma (e.g., refugees and Holocaust in World War II). As the web was developed, the children began to understand that many different types of survival can be encountered. The student responses were recorded on a



chart as a reference for the duration of the study.

The teacher read aloud Gary Paulsen's Hatchet (Scholastic Inc., 1987) during the first part of the theme study. The book, a great favorite of this age group, has a strong survival theme. Before reading the book aloud, the teacher guided the examination of its book design elements: the front and back covers, title page, and dedication of the book. The students were encouraged to respond to the book with comments, questions, and predictions. Some of the children were able to name other books written by Gary Paulsen, for example, The River and Brian's Winter. They related that he often writes books about nature and animals. The teacher told the students to keep in mind the kinds of survival that were mentioned in the webbing activity as the book was read aloud.

#### Discussion of the Book

As the book Hatchet was read aloud in sections, teacher-directed discussions were conducted. In preparation for the discussions, the teacher examined the potential of each section. These aspects were considered: literary elements, interesting words and phrases, unclear ideas and unfamiliar words, implicit ideas, and predictions.

Some of the discussions were teacher-directed with the whole class; others were student-directed in small, heterogeneous groups.

For each section of the book, important aspects for discussion, logs of the student responses, and teacher scaffolding to extend and clarify the discussion are presented in the next section.

### Section 1, Chapters 1-3 (The flight and crash)

- Teacher-Anticipated Potential

The literary elements that are the strengths of the book are characterization, the theme, setting, imagery, and figurative language.

A close relationship exists between the characterization and theme.

The central dynamic character initiates action that results in the resolution of the conflict (the theme of survival). The setting is the vast Canadian wilderness where Brian, the main character, is stranded. He suffers from thirst, hunger, sunburn, and vicious mosquito attacks. The imagery associated with Brian's dilemma strengthens the conflict of the story. Figurative language also facilitates sharp images.

- Teacher-Directed Activity for Reading and Rereading

Literary elements. Describe what makes the first chapters so dramatic. (The reader learns of the divorce and the secret; the pilot suffers a heart attack; Brian crash-lands the plane safely in a lake; he is stranded in the wilderness.)

Student Responses:

“I think the first chapters are dramatic because they have very, very strong words in them such as divorced and the secret. I think that it is emotional because I went through the exact same thing in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.”

“I think the first chapters are so dramatic because Brian has to leave his mom to go see his dad. He felt torn between them.”

“The first chapters were dramatic because the mom is having an affair with a blonde-haired dude, and Brian didn’t tell his dad. If his parents wouldn’t have split, then he wouldn’t be on this trip.”

Plot mechanisms. To focus on a plot aspect, this question was asked: Why does the author repeat some phrases? The repetition is for emphasis to show how Brian is thinking and how desperate he is.

Student Responses:

“Because the things repeated are so important. If he would’ve given up he might have died.”

“Because the author wants you to keep these words in your mind.”

“Because it shows how important that these words are. Brian is very desperate to save his life!”

Unfamiliar words. A number of unfamiliar words related to aircraft and flight are presented in Hatchet. These words were to be noted while reading and then during rereading. Examples are rudder,

rudder pedals, turbulence, transmitter, altimeter, cockpit, throttle, and bush flight.

Implicit ideas. As the students reread the first section of Hatchet, they were asked to identify specific problems and solutions and illustrate them. Then they wrote sentences describing the problem and solution.

Student Responses:

Problem - The pilot died of a heart attack and Brian is afraid.

Solution – Brian lands the plane on the end of a L-shaped lake.

Problem – The plane runs out of gas and is going to crash into the trees. Solution – The airplane skipped through the water and came to an open area to crash land.

Problem – The plane landed in water. Solution – Brian got out of the plane alive.

The students were given these directions to note interesting phrases and descriptions: Brian kept a mental journal of his experiences. As you reread the section, list interesting phrases and descriptions in your journal. (Now there was a constant odor, the pilot was rubbing his shoulder and down the arm, letting go more gas and wincing; the hot white of his anger towards her; the jolt took him like a hammerblow; pulled himself out of the shattered front window and clawed up into

the blue.)

Student Responses:

“His eyes rolled back in his head until there was only white.”

“His stomach tightened into a series of rolling knots, and his breath came in short bursts.”

“He was momentarily blinded and slammed forward in the seat, smacking his head into the wheel.”

- Further Teacher Scaffolding for Discussion

1. Predict what would have happened to Brian if he had been knocked unconscious during the crash. (He would have drowned.)

Student Responses:

“If he had been knocked unconscious, he would have probably drowned in the water.”

“I think that if he would have been knocked unconscious during the crash he probably would have died because he was asleep and would drown.”

