**Discussion Plan**

**Grade:** 4th  
**Subject:** Language Arts

**Michigan Grade Level Content Area Expectations:** R.NT.04.03, R.CM.04.01, R.MT.04.01, S.DS.04.01, L.CN.04.02, L.CN.04.03, L.CN.04.04, L.RP.04.01, and L.RP.04.04

**Text:** “Stealing Home”. Author: Mary Stolz.

**Selection Summary** (from Harcourt Collections Teacher’s Edition *Touch a Dream*, Theme 3: Make Yourself At Home): Thomas lives with his grandfather in their small house on the Gulf Coast of Florida. When Great-Aunt Linzy writes that she plans to come and stay for a while, Thomas and Grandfather are uneasy about the prospect of sharing the house with her. On her arrival, Aunt Linzy takes over Thomas’s room. Thomas’s cat Ringo then deserts him to be with her. Thomas finds it hard to adjust to the new situation and criticizes every change Aunt Linzy makes. Finally, Grandfather persuades him to view Aunt Linzy’s life with sympathy and to understand that change is inevitable.

**Goals/Objectives:** Analyze impact of Aunt Linzy on Thomas and Grandfather.

**Preparatory Activities:** Three previous days with text including silent independent reading, paired reading, and group reading, a response activity, workbook pages, vocabulary, and small group discussion focusing on “Think About It” questions from text.

**Strategy:** Students will prepare answers to “Think About It” questions in small groups and will also write down anything else they feel is relevant or worth discussing with peers. They will bring question answers, additional comments/opinions, and text to discussion. I will remind them about proper group discussion etiquette. I will begin the discussion by asking the “Think About It” questions and will allow the discussion to go where it may.

**“Think About It” Questions:** 1. How does Thomas’s life at home change when Aunt Linzy arrives? What does Grandfather want Thomas to learn from this experience? 2. How does the author use Ringo the cat to help show the problem in the story? 3. Do you think any of the changes Aunt Linzy makes are good one? Explain.

**Follow-up/Assessment:** *Selection Comprehension Test with Vocabulary* administered on Friday following discussion.
I decided to plan a Student Lead, Student Centered (SL-SC) discussion with my fourth graders. I have seventeen fourth graders in a four/five split, with a total of twenty-eight students (eleven fifth graders). My fourth graders are generally higher functioning and independent workers because of the demand of a split classroom situation. But because my school has become quite transient lately, I have been receiving students who are lower functioning and much needier than my original students. My group now consists of either students that are overly capable or completely struggling. There does not seem to be much of a middle ground in comprehension and achievement.

I planned our SL-SC discussion to center around their Reading story selection for the week, “Stealing Home” by Mary Stoltz. I planned the discussion for a Thursday to allow the students at least three school days of lessons and opportunities to become acquainted with the text. They were able to independently read, partner/share read, and small group read the story. They also completed a Response Activity, workbook pages on comprehension and story elements, and activities involving the story’s vocabulary.

The story is about a boy, Thomas, and his grandfather who have to make room in their lives for an unwelcome family member, Aunt Linzy, who comes to stay with them. She makes all sorts of changes to the house and their way of life. It is part of our fourth grade Reading series’s theme unit, “Make Yourself At Home”. The context influenced the discussion because, at my building, many of our students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some are without homes, dependable income, or one or sometimes both of their parents, like Thomas. I felt there
were many parts of the story that my students would be able to easily identify with and I used that as a basis for planning and conducting the discussion. I tried to revolve and focus the students on the “Think About It” questions that they answered with their small groups to prepare for the discussion. I felt that this would allow them the opportunity to interact successfully because of their familiarity with the content and give them a chance to offer new insight to those not in their small group.

