

CONNECTING, RESISTING, AND
SEARCHING FOR SAFER PLACES:
STUDENTS RESPOND TO
MILDRED TAYLOR'S THE
FRIENDSHIP

J L R
Möller & Allen

Karla J. Möller
Jobeth Allen
UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA

*We analyze the discussion that developed when four fifth-grade girls, three African American and one Hispanic, and Karla Möller, a European American, transacted with Mildred Taylor's *The Friendship* (1987). Framing our analysis within the intersection of reader-response theory and sociocultural and critical theories of literacy learning, we show how participants' responses to Taylor's text and adult and peer guidance helped to create a response development zone that allowed for a dialectic of connecting with and resisting the evocation. The girls, all struggling readers, used reading, writing, and discussion to address comprehension difficulties and construct multiple levels of meaning. They became increasingly aware of historical racism and connected that knowledge to events from their own experience, including encounters with the Klan and memories of a relative's murder. We present the group's discussion as a metaphorical play and the girls as spectators who become actors as they engaged in this "theater of discourse" (Boal, 1985).*

J L R
V. 32 NO. 2
2000
PP. 145-186

Um, and I don't like when folks, um, treat Black folks like they could, um, 'cause I like, I'm a like, all white folks, um, I don't know, I want them to like me but I don't know. They might not like me. 'Cause they might be trying to kill and stuff, 'cause I'm scared of the Ku Klux Klan, boy, I swear.... They might want to spend the night at school and see everyone coming in the school. (Tamika, 2/10, p. 25)

TAMIKA, A FIFTH-GRADE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT sharing her responses to Mildred Taylor's *The Friendship* in a small-group discussion, was doing what many educators (e.g., Harris, 1996; Sims Bishop, 1997; Taxel, 1991) have suggested will happen when children read books about social issues. Sims Bishop (1997) stated, "The main purpose of a literary work . . . is to encourage its readers to reflect on the human condition" (pp. 18-19). She argued that all children should have opportunities to see themselves and their experiences mirrored positively in the literature they read and to talk about the realities of oppression, past and present.

The function of multicultural literature is to ensure that students have the opportunity to reflect on it in all its rich diversity, to prompt them to ask questions about who we are now as a society and how we arrived at our present state, and to inspire them to actions that will create and maintain social justice. (p. 19)

Such texts open for consideration important social and political questions. Tamika reflected deeply on the people and issues in *The Friendship* and connected them to society as she experienced it in a small Southern city. She and her peers frequently read and discussed social issues through the books their classroom teacher, Ms. Stroup, introduced for literature circles (Daniels, 1994). Such books prompt readers to consider, as Taxel (1993) noted,

what it means to be human; the relative worth of boys and girls, men and women, people from various racial, ethnic, and religious communities; the value of particular kinds of action; how we relate to one another; and about the nature of community. (p. 11)

These researchers have gone beyond the notion that the sole purposes of multicultural literature are to reflect our own experiences or to allow us a clear view of others' lives. As Desai (1997) pointed out, claims of literature providing mirrors of our own culture and windows into others' cultures far outweigh the evidence that this really happens, nor do they reflect the complexity of the response process and the role that culture plays in that process. Desai wondered about the impact of the stories chil-