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Developing Preservice Teachers' Perspectives on Reader Response

Dana L. Grisham
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Abstract

This study examines preservice teachers' developing conceptions of reader response theory, specifically focusing on the importance of aesthetic response to students' engagement with and motivation for reading. Three intact classes over three semesters (N = 78) participated in an intervention through literature discussion circles after reading award-winning and multicultural children's and adolescent literature. They read a cycle of three novels in each class. Preservice teachers chose the books from multiple copies provided and responded in writing to each selection prior to meeting in small, student-run groups for discussion. Participants wrote dialectical journals for the first book, completed role sheets for the second selection, and for the third novel, provided a written response of their choice. Results indicate: that the aesthetic reader stance predominated in students' written responses and discussions; that written response did not influence the quality of the discussion; and that students were more disposed to consider aesthetic stance as important to the reader after their own participation in literature discussion circles. Participants also highly valued book choices and forms of responses allowed. Implications for teaching are critical in sustaining a balanced view of literacy because current reform mandates avoid the mention of issues such as personal response in favor of literary analysis and often prescribe what teachers must teach and assess.
Background

Most elementary teachers use children's literature in the classroom as one component of a balanced literacy program. Teacher candidates should be prepared in ways to know and love children's literature as well as to learn to identify and value different responses that children may make to literature. How could I, as a teacher educator in literacy, effectively teach beginning teachers about reader response theory and the importance of aesthetic responses to literature by young students?

This issue concerns every teacher educator in literacy, particularly in an era when educational reform at the state and national levels is focused tightly on issues of accountability. In states like California, top-down reform movements are resulting in a resurgence of behavioral objectives prescribing what teachers must teach and assess. The California Language Arts Content Standards (1997), lists specific measurable outcomes to be achieved by students. Under literary response, for example, third grade readers must be able to "identify characters, settings, and key events." Such behaviorally prescribed fragments of study are important but incomplete descriptions of reading; they do not embody the engagement, complexity, and joy that constitutes the reading process. The pressure to raise reading achievement scores through the application of behavioral objectives can lead to an instructional scenario devoid of important affect. As Ruddell (1998) put it, "If children's motivation to read is not sustained from the earliest grades, they will not develop proficiency and independence in reading" (p.3).

The questions which framed my research on adult preferences in responding to literature included: (1) Would elementary preservice teachers prefer to respond in writing to children's literature using dialectical journals, role sheets, or a written response mode of their own choosing; (2) How might the method of written response affect the type of response (aesthetic or efferent) made by the students; (3) How might the method of response affect the ensuing small group literature discussion; (4) In what ways might this experience influence the preservice candidates' attitudes towards teaching children's literature, particularly their attitudes toward aesthetic responses?
Recent best practice in literacy calls for "grand conversations" (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Eeds & Peterson, 1991; Gambrell & Almasi, 1997; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1993) over the literature that elementary students read. Discussion of literature is consonant with social learning theory which suggests that meaning is constructed when the individual interacts with the text and with other individuals (Moll, 1992; Purves, Rogers & Soter, 1995). However, student engagement with text may not be assured by reading alone; nor may meaningful discussions be a natural result of reading. To facilitate the individual's active engagement with the text and with the story world, students are often asked to respond in writing to what they read prior to discussion (Borders & Naylor, 1993; Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1991, McConaghy, 1990). Such strategies are instances of transmediation (Siegel, 1995), which is the phenomenon of using one medium, such as writing, to deepen understanding of, elaborate, or extend another medium, such as reading. Using art, drama, or discussion to respond to a text are other examples of transmediation (See, for example, Peck, 1998).

Three important theoretical and pedagogical areas undergird my study. The first is reader response theory. Rosenblatt (1978; 1994) theorizes the reading process as a transaction between the reader, the text, and the context in which the reading occurs. In this scenario, both the reader and the text are sites in which meaning resides. The transaction between the reader and the text is constructed into an individual response that almost certainly differs to some degree from the transaction between the same text and another reader. From the work of Rosenblatt and others (see, Beach, 1993 and Tompkins, 1980 for reviews), "reader response" theory has evolved and has been the subject of many research investigations over the past twenty years.

One of the major distinctions drawn by Rosenblatt and other reader response theorists is that readers' stances to literature may be aesthetic or efferent. An efferent stance tends toward analytical or critical responses, based on literary elements such as characterization, plot, setting, theme, and so on. These literary elements are highly valued, particularly since they are frequently tested in standardized and other assessments. While
some researchers suggest that students may be guided by the teacher into more meaningful or deeper understanding of the text (Menke & Pressley, 1994), there is a concomitant concern that teacher-directed discussions may revert to the IRE pattern (Mehan, 1979), where procedural interactions dominate the discourse. Efferent responses may be deep and meaningful, but aesthetic responses to literature should be viewed as equally important.

