Children’s Response to Literature: Author, Text, Reader, Context

In the past 20 years, children’s response to literature is an area of literacy research that has attracted a great deal of attention. Extensive reviews of research and theory relevant to literary response (Beach & Hynds, 1991; Galda, 1983; Martinez & Roser, 1991) and the proliferation of books on this subject (e.g., Holland, Hungerford, & Ernst, 1993; Many & Cox, 1992; McClure & Kristo, 1996; Roser & Martinez, 1995; Short & Pierce, 1990) attest to this interest. In the context of all this past work, we might wonder about the next 20 years. What sorts of questions are researchers asking today about children’s interactions with literature, and what might they ask in the future? What types of approaches do researchers employ, and what theoretical lenses do they use to analyze and interpret children’s rich responses?

In this article, I explore these questions, discussing a variety of perspectives that can be taken on children’s literary responses. I suggest lines of inquiry and concepts that might be useful for our continued examination of this complex and endlessly diverse spectrum of response. Although this is not meant to be a comprehensive review of research on response, I refer to specific literary texts in my own studies of response and to the work of some other researchers in order to ground a discussion that would otherwise be too abstract.

This exploration of perspectives, questions, and concepts is divided into four major sections, based on (a) the author of a piece of literature, (b) the literary text itself, (c) the reader of literature, and (d) the context(s) of the experience of literature. As I argue, the sequence of author, text, reader, and context corresponds to what I see as an ascending order. In other words, examination of questions related to authors and texts appear to be less important focuses of current research on response, while the more important focuses seem to be readers and contexts. Focus on various types of sociocultural contexts seems to represent a trend for more comprehensive investigation in the future.

A Focus on Authors

Contemporary literary theory and current research on children’s literary response seem to pay scant attention to focusing on what authors intend to convey to their audience of readers. Barthes (1977) even goes so far as to write of the “death of the author,” asserting the freedom of readers to make whatever they will of a literary text. The question of what authors intend is a thorny one, explored by Hirsch (1967), who distinguishes between the significance of a literary text and its meaning. Hirsch asserts that a text may have multiple significances, for various readers at various time periods and places, but only one meaning—the meaning the author intended.
While they might agree on this distinction, most literary critics would be less sanguine than Hirsch that the authorial meaning can actually be determined. Most researchers and practitioners in the field of children’s literature today would probably emphasize that meaning resides not in the author’s intentions (nor in the text itself) but in the literary experience of readers and their social interactions with each other.

Questioning the author

Nevertheless, children display interest in what authors (and illustrators) intend. My own research on picture storybook read-alouds for first and second-graders (Sipe, 1996, 1997) documents numerous questions relating to authors and illustrators, such as “I wonder why the author chose to end the story this way” or “I wonder why the illustrator chose to use this color for the endpages.” These questions were initiated by both children and teachers, and were clearly productive for literary understanding.

The technique of “questioning the author” developed by Beck and her colleagues for use with both fiction and nonfiction, encourages teachers and students to read “as if the author were there to question” through such queries as “So, what is the author trying to tell us?” or “Why is the author telling us that?” (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997, p. 50). By modeling, the teacher can encourage students to ask the same kinds of reflective questions, thereby facilitating rich discussion. Further research is needed in order to explore the various ways in which children can learn to not be satisfied with facile interpretations of literary texts and to probe more deeply.

The authority of authors

The idea that an author may have a certain authority has been revisited from the perspective of the literature of diversity. One focus of debate among experts in multicultural children’s literature is the question of who may validly, accurately, and authoritatively write about non-mainstream cultures. Does an author need to be an “insider” to the culture in order to write about it? What constitutes insider knowledge, and can outsiders acquire it? Are there valuable perspectives that outsiders to a culture can bring? Who has the authority to represent another culture?

