

## Teacher Candidates' Emerging Perceptions of Reader Response Theory

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### Abstract

What are the possibilities when teacher candidates participate in focused instruction in reader response theory and connected opportunities to experience response to literature, then design and implement response experiences with their elementary students? Consideration of this question led to this study that describes teacher candidates' knowledge about reader response theory and their perceptions of the value and usefulness of reader response theory throughout a semester of focused experiences in university and elementary classrooms. Through qualitative analysis, four distinct, but related themes emerged. These themes describe teacher candidates who: 1) are at differing stages of understanding, 2) find that responding to literature is not "normal" to the elementary students they taught, 3) view reader response experiences as being joyful opportunities for students, and 4) make strong connections between reader response and critical thinking.

When students in my literacy methods courses ask me how I define literature, I respond by saying that I describe it by what it isn't. Borrowing from Rosenblatt's *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* (1978), I say, "If someone can tell you about a book and it's just as good as reading it, it's not literature." But what does it matter if the material students are reading in elementary schools is literature or not? Author Katherine Paterson argues eloquently for the art of literature when she writes, "A good story is alive, ever changing and growing as it meets each listener or reader in a spirited and unique encounter..." (1997, p. 7). But, what of those who want to interpret stories for child readers, making sure they get the "real" meaning and can answer adult-written comprehension questions correctly? Paterson writes, "When a lively story goes dancing out to meet the imagination of a child, the teller loses control over meaning. The child gets to decide what the story means" (p. 7).

With our current national focus on educational testing, it seems that the soul of reading is in danger of being set aside for the more expedient multiple choice interrogation that is easily converted to numbers and rankings. Often with the best of intentions, the joy and serious intellectual activity of reading literature is taken away from children and replaced with required efferent, or informational readings, of literary texts (Rosenblatt, 1995).

The environment a teacher creates in the classroom and the teacher's philosophy about how students learn plays an influential role in how students view literature (Karnowski, 1997). A teacher in a reader response classroom would see students as active participants and decision makers in their own learning (Rosenblatt, 1995). However, most of the future teachers in my courses have had very limited experience with responding to literature, and cannot be expected to be literary guides until they have had rich, thoughtful, and enjoyable experiences with literature themselves.

### **Institutional Context**

Our university's teacher education program includes a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a one semester graduate component of a sixteen-week student teaching internship and a research course. The future teachers in this study took a children's literature course as their first in a sequence of literacy methods courses, then took three additional courses that began with theory, then connected theory to classroom practices. These methods courses viewed the teaching and learning of reading, writing, speaking, and listening as being naturally connected and intertwined. Our students had a variety of experiences in their literacy courses and other foundational and methods courses that included an emphasis in constructivist teaching, varied field experiences in urban, rural, and suburban settings, and tutoring an elementary child in literacy development.

The course in which this study took place was the last literacy methods course and occurred immediately before the graduate-level internship semester; it emphasized literacy teaching and learning in a whole-class context, with the emphasis on learning to reach all the individuals in a classroom of elementary students. The literacy methods course was a part of our Elementary Methods Block which was comprised of methods courses in mathematics, social studies, science, and literacy, a course about diverse learners, and a mentoring course. The Block semester included a four-week field experience component during which our students worked with partners to develop, implement, and assess lessons that were both integrated and non-integrated across the curriculum. In the previous literacy course, these teacher candidates were introduced to reader response theory and participated in literature response groups with self-selected works of young adult literature. However, when asked about their understanding of reader response theories at the beginning of the semester, the students looked a bit puzzled before two remembered that their book groups were somehow connected to reader response.

### **Personal Context**

I approached this study with a commitment to the idea that elementary aged children are very capable of responding to literature in a thoughtful manner—seriously, deeply, and often playfully. My previous research includes a study of fourth graders who analyzed their own responses to poetry; they were capable of not only responding thoughtfully, but also could reconsider and shed light on their previously written responses (Author, 2004). That study and studies by others indicate that the range of literature that appeals to children is broad and that elementary students can learn to guide their own literary discoveries (Lehman & Scharer, 1995-96; Sipe, 2002; Spink, 1997). I also believe that the influence of teachers and their own approaches to literature cannot be overemphasized. Researchers have found that the teachers' approach to literature sets the tone for classroom discussions about texts; in other words, the teacher is largely responsible for creating ( or not creating) an environment that fosters literary explorations (Heald-Taylor, 1996; Karnowski, 1997; O'Flahaven, 1995). Louise Rosenblatt's seminal work, *Literature as Exploration*, has had a large impact on my view of the potential of literature study to connect readers with the world and ultimately to have a role in promoting democratic thinking and practices (1938, 1995). From Rosenblatt's work to others who are exploring readers' varying ways to respond to literature (Leung, 2003; Patterson, 2003; Serafina, 2002; Sipe, 2002), we are discovering the power of the reader to intelligently interpret and act on his/her own responses to works of literature. In previous studies, I examined teacher candidates' responses to works of children's literature and found that while future teachers did make personal connections with literature, they also felt that it was their responsibility to mediate elementary children's interpretations of literature (Author, 1999; Hade, 1993). While working with beginning teachers, I have observed how the

