

IRA Outstanding Dissertation Award for 1998

THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION'S OUTSTANDING DISSERTATION AWARD, which has been given yearly since 1964, recognizes exceptional contributions made by doctoral students in reading or related fields. Candidates may be self-nominated or nominated by their dissertation advisors. Each submits a monograph based on the dissertation, which must have been completed during the previous academic year. These monographs undergo rigorous review by the IRA Subcommittee on the Outstanding Dissertation Award. The winner and other finalists are recognized at IRA's Annual Convention in April or May. The award also carries with it a monetary prize made possible by a donation from Silver Burdett & Ginn, Inc., a U.S. educational publishing house.

The following summary of the 1998 award-winning dissertation has been provided for *RRQ* by its author.

Lawrence R. Sipe

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA

The construction of literary understanding by first and second graders in response to picture storybook read-alouds

This article briefly summarizes a descriptive naturalistic study (Sipe, 1996) of the literary competence (Culler, 1975) of a class of first and second graders as suggested by their responses during read-alouds of picture books. I wanted to answer the following questions: (a) What are the verbal indications that young children are developing literary understanding as picture books are read aloud? What is the nature of this literary understanding? and (b) How does the teacher scaffold the children's developing literary understanding during storybook read-alouds?

I conducted the study in a combined first- and second-grade classroom in a public elementary school in a large midwestern U.S. city. The entire school prized children's talk and active learning and greatly valued literature both as a tool for teaching literacy and as a life-informing and life-transforming experience in itself. The 27 children were from middle and lower middle class families with a diversity of race and culture, including African American, Native American, and Appalachian heritage. The classroom teacher was greatly knowledgeable about children's literature and used it to teach reading.

Over 7 months, acting as a participant-observer, I collected data (field notes and transcripts of audiotaped read-alouds) in three nested social contexts: 35 read-alouds to the whole class, 28 read-alouds to two small groups of 5 children each, and 20 one-to-one read-alouds with each of the 10 children in the two small groups. The classroom teacher read to the whole class, and I read to the small groups and individuals. Three literary genres were represented: fairy and folk tales, realistic fiction, and contemporary fantasy. I chose 45 representative complete transcripts for intensive scrutiny, using the conversational turn as the unit of analysis and employing the constant comparative method, specifically Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-stage model of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Five conceptual categories of the children's 4,165 conversational turns emerged from the analysis:

1. *Analytical* responses (73% of the turns) interpreted the text and illustrations in the manner of the New Criticism (Ransom, 1941) by engaging in a close reading of the text, addressing the traditional elements of narrative (plot, setting, characters, and theme) and narrative techniques such as foreshadowing. Children also discussed illustration media and sequence, conventional visual semiotic codes (such as the semiotic significance of color), and the relationship of text and pictures.

2. *Intertextual* responses (10%) connected the text being read aloud to other stories, the work of other illustrators and artists, television shows, movies, and other cultural products. The children interpreted and placed texts in the literary matrix they were constructing, showing an awareness that stories lean on other stories (Yolen, 1981).

3. *Personal* responses (10%) connected the text to the children's own lives. Children drew the story to themselves by finding points of similarity between their experiences and the experiences of characters in the story, making life-to-text and text-to-life connections (Cochran-Smith, 1984), and by commenting on what they would do if they were a certain character.

4. *Transparent* responses (2%) suggested that the children were so engaged in the *lived-through* aesthetic experience of the story (Rosenblatt, 1978) that, momentarily, their world and the secondary world (Benton, 1992) of the story had merged with and become transparent to each other. The small percentage of these responses may indicate that the children's *silence* was the primary way in which they demonstrated this deep engagement; the responses seemed almost inadvertent as children spontaneously talked back to the story.

5. *Performative* responses (5%) manipulated the text, utilizing it as a pretext (O'Neill, 1995) for the children's own creative purposes, in a playful (and some-

times subversive) carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) romp, and an expression of *jouissance* (Barthes, 1976). Like little deconstructionists, the children regarded the text as their playground, as an anarchic array of signifiers with potentially infinite meanings, and over which they exercised complete control.

Taken together, these five categories describe what constituted literary understanding for this group of children: what their interpretive community (Fish, 1980) valorized as appropriate ways of responding to picture storybooks. The children (a) engaged in textual and visual analysis, (b) formed links with other texts, (c) connected the text with their own lives, (d) momentarily entered the story world, and (e) playfully manipulated or subverted the story for their own creative purposes.

I also analyzed the adults' 3,670 conversational turns, seeking to describe the ways the adults (the classroom teacher and I) enabled the children's literary understanding. Five conceptual categories emerged, indicating five scaffolding actions:

1. *Reading* the text (28% of the turns) mediated the story for the children, investing it with the reader's pacing, segmentation, and affective expression. Readers also acted as tour guides or docents for the book, pointing out certain noteworthy features like the endpages or the title page.