Some Pueblo readers’ responses to McDermott’s (1974) Arrow to the Sun, for example, are critical because they believe that McDermott, who does not have Pueblo heritage, misrepresents Pueblo culture in many ways in this award-winning book (Smolkin & Suina, 1997). In terms of children’s response, it is interesting to compare response to books by authors who are insiders to their culture with response to books by authors who are outsiders.

Author stances

According to Sutherland (1985), authors assume one of three different stances toward societal norms and ideologies: the politics of assent, the politics of advocacy, or the politics of attack. The politics of assent merely reflects and reinscribes societal norms, rendering the ideologies invisible, whereas the politics of advocacy and attack either promote or denounce particular sociocultural practices.

For example, We Are All in the Dumps With Jack and Guy (Sendak, 1993), a surreal fantasy about homeless children who live in a dump, seems to reflect the author’s employment of the politics of attack, in this case against the particular social practices that allow people to be homeless. It would seem important for children to understand the stance of the author in order for the book to achieve its greatest effect. How children’s responses to books differ, depending on these three different authorial stances, is an area for further research and reflection.

A Focus on Texts

Despite the difficulties of finding meaning “in” a literary text, it seems clear that different types of texts may evoke different responses. In my research (Sipe, 1996), children’s responses that connected the book being read aloud to other texts—their intertextual connections—were significantly more frequent during read-alouds of traditional literature (e.g., The Gingerbread Boy) than during read-alouds of contemporary realistic fiction, such as Waber’s (1972) Ira Sleeps Over. In the case of Ira Sleeps Over, the children made many personalizing connections, recalling with pleasure the times they had slept over at a friend’s house, but the intertextual connections were limited. In the case of The Gingerbread Boy, reading multiple versions of the same story no doubt contributed to
the greater number of intertextual connections the children made. Researchers and practitioners may want to continue to refine and extend their knowledge that different texts evoke different responses to include an examination of how this general idea plays out in specific situations, texts, and readers.

Another way of examining the nature of texts and their possible influence on response is Barthes’s (1974) distinction between “readerly” and “writerly” texts. A readerly text is one that a reader may consume almost passively and in which information is transmitted, whereas a writerly text is produced actively by readers who must put the text together (or “write” it, as it were) for themselves. This distinction, of course, does not deny that all meaning making is active, but it is also clear that some texts require more work from readers.

For example, Obbink (1992) describes Paulsen’s The Winter Room as a writerly text. Another example of a writerly text would be Fleischman’s Bull Run (1993), which tells the story of the first land battle of the Civil War from 16 different perspectives. The reader must integrate all these perspectives in order to make sense of the book as a whole. Response to such writerly texts may have particular parameters and characteristics, and further empirical research is necessary to delineate them.

The visual text
Picture books are the principal format through which young children experience literature. Within the last decade, the field of children’s literature has been greatly enriched by several comprehensive examinations of picture books (Doonan, 1993; Kiefer, 1995; Nodelman, 1988; Stewig, 1995). These theoretical and pedagogical works provide the foundation for extending our knowledge of how children integrate visual and verbal sign systems in picture books to make meaning and engage in literary interpretation (Sipe, 1998a). Clearly, the richest literary understanding of picture books involves responding to all the information—both visual and verbal—in all parts of the book.

For example, the children in my read-aloud studies were acutely sensitive to the differences in illustration between the traditional version of The Gingerbread Boy by Paul Galdone (1975) and the more contemporary “city-slicker” version by Richard Egielski (1997). As well, the children responded to all the parts of the book—the front and back covers, end pages, title page, and dedication pages. They used all of this visual information in their meaning making, integrating it with the words of the story.

Leaders in literacy research have recently called for a broader definition of literacy to include the visual aspects of picture books (Flood & Lapp, 1995). According to Madura (1998), “Although the practice of considering the picture book as a complete, aesthetic piece of artwork is becoming more common, it still remains a relatively new idea” (p. 375). Researchers and practitioners might want to consider how children use the words in picture books to “fill in the gaps” of the illustrations (Iser, 1978) and how the illustrations supplement the words. As well, since the illustration sequence in picture books never simply duplicates the verbal narrative, there is always a potential for irony and tension between them (Nodelman, 1988). This irony and tension can be explored through children’s responses.