ideals of teacher candidates are set aside so quickly when they are immersed in an environment of high-stakes testing. Hence, this examination in a teacher education literacy methods course was undertaken: What are the possibilities when teacher candidates participate in focused instruction in reader response theory and connected opportunities to experience response to literature, then design and implement response experiences with their elementary students?

Along with the above over-arching question, the express purposes of this study were to describe teacher candidates' knowledge about reader response theory and their perceptions of the value and usefulness of reader response theory in the elementary classroom at three different points in the semester: 1) at the beginning of the semester, 2) after participating in reader response experiences and being introduced to the theory, and 3) after designing and implementing reader response experiences with their grades three through five elementary students.

### **Method**

The participants in this study were twenty-five seniors in their last undergraduate semester, twenty-two females and three males. All three males and eighteen females were Caucasian, while the remaining females included two Native Americans, one Lantina, and one Asian American. As described earlier, the study took place in a university classroom. As a part of data collection, however, teacher candidate participants described reader response experiences they had designed and implemented with students in nearby elementary schools.

The instructor for the literacy methods course in which this study took place was a graduate student in literacy education who had completed all coursework for a doctoral degree. He had taught for six semesters in our program and was familiar with the previous literacy methods courses. He had an interest in and had done extensive professional reading on reader response theories and reader response with elementary students.

The previous semester, I had completed a pilot study of the instrument design and had developed and implemented the reader response experiences that were a part of this study. Doing so enabled me to support the graduate teaching assistant who was the course instructor during this study. We worked cooperatively to plan reader response experiences, revising them as we saw fit from those I had developed the previous semester. We also collaborated on developing the methods and content of introducing reader response theories to the participants. The teacher candidate participants were also enrolled concurrently in a mentoring course that I taught, so I knew them personally and had conversations with them before the literacy methods course and at other times during the semester. Hence, my role was that of both participant and observer. I participated in developing their experiences, and observed each class session in which elements of the study were conducted.

Data sources for the study included a questionnaire (completed pre-, mid-, and post), field notes from my observations in the university classroom, and participants' descriptions of their experiences with elementary students. The questionnaire was comprised of twelve Likert-scaled questions on a one to ten point continuum designed to elicit participants' knowledge about and perceptions of the value and usefulness of reader response theory. While no statistical inferences can be drawn from the results of this questionnaire, means and standard deviations are included to illustrate and support the findings. My field notes were taken during observations in the classroom and were supplemented with further detail immediately after leaving the classroom. Participants were asked to write responses to six open-ended items developed to allow them to describe the

reader response experiences they had designed and implemented. Responding to the open-ended items was a required part of the course, but no grades were assigned: completion of the descriptions sufficed for points to be earned. The items are as follows:

- Describe the reader response experience you implemented with students. How would you characterize their responses?
- Did you get the results you expected from your students' responses? Why or why not?
- Would you do something differently next time to get "richer" results? If so, what would you do?
- How is the reader response experience you implemented with elementary students different or the same as asking comprehension questions after reading?
- What connection do you see (or not see) between reader response experiences and the development of critical thinking skills with elementary students?
- What questions do you still have about reader response theory and practice?

The participants attended this course once per week. At the first week's meeting, they completed the pre-questionnaire. During the next six class sessions, the teacher candidates participated in a variety of reader response experiences. These experiences included responding through writing, drama, art, discussion, graphing, and a combination of writing and talking. The literary texts that were presented are included in the bibliography. After each experience, participants spent time considering possibilities for both the specific text and the type of response experience with elementary students. The instructor asked, "What are some different ideas you have for inviting response to this text?" "How could you change this experience by using different texts?" and "How would you adjust this experience based on different interests, grade levels, and experiences of your students?"