2. Brian is bothered by a secret he is keeping. What is this secret and why is Brian so focused on it? (The secret is his mom’s interest in another man. Brian is deeply hurt by the divorce and is angry.)

Student Responses:

“The secret is he saw his mom and another man kissing in her car in a

parking lot. He probably didn't want to see that, but he can't forget it."

"The secret is that his mom was seeing someone when his mom and dad were still married. Brian is angry."

3. How might the pilot's treatment of Brian as an adult have helped save his life? (The pilot let Brian handle the controls which gave him experience, confidence, and sense of responsibility he needed when he was on his own.)

Student Responses:

"Because if he wouldn't have let him use the controls he might not have been able to work the plane right and would have died."

"He knows a little about how to fly the plane and if he didn't he would have crashed."

### Section 2, Chapters 4-13 (Early survival and mistakes)

Literary elements. To center on the element of imagery, this statement was made followed by a question: How does Brian see and hear differently from when he first crashed? (Brian has become more observant, and he carefully identifies things he comes in contact with.)

Student Responses:

"He listened for rustling sounds, like when he first came face to face with the bear."

"The porcupine in his shelter smelled of rot that made him think of graves and death. He wouldn't forget that smell!"

"When he made sparks on the rock by throwing his hatchet at the porcupine. Sparks meant he could make fire!"

"On p. 105 it talks about how Brian now sees details like a bird moving a wing inside a bush or a ripple on the water. He would truly see these things and know what they meant, not just notice them."

In examining characterization, this question was examined: Brian has to provide himself with food and shelter. How do Brian's goals change from the time of the crash to the forty-seventh day? (He no longer expects to be rescued by others but hopes to survive on his own.)

Student Responses:

"Brian learned a lot from his mistakes. He became smarter everyday. He didn't want to die."

"Brian learned that feeling sorry for himself didn't work. He didn't have time for it. He removed the porcupine quills and kept going."

"Brian finally thought he might not be rescued. This really scared him because he was so alone!"

Plot mechanisms. Looking at the part the image of the hatchet, which Brian's mother gave him as a gift, played in his survival, this statement was made followed by a question: In what ways did he use

the hatchet to survive?

Student Responses:

“He attacked the porcupine with it and then realized he could make a fire with sparks when the hatchet hit the rocks. So, he used it to start a fire.”

“Brian used the hatchet to cut wood and branches for his shelter.”

“The hatchet helped him cut trees for firewood and protected him.

I can see why the book is called Hatchet.”

Implicit ideas. The children were asked to identify specific problems and solutions in this section of Hatchet. They wrote sentences describing the problems and their solutions.

(Encounters with the bear, porcupine, and wolf: starting a fire; spearing a fish; keeping a signal fire going.)

Student Responses:

Problem – The porcupine attacks him. Solution – He uses his hatchet as a weapon.

Problem – Brian sees a bear while picking berries. Solution – Brian runs the other way!”

Problem – Brian has trouble starting a fire. Solution – He made a sparks nest and blew on it.



Interesting phrases and descriptions. The children recorded interesting phrases and descriptions in their journals as they skimmed the section.

Student Responses:

“It was as if all the berries, all the pits had exploded in the center of him, ripped and tore at him.”

“Brian made a sound of fear and when the sound was half done a thing happened with his legs, a thing he had nothing to do with, and they were running in the opposite direction from the bear!”

- Further Teacher Scaffolding for Discussion

1. How would you describe the way Brian learns new skills in the wilderness? (Trial and error, persistence)

Student Responses:

“Brian made a lot of mistakes and learned from them.”

“I think Brian worked very hard at surviving, like when he worked so hard at starting a fire.”

2. Why does Brian need to keep busy? (He needs to avoid being depressed about his situation.)

Student Responses:

“Brian has to keep busy constantly finding food like a wild animal.”

“Brian doesn’t have time to feel sorry for himself or he’ll never survive.”

“When the plane didn’t rescue Brian he was sad but he had to shake it off.”

3. What does Brian mean when he says “discoveries happened because they needed to happen”? (A need causes us to search for and find an answer.)

Student Responses:

“I think he means that he wouldn’t learn these things if he wasn’t fighting to survive.”

“Brian learned how to start a fire, and spear fish because he had to in order to survive!”

Section 3, Chapter 14 – Epilogue (New hope and the rescue)

• Teacher-Directed Activity for Reading and Rereading

Literary elements. To initiate a discussion of characterization, these statements were made followed by questions.

1. Brian is almost blinded when a skunk sprays him. How does this incident change his thinking? (Brian realizes that you must learn from your mistakes to prepare for future dangerous encounters and incidents.)