There have been few examinations, thus far, of children’s response to literature in interactive computer formats (Chu, 1995) or hypertext formats (Meyer, 1994), although this technology is becoming increasingly available and popular (Mellon, 1994). This is an area in definite need of further examination by researchers and practitioners.

Textual mirrors and windows
Another area of interest with a textual focus is the increasing availability and use of multicultural literature, which highlights cultures that hitherto were almost invisible in children’s literature or which were represented with negative cultural stereotypes. Although the precise boundaries of multicultural literature are unclear (Cai, 1998), most would probably agree that a major component is literature for, by, and about people of color: African Americans, Asian Americans, Caribbean Americans, Latino/Latina Americans, and Native Americans.

As Galda (1998) observes, these types of literary texts may act as mirrors and windows. For children with a similar culture, a book may act as a mirror, allowing them to see themselves in the story. For children from a different culture, a book may act as a window, allowing them a vicarious experience
of what another culture is like. Thus, the same text may act as a mirror for some children in a classroom and a window for others, and the text may provoke a lively (and helpful) exchange of views. More descriptive research based on this distinction would be valuable in refining and extending our understanding.

A Focus on Readers

Reader-response theory (Beach, 1993; Tompkins, 1980), with its clear focus on readers, has had a profound influence on the way many researchers and practitioners approach children’s interactions with literature. The work of Louise Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) has been especially influential in helping us to understand the various stances readers may take in relation to texts, ranging on a continuum from reading (or listening) solely for the purpose of coming away with some information or understanding the “facts” (the efferent stance) to the purpose of immersing oneself in the story world for a “lived-through” experience of the story (the aesthetic stance).

In fact, there is very little research on children’s response to literature that does not make use of Rosenblatt’s work as a part of its theoretical foundation (for example, see the collection of articles in Many & Cox, 1992). However, other perspectives on reader response are also important to consider.

The stance of resistance

Sutherland’s (1985) work, discussed above, suggests that authors reveal in their literary texts that they implicitly assent to, advocate for, or attack certain socio-political conditions or ideologies. We might think about how this applies to readers. Readers may neutrally accept a text, actively embrace it, or vehemently resist it for one reason or another.

Children may resist a text in various ways. In my own read-aloud research, children objected to the use of “Gingerbread Boy” rather than “Gingerbread Man” in the Galdone (1975) version of this traditional story. But resistance can have profound ideological foundations as well. Some researchers, notably Enciso (1994), have written about how children may resist a text that they feel does not mirror their cultural reality.

In Enciso’s study, a Latina child, observing that the world of Maniac Magee (Spinelli, 1990) was “black and white,” wondered what place she or someone from a different ethnic group would occupy in the book. Hartman (1995), in his study of eight adult readers, found that one of the adults adopted a resistant and questioning stance. In discussing Mildred Taylor’s The Friendship (1987) with several fifth graders, Möller and Allen (1998) found that they exhibited “engaged resisting,” reacting to representations of racial injustice in the text by expressing their pain or anger at what was happening in the story.

This idea of resisting a text seems, therefore, to be fertile ground for further exploration. What happens when readers resist a text? What are the various modes of resistance, and how do they play out in the social interaction of literary discussion? What are the ideological, social, and personal grounds of their resistance?

Individual response styles

There is a great deal of current interest in the ways culture shapes response. This is explored below, in the section on context. However, we might also ask the question of how individual readers’ personalities and specific previous experiences shape their response. It is possible that a reader may manifest a matrix of responses that are specific and unique to him or her.

In research on first and second graders’ literary understanding, I found clusters of responses that suggested individual literary response styles (Sipe, 1998b). Similar research would attempt to show how both children’s individual experience and cultural backgrounds contribute synergistically to their literary response.