During the eighth class meeting, reader response theory was introduced. Rosenblatt's transactional theory was initially explained and specific quotes from her writing were discussed. Different theories of reader response were presented, with Beach's *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader Response Theories* serving as a guide (1993). Teacher candidate participants were invited to make connections between theory and their involvement in reader response experiences over the past six class sessions. Then, they were encouraged to combine the theory and their experiences to brainstorm possibilities for the students in their elementary field experience classrooms. Additionally, because critical thinking had been discussed in previous methods courses, the instructor facilitated a discussion about possible links between reader response theory and critical thinking.

During the ninth class meeting, participants completed the mid-questionnaire. They also informally presented their ideas for reader response experiences they were considering for their third, fourth, or fifth graders. The teacher candidates spent the next four weeks in classrooms working with a partner. They had the choice of completing the reader response experience with their partner or independently, but they did not complete the experience until all other assigned lessons were finished. Therefore, each reader response experience was presented to the elementary students after the teacher candidates had been in their classrooms full time for about 3 weeks.

The participants returned to the university for classes after the field experience portion of the semester. At the week fourteen class meeting, the post-questionnaires were completed and responses to the open-ended items were collected. The instructor encouraged the teacher candidates

to describe for each other the reader response experiences they designed and implemented and to share their subsequent reflective thinking. At the last class meeting of the semester, the instructor and I responded to questions the participants had about reader response with elementary students.

### **Data Analysis**

A phenomenological approach was used for qualitative data analysis with the goals being to obtain fundamental knowledge, to search for themes, and to describe the participants' developing understandings of reader response theory. The goal was to accurately describe the written and observational data rather than to look toward generalizability. I used a four-step phenomenological plan put forth by Denzin (1989) as a guide, but adapted it to fit this study. First, information was gathered as I read and reread the written data during the semester. The course instructor and I held formal and informal meetings discussing how best to design experiences for the teacher candidates and how we interpreted their understandings so far. Second, at the end of the semester, I put forth themes that emerged from my consideration of the data. The data were set aside for a period of several months, then examined again for emerging themes of the participants' knowledge of and perceptions of the value and usefulness of reader response theory. Third, I evaluated the two sets of themes that were put forth earlier for validity and comprehensiveness and made adjustments where warranted. Fourth, themes that emerged were interpreted and related to the guiding questions of this study. In addition, numerical data derived from the questionnaires added insight to the analysis of the three guiding research questions.

### **Results and Discussion**

Seven sets of partners chose to design and implement their reader response experiences together, while eleven participants chose to complete them individually, for a total of eighteen different experiences. Participants were told they were welcome to model their experiences after those presented in class, and eight of the experiences were similar to one of the six modeled in-class reader response experiences.

Ten of the eighteen experiences were totally original, with varied literature and varied choices of responses present within the experiences. Works of literature presented include *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (Hopkinson, 1993), "Sick" (Silverstein, 1974), *Welcome to the River of Grass* (Yolen, 2001), Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and *I Was a Third Grade Science Project* (Auch, 1999). Modes of response in the experiences designed by the participants included writing, drawing, talking, graphing, and some combinations and choices within these modes. Literature selections included twelve fiction picture books, two fiction chapter books, two works of poetry, one non-fiction picture book, and one non-fiction speech.

Four distinct, but related themes emerged in the analysis of the field notes and descriptions of the reader response experiences. Each of the themes will be presented and discussed within the context of the three research questions.

### **Knowledge of Reader Response Theory**

To respond to the first question of teacher candidates' knowledge of reader response theory, their responses on four items from the questionnaire that was given during weeks one, nine, and fourteen were examined: *I understand reader response theory; I know enough about reader response theory to design and implement reader response experiences for elementary students; I view reader response experiences as being different from asking comprehension questions; I am aware of a variety of ways to encourage response to reading with elementary students.* Means

progressed from 5.64 ( $SD=2.51$ ) to 8.59 ( $SD=1.10$ ) to 9.43 ( $SD=0.73$ ), indicating that the participants were increasingly confident about their knowledge of reader response theory and practice as the semester progressed. In addition, their descriptions of the reader response experiences they designed and implemented with elementary students were examined with an eye toward the dual constructs of respect for the child reader and respect for the literature. An analysis of these experiences is included under the first theme.