Student Responses:

“Brian was nearly blinded by the skunk’s spray and then the skunk ate his turtle eggs. He would have to protect his food better.”

“Brian thought he would have to build a better shelter to protect him from dangerous animals.”

2. What qualities does Brian show when he tries to get the survival kit from the plane? (courage, determination, strength, fear)

Student Responses:

“Brian was very courageous. He kept going even after he saw the pilot’s skull!”

“Brian was afraid the plane would sink further when he got inside it.”

Gary Paulsen, in Hatchet, uses many examples of similies and metaphors to provide precise and mental images, such as “a flying pear” (describing a foolbird) and “leaving the snags poking into the sky like broken teeth” (describing trees after a fierce wind). The students were asked to skim the text for other examples of similies and metaphors in this section.

Student Responses:

“A brown wall of fur” (the moose)

“Wind like the sound of a train, with the low belly roar of a train.”  
(the tornado)

“His mouth tasted as if he had been sucking on his foot all night.”

In this last section, the story’s theme of survival emerges as one disaster after another (rendered by the skunk, the tornado, and the moose strike) occurs. Yet, Brian knows he will survive. What happened to make him feel this way? (Brian was filled with tough hope and was ready to accept any and all challenges to his survival.)

Student Responses:

“Brian was different after he wasn’t rescued by the plane. He knew

he had to survive on his own.”

“He was depressed when the plane didn’t see him. He was not the same. It made him change and become stronger.”

Implicit ideas. The students were asked to identify inferred problems and their solutions in this last section of Hatchet (skunk attack, tornado strikes, moose attack).

Student Responses:

Problem – Brian got sprayed in the face by a skunk and was almost blinded. Solution – Brian had to run to the lake and stick his head in the water to wash his eyes.

Problem – Brian’s buried turtle eggs were eaten by the skunk.

Solution – He found a place to keep his food up high and away from animals.

Problem – Brian is attacked by a moose and almost gets killed.

Solution – He plays dead and slowly moves to the shore!

Problem – A tornado comes and whips Brian against the rocks.

Solution – Brian hangs on to the rocks to save his life!

Interesting phrases and descriptions. The students listed in their journals interesting phrases and descriptions.

Student Responses:

“The thick sulfurous rotten odor filled the small room, heavy, ugly, and stinking.”

“He was whipped against the front wall of the shelter like a rag,

felt a ripping pain in his ribs again, then was hammered back down into the sand once more.”

“For years after his rescue he would find himself stopping in grocery stores to just stare at the aisles of food, marveling at the quantity and the variety.”

- Further Teacher Scaffolding for Discussion

1. What does Brian learn about solving problems? (He needs to use sense, think things through, be patient, and plan.)

Student Responses:

“Brian learned to think before he acted, like when he threw sand at the skunk he wasn’t thinking and got sprayed!”

“Brian learned that you can’t solve every problem in a day. It takes time to build a shelter and a raft.”

2. Why do the contents of the survival kit give Brian “up and down” feelings? (He’s glad to have the supplies but feels they remove him from where he is. They represent technology, not the natural world in which he finds himself.)

Student Responses:

“Brian didn’t know if he liked the change because it wasn’t part of nature. He had survived on his own many days!”

“This made everything so easy. He could wash with soap and cook real food. It was all so different.”

3. Why is Brian less obsessed by the secret at the end of the book? (He's grown independent and has matured; he has learned from his experiences. He is not as focused on his parents and their relationship to him.)

Student Responses:

"Brian had to keep his mind on staying alive so the secret didn't seem as important."

"Brian had a lot of time to think when he was alone. The pain is less as time passes. That's the way it was when my parents separated."

#### Discussion of the Book – Additional Reading

After the oral reading of Hatchet was completed, small-group discussions extended the thematic unit of survival. Three theme-related books were chosen and were presented individually through teacher book talks. The related books were Gary Paulsen's The River and Brian's Winter, sequels to Hatchet, and Marden Dahlstedt's The Terrible Wave, a historical fiction work based on the Johnstown, Pennsylvania flood in 1889.

The students signed up for the book of their choice and were placed in heterogeneous groups of three to five. The teacher had divided the books into sections to be read and discussed in these small groups. The teacher frequently joined the groups as an active participant expanding student responses rather than evaluating them. Other

activities included journal writing, projects, art activities, and other cross-curricular connections.

### Summary

Book talk in a thematic unit is a means of promoting productive, satisfying, and thought-provoking experiences. The students were free to respond to the sections of the books. The teacher encouraged responses and expanded the students' interpretations and answered their questions. The students' interactions with each other in the small groups extended their understandings of the works. Because the students' responses to their reading experiences were the focus of the unit, the teacher learned a great deal about their thinking-language and personal-social abilities.

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