Exploring literary pleasure

Everyone has experienced the pleasure of being “lost in a book” (Nell, 1988). Teachers know that the pleasure children feel as readers or listeners is frequently intense and total, almost visceral. However, reader-based theories (that might be expected to address this issue) rarely discuss pleasure in a serious way (Touponce, 1996). Educational researchers have tended to avoid direct discussions of pleasure, preferring to use the language of “motivation” or “affect” (Matthewson, 1994; McKenna, 1994) instead.
In studying intertextual connections, I found that the children clearly experienced several types of pleasure in making these connections among texts. These included the pleasure of making a connection that furthered understanding or interpretation and the pleasure (possibly more intense) in using the connection to playfully enter the story or to stitch stories together.

The children’s other types of responses were also characterized by pleasure. For example, children delightedly personalized stories by comparing situations or characters in a story to their own lives: “Hey, that same thing happened to me!” or “I felt that way, too!” All of this suggests a possible typology of pleasures that children experience when responding to literature. Perhaps distinguishable pleasures can be identified, associated with interpreting, personalizing, and having a lived-through aesthetic experience of stories.

Another possible starting point for investigation would be to consider the distinction Barthes (1976) makes between two types of literary pleasure he calls *plaisir* and *jouissance*. Barthes asserts that we feel *plaisir* when we find ourselves or our own cultural environment mirrored in literature. However, when we are shaken, surprised, or mystified by a story world that turns our assumptions upside-down, we feel *jouissance*. It would seem that children can experience both types of pleasure. Barthes’s distinctions are actually between different types of texts, rather than experiences in readers; but as McCormick (1988) remarks, *plaisir* and *jouissance* can be more usefully applied to the reading experience than to the text.

**Literature as life informing**

Many teachers would reject didactic literature with a moral or ethical message that is too overt. Yet children’s literature has always been intended to instruct as well as to delight (Darton, 1982; Demers & Moyles, 1982). We may smile at the Victorians’ belief that literature should make children “wise and good,” yet we certainly would not want to expose them to literature that makes them ignorant and bad!

The idea of literature’s moral and ethical impact has received major rehabilitation by literary critics such as Wayne Booth (1988). It is seductive to think of literature as a totally separate and distinct thing from the world, a pure “verbal icon” (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954) that takes us out of the world and into the timeless and uncontingent realm of art. But all art, including literature for children, is saturated with the ideology and worldview of those who produce it (Stephens, 1992). And children’s response to literature can either re-inscribe or challenge their own ideology and worldview. As Bishop (1997) cautions, social change will not be easy, “nor can literature, even with all its potential artistic power, be expected to carry the major responsibility for transforming the world” (p. viii). Yet Bishop also argues that literature can act as a “catalyst” for the discussion and social interchange that will affect how children think about the world.

Thus, literature can help us perceive reality in new and fresh ways, “defamiliarizing life,” as Shklovsky (1966) argues, and making us alive to new possibilities, new ways of perceiving the social order, so that we can imagine what a more just society would look like. We need more research on how literature can be an agent of socialization and cultural reproduction as well as how literature can be an agent of social subversion and change.

**The broad range of reader response**

In one of the first naturalistic studies of children’s response to literature in classrooms, Hickman (1981, 1983) documented a variety of responses, including talk, various types of writing, spontaneous and planned dramatic reenactment, painting, drawing, and music. Nevertheless, study of oral and written response has dominated research in this area. Children’s talk and writing have been analyzed in the context of literature discussion groups (Routman, 1991), “grand conversations” in literature study groups (Eeds & Wells, 1989), book clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997), and literature circles (Daniels, 1994).