2. *Managing/encouraging* (36%) involved controlling the discussion and modeling how it could proceed most fruitfully, as well as praising children and repeating what they had said, which tended to elicit more talk.

3. *Clarifying/probing* (28%) involved making links among what several children had said, asking for more information or explanation, and asking probing questions.

4. *Speculating/wondering* (3%) was a stance taken by the adults to situate themselves as fellow seekers and interpreters. The small percentage here is possibly due to the fact that the *silence* of the adults also functioned to allow the children to function more independently.

5. *Extending/refining* (5%) was concerned with identifying teachable moments (Eeds & Wells, 1989) for the introduction of new literary terms or taking the children's comments to a higher level of abstraction or generalization.

Thus, though the children were quite involved in constructing their own meaning, the adults in this study also figured largely in the children's developing literary understanding, demonstrating the importance of active students *and* active teachers (Cazden, 1992; Clay, 1991).

Further empirical and theoretical work is necessary to extend and refine the five aspects of literary understanding that emerged from this study, and to relate this model of literary understanding to other work, such as that of Cox and Many (1992), Kiefer (1995), Langer

(1995), Lehr (1991), May (1995), and Wolf and Heath (1992).

The young children in this study were sophisticated literary critics (McGee, 1992; Sipe, 1998; Sloan, 1991), and the storybook read-aloud situation was an important site for the development of their literary understanding. Teachers and researchers may want to consider how the implicit and explicit rules of read-alouds influence children's literary understanding. Because fully two thirds of the children's conversational turns in this study took place during the storybook read-aloud, it may be important to allow children to talk during the reading of the story, at least on occasion. Expecting young children to hold their response until the end of the story may simply lose the response. In most literature circles, literature discussion groups, and book clubs (Daniels, 1994; McMahon & Raphael, 1997), the discussion takes place *after* a story is read. Storybook read-alouds offer the possibility of scaffolding the children's meaning construction as it is in the process of being constructed.

Educators may also want to reflect on how nontextual elements of picture books—illustrations, endpages, title pages, and the like—offer rich potential for meaning making, thereby “broadening the lens” of what we conceptualize as literacy to include visual aesthetic response (Flood & Lapp, 1995).

REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, M.M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world* (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Barthes, R. (1976). *The pleasure of the text* (R. Miller, Trans.). New York: Hill & Wang.
- Benton, M. (1992). *Secondary worlds: Literature teaching and the visual arts*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Cazden, C. (1992). *Whole language plus: Essays on literacy in the United States and New Zealand*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Clay, M.M. (1991). *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1984). *The making of a reader*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Cox, C., & Many, J. (1992). Beyond choosing: Emergent categories of efferent and aesthetic stance. In J. Many & C. Cox (Eds.), *Reader stance and literary understanding* (pp. 103–126). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Culler, J. (1975). *Structuralist poetics: Structuralism, linguistics and the study of literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in the student-centered classroom*. York, ME: Stenhouse.
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Flood, J., & Lapp, D. (1995). Broadening the lens: Toward an expanded conceptualization of literacy. In K. Hinchman, D.J. Leu, & C.K. Kinzer (Eds.), *Perspectives on literacy research and practice* (pp. 1–16). Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- Kiefer, B.Z. (1995). *The potential of picturebooks: From visual literacy to aesthetic understanding*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Langer, J.M. (1995). *Envisioning literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lehr, S.S. (1991). *The child's developing sense of theme: Responses to literature*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- May, J. (1995). *Children's literature and critical theory: Reading and writing for understanding*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGee, L. (1992). An exploration of meaning construction in first graders' grand conversations. In D. Leu & C. Kinzer (Eds.), *Literacy research, theory and practice: Views from many perspectives* (pp. 177–186). Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- McMahon, S., & Raphael, T. (Eds.). (1997). *The book club connection: Literacy learning and classroom talk*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association and New York: Teachers College Press.
- O'Neill, C. (1995). *Drama worlds: A framework for process drama*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Ransom, J.C. (1941). *The new criticism*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Sipe, L.R. (1996). *The construction of literary understanding by first and second graders in response to picture storybook readalouds*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.
- Sipe, L.R. (1998). First and second grade critics: Understanding children's rich responses to literature. In T. Raphael & K. Au (Eds.), *Literature-based instruction: Current issues, future directions* (pp. 39–69). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Sloan, G.D. (1991). *The child as critic* (3rd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Wolf, S.A., & Heath, S.B. (1992). *The braid of literature: Children's worlds of reading*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Yolen, J. (1981). *Touch magic: Fantasy, faerie and folklore in the literature of children*. New York: Philomel.