- **Theme #1: Sometimes the magic works (and sometimes it doesn't).** While most of the reader response experiences designed and implemented by the participants showed a thorough knowledge of reader response theory (for future teachers about to begin their student teaching internships), there were still some who did not grasp the need to respect both the literature and the child reader. Varying degrees of understanding of reader response were displayed by the participants in their responses to the open-ended questions and in my field note descriptions of university class activities. Following, the first three excerpts from the participants' written descriptions illustrate reader response experiences that respect both the child reader and the literature, while the last is more indicative of a lack of respect.

Betsy: I used graphing as a way to examine the feelings of different characters in the book during the same story events. We read *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson about an African American girl and Caucasian girl that don't fully understand why they are not supposed to interact with each other...several of the students changed their minds after marking their chart and liked the fact that they could just cross it out and make a new one in the appropriate place...The entire class engaged in quality discussion after the reading of the book ...some students even used real life examples to illustrate how they felt in similar situations.

Jennie: We used a book that both my partner and I fell in love with during class, *My Many Colored Days*. We did the same experience as was done in class (responding through art)...The results were amazing!...Their responses were full of creativity and truth...I was surprised to see teardrops on some papers and open discussion of feelings.

Patrick: My partner and I did two different types of poetry readings for our students. She read a poem by Shel Silverstein, a light-hearted approach to responsibility through the eyes of a young girl. I chose to read "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost. I wanted to create a difference by reading the two poems. I wanted to see not only a response, but observe the students as they experience a range of expressions in their responses.

Francine: I read *Welcome to the River of Grass* by Jane Yolen. I told the class to think about where the story might take place while I read it. After the story, I asked the students to write about where the story took place...Then we had a class discussion and I revealed to the class that the story took place in the Florida Everglades.

- **Theme #2: We're not in Kansas anymore!** Teacher candidates found that the elementary students were surprised not to be graded and to be allowed to create their own responses. They felt that because the reader response experiences were vastly different than what their students had experienced, they had to struggle to let the kids know that their opinions counted. There were also several participants who felt they just needed more time to work with the kids to help them learn to trust themselves. Following are excerpts that highlight

this belief that reader response experiences are contrary to the typical experience of their elementary students:

Korina: This is not something they do at all, so I'm glad that we could give them a critical thinking and writing opportunity...The problem lies with the experience level the kids have with this kind of experience. There is one word for it—none!

Debbie: This experience would have been better if they weren't worried about being wrong.

Betsy: This was the students' first time to ever participate in a reader response experience. In fact, they begged us to do another one...They are so used to filling in blanks or answering direct questions on worksheets that it was a challenge for them to accept the fact that there was no right or wrong answer.

Suzanne: ...the children are not used to responding in this way...In my own classroom, I will practice this type of experience more often. Once children become more comfortable with this type of responding, their writing and responding will be richer.

### Value of Reader Response Theory

To respond to the second question of teacher candidates' perceptions of the value of reader response theory, their responses on four items of the questionnaire were examined: *I plan to consider my personal responses when I read works of literature; I plan to use a variety of reader response experiences in my elementary teaching; I think it is important for an elementary teacher to understand reader response theory; I believe reader response experiences are worth spending instructional time on.* For this collection of items, means progressed from 6.87 ( $SD=2.16$ ) to 8.85 ( $SD=1.29$ ) to 9.34 ( $SD=0.93$ ), indicating an increasing progression toward valuing reader response theory.

- **Theme #3: Joyful Noises!** A common theme among the descriptions of the reader response experiences was a sense of joy that pervaded the participants' literature study with their elementary students. The words "allow" and "let" were repeated twenty-eight times in the participants' descriptions of their reader response experiences with elementary students. The word "enjoy" was repeated twenty times. Following are selected excerpts from the participants' written descriptions that support the assertion that enjoyment was a common theme:

Sara: The students were responsive to the experience—almost all of them raised their hands to voice their feelings. They really seemed to enjoy the book and getting to talk about their individual responses.

Melinda: The students included great details and really used their imaginations, letting their ideas flow.

Rachel: The children really enjoyed the experience and seemed more interested in completing it than most assignments...By all appearances, they seemed to be quite engaged.

Marcus: The students enjoyed being able to respond to the book and make it personal...they get to be creative and express their true feelings without feeling like they have to do something just because the teacher told them how to do it.

Jennie: Every student participated and thoroughly enjoyed the chance to express themselves...we let them draw/create/express a response that fulfilled the teachers' needs and the students' needs as well.