Spontaneous dramatic play (Rowe, 1998), process drama (Heathcote, 1984), more formal dramatic productions, and other artistic modes (for example, the creation of music, dance, and visual art) as responses to literary texts have generally received less attention from researchers and practitioners. Literary response that incorporates the arts in some way is thus an important area for continuing study.
A Focus on Context

Although reader-response theories will most likely continue to have an important influence on the way we think about children’s experiences with literature, researchers and practitioners are giving increasing attention to the various sociocultural contexts that surround readers and profoundly influence their response to literature. We might think of these contexts as a series of nested boxes or concentric circles, ranging from the particulars of any given situation (the smallest box or circle), to the total classroom context, to the world outside of school, including children’s ethnic and cultural backgrounds, their families and neighborhoods, and the all-pervasive “popular” culture. Study of the complex interaction among all these contexts results in richly textured description of literary response. Thus, the context of response will probably continue to receive a great deal of attention.

The immediate context

Perhaps the most common immediate context for children’s response to literature is a teacher reading aloud to the class. In my study of a first and second grade classroom, there were explicit and implicit rules for the read-alouds. Children were seated on a carpet in a special area of the classroom, surrounded by bookshelves containing the classroom’s library of trade books. As well, these children and their teacher had come to an understanding about how to listen to a story and how to read a story aloud. The class had conversational norms about interrupting and when and how to speak. This complex set of implicit rules and expectations—the immediate social context of the read-aloud—was largely determinative of what counted as response in this situation. Indeed, responses that were accepted and even encouraged by the teacher may have been rejected as off-task behavior in other read-aloud contexts led by other teachers.

The immediate context of any literacy practice also has physical dimensions. In my study, the close proximity of the classroom library likely facilitated the making of intertextual connections. Children were free to search for books that reminded them in some way of the book being read aloud, and these books were literally within reach. Children were also free to talk during the reading of the story, rather than having to wait until the end of the story to respond. This allowed them to make intertextual connections at appropriate times and in ways that scaffolded their developing understanding (and gave voice to their creative impulses) in tandem with their ongoing experience of the story.

We know that teachers have widely varying styles of reading aloud to children (Dickinson & Keebler, 1989; Martinez & Teale, 1993) and that particular read-aloud styles may have an important impact on children’s literacy learning (Dickinson & Smith, 1994). What needs to be further investigated is the impact of different read-aloud styles on children’s literary understanding and response to literature.

The classroom community

The immediate context for literary response is affected by the larger context of the whole classroom situation and school community. In the case of my read-aloud research, the read-aloud situation was nested in the larger classroom context. The physical arrangement of the entire classroom and the implicit and explicit rules for behavior certainly affected the read-aloud situation. As well, the ways in which literature was talked about, experienced, and appreciated outside the read-aloud situation also constituted the children’s experience of literature.

In these classrooms, response outside the read-aloud situation took on a wide range of possibilities: including painting and drawing, music, formal and informal drama, and writing that related to the literature being read. The community of the classroom helped to form what literary critic Stanley Fish (1980) calls an “interpretive community,” with its own norms for what literary understanding and literary discussion were all about—what was valorized and what was disregarded.

Each classroom has, no doubt, its own interpretive community. Moreover, this interpretive community is formed anew from year to year, since teachers usually have a different set of children each September. Yet few studies have sought to describe the genesis of these literary interpretive communities in the first weeks and months of the
school year. Such studies would add greatly to our knowledge of how interpretive communities arise and how they play out in the children’s response and literary understanding.

Non-school contexts

With the exception of the large number of studies of family literacy practices, there is a paucity of research on children’s responses to literature outside the classroom. Literary response and discussion might have very different social dynamics in various settings: the public library, community center, or among an informal circle of friends.

Investigating response in these types of non-school contexts would provide additional knowledge about the range of literary response and the influence of social context on response. Response to literature in non-school settings may comprise a different set of speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986) than response in classrooms.

The influence of gender on response

A person’s biological sex is a physical given, but gender is socially and culturally constructed, consisting of the many implicit social norms about how boys and girls should act, think, feel, and speak. Davies (1993) found these gender differences to be important factors in the ways preschool children respond to literature. Cherland (1992) maintains that, in our culture, girls employ a “discourse of feeling,” whereas boys tend to employ a “discourse of action.” Cherland notes that boys and girls will respond to literature in different ways, using these two discourses. For example, girls may be more likely to talk about story characters’ feelings and relationships, whereas boys may disdain this type of discussion, preferring to talk about the twists and turns of the plot.

