

# *Reading Horizons*

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## READING: THE CONFERENCES

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# READING: THE CONFERENCES

Jeanne M. Jacobson

## **Abstract**

At the International Reading Association's annual convention last spring, several presentations were devoted to the topic of literature-based themes. For a session on "Extending Students' Curiosity and Knowledge: Developing Interdisciplinary Expertise in Print Rich Environments," the featured speakers were Deborah Rowe and Charles Kinzer of Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, and Jeanne Peter from the Vanderbilt University Child Care Center.



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**International Reading Association  
37th Annual Convention  
Orlando, Florida, May, 1992**

***Literacy: The Language of Freedom***

At the International Reading Association's annual convention last spring, several presentations were devoted to the topic of literature-based themes. For a session on "Extending Students' Curiosity and Knowledge: Developing Interdisciplinary Expertise in Print Rich Environments," the featured speakers were Deborah Rowe and Charles Kinzer of Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, and Jeanne Peter from the Vanderbilt University Child Care Center.

The presenters pointed out that adult concern for time constraints can interfere with good learning, noting that teachers tend to *move right along*, whereas we should instead allow children time to explore a theme, and thus enable them to become expert on topics of their choice.

A year-long observational study of preschoolers who were provided with opportunities to explore themes related to their own interests yielded information about how children — including very young children — can indeed become experts on a topic and what such expertise is like. The children's program allowed them time to experience books repetitively, to

explore topics and materials at their own pace, and to have adult help in getting answers to their questions. One theme was Work Machines. Books and toys were provided in the same center, and were always available. Adults responded to children's interests rather than setting the pace themselves. The conference presenters stressed the importance of providing continuous access to materials; planning open-ended activities, encouraging sharing of expertise, and not following a teacher-developed, predetermined sequence of activities. "When we did not follow children's interests," Rowe noted, "they drifted away. Older children don't have this option."

The quality of children's responses to literature changed with increasing expertise. Early responses to a book, at the surface level, typically consisted of asking questions and retelling parts of the story. Eventually, these four and five year old children began to use one familiar book to interpret another, to compare and contrast books, and to ask insightful questions. Because they had internalized information from favorite books, studied illustrations which interested them, and learned the vocabulary of their field of interest, they were able, as Rowe pointed out, "to ask questions which benefited us all." She cited the example of a preschooler who asked, "Why do work machines that have caterpillar tracks not have stabilizers?" The children's expertise, presenters stressed, was built through reading, discussion, *and play*.

Those attending the IRA conference had the opportunity to hear featured speakers including Walter Dean Myers, Taffy Raphael and Jim Trelease, and to choose among a rich array of workshops, symposia, and meetings for special interest groups. Presentations describing current research in the areas of reading education focused on a wide range of topics. In one session, researchers discussed results of their studies of teacher characteristics. Sharon Arthur Moore, of Arizona State University, spoke on "Recalled Practices, Behaviors and Traits of Memorable Teachers," a topic related to the June 1993 themed issue of Reading Horizons: *Exemplary Teaching and Exemplary Teachers*.

Moore's work follows that of other researchers who have focused on teachers who have influenced their students positively, and also adds the dimension of parallel research about teachers who are perceived as memorable in a negative way. The salient behaviors of negatively recalled teachers, she finds, are humiliating students, losing personal control, and demonstrating a lack of interest in teaching. Personality traits of these teachers match their maladaptive actions. They are seen as disorganized, uncaring, and demonstrating dislike of, or disinterest in, children and teaching, and as boring and emotionally unsafe.

Future teachers, Moore notes, are strongly influenced by the teaching they themselves have experienced and observed during their years in school. "The apprenticeship of observation is the longest apprenticeship in the world," she noted. "We are learning how to be a teacher for thirteen years, by observing in the classrooms where we are taught."

*Dr. Moore shared some of the quotations she has collected from students about teachers who had a significant positive effect on their lives. Here are the statements of three students about a teacher who influenced them.*

**I was not afraid to make mistakes because I knew she would help me and not criticize me.**

**She taught me what it was like to be a person, to feel joy and pain, to laugh and cry.**

**When I told her that my goal had changed since I met her and that I wanted to be a teacher just like she was, she stopped and looked at me. "Sit down," she said. She gave me a heart to heart talk. She said, "You know, teachers never quit learning and if they do, they stop growing — and once you stop growing yourself, you no longer have anything to offer your children."**