Some interesting events occurred over the course of the discussion. First, because the boy in the story seemed to be the same age as the students, the children were immediately able to identify with him and his views and feelings. The first comment of the discussion, aside from answer to my questions, was from Robert who asked, “How old do you think the boy was?” Right away, the students started discussing how old they each felt the boy was. They were able to come to the consensus that he was probably their age, nine or ten. I felt that this was a good time to interject. I asked the group, “Why do you think the author chose to write a story about a nine-year-old boy for fourth grade students?” I wanted to see if they understood why the story was a part of their fourth grade text. I received many comments, but my favorite, and what seemed to be the favorite of the group, was Alexis’s comment, “The author made the boy nine so you could feel like a part of the story.” Most of the students physically agreed to the comment by nodding heads or mumbling “yeah”. I felt that this was an important insight to get to in the talk. It allowed me to see that the students were able to identify with the text and therefore have an interest in the story. It made them an active audience and more active participants in our discussion. Another personal topic of interest for the students was the fact that the boy was living with his grandfather and not his parents. Many of my students seemed motivated to discover and discuss why he did not live with his parents. I have a few students that come from family
situations that made this issue relative to the context of their lives. The group did a nice job
deciding that there could have been many reasons for this, from the possibility that they were no
longer alive to a question of whether he was behaving badly and had to be sent away to live with
his grandfather. This reminded me of Jeffrey Wilhelm’s section on “Inferences with Narrative”
which offered exercises to help students create effective inferences about the text. Both of these
topics helped the discussion remain relative to the students and allowed them to more fully
engage in the story and its message. These reactions also seemed to reinforce the insights of
Janice Alamasi in her article on how students interpretations of texts are shaped by personal
experiences.

I noticed that after this portion of the discussion, the students were very quiet. No one
seemed like they needed to explore the story any further. I decided to move on with my
questioning. I continued with the comprehension questions from the book. The students were not
able to make the connection between Ringo choosing Aunt Linzy and how that symbolized a loss
in Thomas’s trust, too. Some of my students were able to offer valid opinions for the questions,
but I could sense my discussion was pretty much over. The students seemed settled with how the
discussion ended and I let them know that we would have an opportunity to discuss our next
story the following week.

When the discussion was over and the students returned to their small groups, I felt that
the discussion had not quite accomplished what I had planned it to. I began questioning the value
of this particular discussion, but then Nori approached me and asked, “Are we going to be able to
talk about the story anymore?” She asked loud enough for the other students to hear and they
responded with nods and “Can we?” and “We liked it”. That made me feel much better about
what had just taken place. I realized that the discussion did have an impact on the students and
they did benefit from the time together. This also showed in improved comprehension scores on their tests the following afternoon.

After reflecting on the discussion and watching it a few more times, I did notice a few things that I adapted in my discussion to support particular students’ learning and accommodate different needs and abilities. Even before the discussion, I had the students work together in their small groups, or pods, to answer the “Think About It” questions that I planned to focus our talk on. This allowed them to work in a small group setting and get comfortable with the content and expectations of the talk. Then they could come prepared and feel confident in their responses. I also gave them the opportunity to add any comments or questions on their papers to bring to the discussion so they could share, if they wanted. This was like the cue sheet that Margo Sorenson suggested in her article. I feel that this gave the students a sense of ownership in the course of the discussion and made them feel that their opinions were important and valid.

In addition to allowing them time to prep for the talk, I also decided that it would be a good idea to keep the fourth grade separate from the fifth grade for the discussion. This allowed them to again feel comfortable with a smaller group and not be pressured to answer in a whole-group setting. Because of the time constraints of the split classroom, I do a lot of whole group instruction and recitation when I can. But I have come to realize that Reading discussions are much more successful and useful when done in a smaller group. It allows more focus and interaction between the students. It also allows more opportunities for “authentic discussion” like Larry Johannessen discusses in his article.

Another way that I adapted the discussion was by occasionally interjecting with comments concerning Thomas and Grandfather’s domination by a female and asked why they didn’t fight her. I felt that it was important for my fourth graders to explore why the males in the
story felt helpless with the strong female character. As I have mentioned before in previous papers and postings, the girls in my classroom are very loud and intimidating. They do not seem to be like those observed in Cindy O’Donnell-Allen and Peter Smagorinsky’s article, although they do tend to be indirect in their responses and nurturing toward the male students. In the same vein, my male students are not like those profiled in P. Orenstein’s article. They tend to sit back and let the girls nurture them and take care of everything, much like Thomas and Grandfather. I wanted them to make the connection that Thomas and Grandfather chose adjustment and acceptance rather than fighting and creating conflict. I don’t believe that the students were able to quite make the connection that I was trying for, but they did offer some interesting opinions about how it was easier to agree than argue.