Evans (1996), in her study of gender in literature discussion groups, suggests that these discourses are interdependent. The fluidity of gender identities in relation to literacy practices (including response to literature) has been explored by Anderson (1998), who employs the metaphor of “casting” gender, arguing that boys and girls cast themselves in various gender roles depending on particular contexts. The complex influence of gender on literary response is an important area for further study.

Diversity of cultural background

The vast question of how culture shapes, constrains, and enables literary response is an area under active investigation. Children with various cultural backgrounds bring a great diversity of experience to their classrooms. The culture of the classroom may actively support or clash with the children’s family and neighborhood culture. Just as no single piece of literature can adequately convey the complexities of any given culture, no one representative of a culture can adequately speak for all its members. As Cazden (1988) and others have shown, even the basic concept of narrative or story may be significantly different for various cultural groups. For example, what is valorized as a “good story” may vary across cultures.

All of these factors make it important to contextualize children’s responses to literature and to seek to understand the ways in which a diversity of response from a diversity of cultures can enrich literary discussion and interpretation. As well, the contextualization of response will likely mean the development of “local, small-scale theories” of response rather than broad, general theories (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 11).

The teacher who tries to facilitate response in such diverse environments has a challenging job. As teachers seek to move away from the approach to literature that made discussions “gentle inquisitions” and toward an approach that encourages “grand conversations” (Eeds & Wells, 1989), their roles are worthy of further investigation.

The influence of popular culture

In the United States, we are surrounded by the popular culture that we experience through television, news media, movies, and commercial enterprise in general. Children are, of course, heavily influenced by popular culture, and they bring this experience into classrooms. Such literacy researchers as Anne Haas Dyson (1997) have investigated the use children make of popular culture in their writing. The influence of popular culture on children’s literary response has received less attention. Classroom teachers are well aware that the first experiences of traditional fairy tales and folk tales for many children are video, movie, and cartoon versions.
For example, children often equate Cinderella with the Disney version of that protean story. Landes (1983) studied second grade children’s responses to two versions of Peter Rabbit: the original tale by Beatrix Potter (1902) and a simplified, popular culture version. She found that the children preferred Potter’s complexity of language and subtlety of illustration and that they could give reasons for their preference.

Yet it is clear that popular culture can enable sophisticated and insightful literary responses. In my research with first and second graders, children were discussing Bunting’s (1991) Fly Away Home, a story about a homeless boy whose mother has died, and who lives with his father in an airport. The boy sees a bird trapped inside, and he rejoices when it finally escapes through a temporarily open door. During the read-aloud, one of the children commented that the bird could be the boy’s mother or her spirit. In order to justify this view, she referred to the television show “Married With Children,” pointing out that one of the show’s characters had been transformed into a dog. Thus, the beautiful idea of the bird as a symbol of the mother’s spirit was enabled by a child’s knowledge of a television program that many might consider rather vulgar. Both the constraining and enabling effects of popular culture on children’s literary response deserve more reflection and examination.

Conclusion

This article has used examples from my own and others’ research to ground a discussion of various perspectives and possibilities in considering children’s literary responses. Four areas of interest are explored: authors, texts, readers, and contexts. Although each of these generate intriguing research questions, those involving readers and contexts will probably continue to attract the most interest.

Children respond to literature in many ways, and their responses may be viewed through many theoretical lenses. Response is often an evanescent thing—a matter of a few seconds. But we would not be interested in response if we did not feel that this work can offer some real benefits for children. As children embrace or resist texts through language and a variety of artistic modes, they are forging links between literature and their own lives. Such links have the potential to be both informative and transformative for their developing sense of themselves as individuals and members of society. Researchers and practitioners who focus on literary response are thus in a position to trace children’s sense of identity, purpose, and common humanity.

References


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