Karen: The kids all came up with many wonderful and creative ideas. I believe that their overall responses were incredible. It would be fun to extend this experience by allowing the students to create their ideas...

### Usefulness of Reader Response Theory

To respond to the third question of teacher candidates' perceptions of the usefulness of reader response theory, their responses on four items of the survey were examined: *I personally enjoy responding to my reading in a variety of ways; I enjoy designing and implementing reader response experiences with elementary students; I plan to design and implement reader response experiences with elementary students in my future teaching practice; I think reader response experiences are a way to promote critical thinking in elementary students.* These four items produced means that moved from 6.90 ( $SD=2.31$ ) to 8.37 ( $SD=1.54$ ) to 9.14 ( $SD=1.03$ ), indicating a continuous movement toward seeing the usefulness of reader response theory.

- **Theme #4: Deep thinkers, Anonymous.** Teacher candidates felt that what they were doing was very different than asking comprehension questions and very much the same as critical thinking. This may be mitigated by the fact that they were asked specifically about the relationship between reader response and comprehension and reader response and critical thinking. However, the resulting written connections are so very strong and were stated in such a variety of ways that I feel confident in asserting this as a theme. The following are illustrative excerpts:

David: Thinking about all the angles of a problem before deciding on an answer, that is what critical thinking is for and the reader response experience gets them thinking (using their brains).

Alicia: Within reading response students are asked to look at literature while reading, instead of afterward. They are introduced to looking in a different, more critical way. This critical thinking skill then manifests itself within reader response.

Korina: Critical thinking is not the "what" as much as the "why" of something. This experience gave the students an opportunity to find a connection with the story and themselves. That's important if they are going to understand something.

Rachel: ...kids were able to create something worthwhile rather than answer a bunch of questions that mean nothing to them...Even at face value, it is evident that reader response experiences require more thought.

Betsy: ...students apply intellectual standards by having to explain, reason, and think through their interpretations by looking for relevance, accuracy, and clarity in the text, the author's message, and their relations to their own life experiences.

Marcus: We are telling them that we value what they think beyond just details from the book.

Krystal: Reader response experiences allow students to use their creativity, imagination, and prior knowledge to make connections with literature.

Barbara: Students will then start thinking critically about all the reading they do—not just when they are asked to do a reader response experience with it.

### **Implications**

I have attempted to tell the story of one group of teacher candidates' developing understanding of reader response theory and practice; in doing so, there are limitations that should be discussed. The study does not delve into some of the deeper issues of reader response and is only a one-semester long project. It remains to be seen how these individual teacher candidates set up environments for literature study in their own elementary classrooms. Because they will be beginning their teaching careers in an atmosphere of increased accountability to the public and various governmental agencies, their resolve to value reader response may not sustain itself. Of course, I certainly hope that a semester of focused reader response experiences in the university and elementary classrooms will be enough to worry the edges of their consciousness when they share works of literature with their students.

Rosenblatt (In Farrel & Squire, 1990) sees a strong relationship between the capacity for personally meaningful, self-critical literary experience and the nurturing of men and women capable of building a fully democratic society. From Rosenblatt's original work on reader response theory to Sebesta, Monson, and Senn's (1995) hierarchy of responses of young readers to current practice in elementary schools, the discussion of response to literature has become a common theme in university teacher preparation programs. However, today's teacher candidates can rarely recall being encouraged to personally respond to their reading, hence, they have limited experience on which to base their future practice. Sipe (2003) spoke about the spaces that storybook read aloud open up in primary children's lives. These spaces include: 1) a supportive, intimate, and emotionally rich space, 2) a space for play, pleasure, and spontaneity, 3) a space for imagining, speculating, and reflecting, 4) a space for creating an interpretive community, and 5) a space for responding to art. These spaces could provide a framework around which to view expanded authentic literary opportunities for students in our teacher education programs. Many of our students are enamored of children's literature, but fewer are readers of "adult" literature. Hence, it would be advisable to help them stretch their own boundaries to include a variety of literature and open the doors to allow them to discover reflective, interpretive, and playful spaces within.

Ah, the possibilities!

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**Literature Presented in the Study by the Course Instructor**

Bottner, B. (1992) *Bootsie Barker Bites*. Ill. Peggy Rathmann. New York: Putnam.  
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Various works of fiction and non-fiction picture books, along with various poem collections were available for a reader response experience that focused on dramatic responses.