Also, I have a few quiet students that seem very uncomfortable interacting with the group. I, too, am very shy in peer groups and I understand why they may not want to contribute. Like in Jane Townsend’s discussion of quiet students, some seem to just be reserved like Anne, while I sense that others are not confident in their knowledge of the content, much like Rex. In order to make sure that they were paying attention and understanding, I told them to nod their head or raise their hand if they agreed so they were physically showing me that they were paying attention and understanding. I also did not require everyone to contribute orally because I did not want anyone feeling pressured to respond. I value the quality of responses, not a quantity of responses. I truly strive for a version of the “Socratic Method”, and I do not want my students to feel uncomfortable responding like those in the video segment on the topic.

After observation and analysis of my discussion, I feel that there are a few things that I need to work on in order to improve future discussions with my class. Although I planned on the discussion functioning as a student-led, student-centered discussion, it ended up being morea
teacher-led, student centered discussion. I feel this is because of my need to make frequent interjections. I know that I still have to work on my patience and acceptance of silence. I observed that I stepped in quite a few times to try to keep the students on track. I noticed that I started off in the beginning trying to act like a peer in the group and just make statements and comments that went along with what they were discussing. I then noticed that I was starting new lines of questioning to get them edging toward the right path.

I am still actively working on stepping back, letting the talk happen, and display the qualities of a democratic leader, according to David Potter and Martin Anderson. These weaknesses were most evident during moments of silence. Many of the students would turn their eyes to me and wait for me to take the lead and to comment or question to start the talk back up. They are still very dependent on my leadership and direction in discussions. I feel that I could continue working on conversation strategies, like the envisionment building activities offered by Judith Langer and Elizabeth Close.

Although there are many things I need to practice and improve upon, I could tell that I have improved quite a bit since the beginning of the school year. I started off in September only conducting recitations, moving on to I-R-E, and now I actually let the kids talk! This is a great improvement and I have seen their comprehension scores on the weekly tests improve. I still value I-R-E-style recitation, like that discussed by Carol Weinstein and Cazden. And when it is executed properly, like Weinstein discussed, it can be extremely beneficial and informative to the students. But I feel I need to find a good balance between the two styles in my classroom so the students are able to gather the best of both worlds.

Aside from my observing how I made adaptations and my leadership skills that need work, I noticed something else very important. I observed that the participation patterns seemed
to improve when the kids had a personal or emotional connection to what we were discussing, *i.e.* Thomas not living with his parents. I could see a large jump in participation and many more students contributing, both boys and girls. The students physically appeared more attentive. They sat up straighter and their eyes focused on the speaker. This indicated to me that they are moving closer to Johannessen’s idea of “authentic discussion”. This particular positive pattern also helped me realize that the students seemed to really enjoy the discussion. As I mentioned previously, one student approached me afterward to ask when we would be having another discussion. They seemed to really like interacting with their peers and seemed to find it beneficial.

After watching the discussion, I also noticed that the students were able to follow the proper etiquette of a discussion without much interference or direct from me. They followed two of Sorenson’s three rules of discussion: *Courtesy* and *Tolerate Silence* (they still need to work on *Don’t look at the teacher!*). One reason I had previously neglected conducting discussions in my classroom was my fear of conflict among the kids. I did not want the students to be rude to one another or argue. This discussion helped me realize that the students actually value one another’s opinions and are able to handle disagreement with respect. They can be mature and listen to one another speak.

I feel that this discussion went very well and did help students accomplish the goal of exploring what impact Aunt Linzy had on Thomas and Grandfather. I feel that the kids were still not quite able to commit fully to the discussion because of their lack of experience with it. We are nowhere close to the discussions that I have watched in our required video segments, but I feel that with time, many things are possible. It seems that the more often we take the opportunity to have talks, the better we all become at it. It also seems that the more I become
comfortable with leading the discussions, the better the students are at it. This course has proved to be very beneficial in my discovery of a new comprehension tool in my classroom, discussion. It has helped me realize the benefits of discussion and their proper place in the classroom.