The aesthetic stance, according to Rosenblatt, consists of reader responses to the text based upon personal and intertextual connections. An example of aesthetic response is when persons who have read the same book get together, and their usual first question goes something like, "How did you like the book?" A personal aesthetic response might be one in which the reader compares a situation in the book to his or her own life. An intertextual aesthetic response might consist of comparison of one book with another in a personal vein. The value of aesthetic response is that it deepens the reader's engagement with the text. Rosenblatt (1994) argued that aesthetic response is necessary for the reader's construction of meaning prior to students engaging in efferent types of responses. Almasi (1995) studied participation structures in literature discussion groups and found that when students were allowed time to talk about topics that were meaningful to them, their responses to the literature tended to be more complex than those of students who responded only to the teacher's questions.

Second, journaling as an effective response to literature is represented by a large body of literature (see, for example, Berthoff, 1981; Kamber, 1995; Livdahl, 1993). These works state that journal writing leads the reader to a deeper relationship with the text. Dialectical journals, in particular, have been used as an instructional strategy for various purposes, including response to literature (Ellis, 1997; Meehan, 1998; Newell, 1996).

Finally, Literature Response Circles (LRCs) are an often-used instructional strategy for literature study (Daniels, 1994; Samway & Whang, 1996; Smith, 1996). Literature Response Circles have been successfully utilized for literature study at every grade level from Kindergarten (Souvenir, 1997) to the university level (Peck, 1998). The
variation in the way LRCs are conducted in schools is highlighted by the different structures recommended in the Daniels (1994) and Samway and Whang (1996) books, both of which are well-known texts which teachers read. For Daniels, LRCs are student-led, student-centered temporary groups in which students discuss topics of their own choosing. His use of role sheets to support discussion as students read agreed upon portions of the book is seen to be a scaffolding technique that should be removed as soon as students have gotten the knack of discussing freely.

In contrast, Samway and Whang recommend two sessions for discussion. The first discussion session takes place after students have read the entire book and centers on aesthetic response to the book. The second discussion takes place shortly thereafter and focuses on the efferent responses that provide for a serious literary analysis of the book.

Rosenblatt’s transactional theories, the theory of transmediation, and the use of literature circles are all consonant with social constructivism (Fosnot, 1996) in which the learner is actively constructing meaning during interactions with others.

Most of the literary instruction in schools falls into the efferent category. In an earlier study (Grisham, 1997) elementary teachers involved in a project to implement literature circles were torn between their goal of making educational experiences more learner-centered and their concomitant anxiety over what they interpreted as wasted time or off-task behavior when children were in charge of their own learning. An illustration of this dilemma occurred during student-run literature discussion groups, when teachers who briefly visited the “student-run” groups tended to direct students away from discussions involving aesthetic responses to literature and toward more analytic (efferent) responses. These teachers, who had participated in study groups on literature circles, perceived the value of aesthetic responses by children in a theoretical sense, but struggled with their implementation. Teachers in the study could not seem to prevent themselves from steering the groups into traditional teacher-directed literary discussions centering on character, plot, setting, and theme, all of which met the mandates for accountability rather than the need to engage students more deeply with literature.
Method

I focused on ways to engage adult readers, graduate level preservice teachers, with children's literature such that they might better internalize the significance of aesthetic response. In teacher preparation, the use of Literature Response Circles (LRCs) or Book Clubs in the literacy methods course appeared to be a productive way to model the responses or discussions teachers seek to have with children involving both aesthetic and efferent responses to literature. Preservice students are generally positive about the opportunity to read and respond to such award-winning children’s books as The Giver, by Lois Lowry.

Three sources were critical to the formation of the literacy intervention described here. The first, Harvey Daniels’ (1994) Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom, provided the primary impetus for organizing of my literature circles in the preservice classroom, and provided for one of the methods of written response: role sheets. From Samway & Whang (1996), I took the idea of reading the entire book before discussion. From the third source; Lapp, et. al. (1995), I took the idea of Book Club for teachers. The study took place during the 1997-98 academic year at a large California university.

Participants

Participants were three intact classes of graduate students in a fifth-year (graduate) teacher education program to earn the multiple subjects (K-8) teaching credential. During the first semester, students focused primarily on early literacy learning. The second of the two-class sequence focused on literacy learning in grades 4 to 8. Three intact classes of students (N = 78) participated in the study. Students in these classes were part of the teacher education program, primarily white and female (See Table 1).
Instructional Sequence

The element that I added consisted of three literature discussion cycles in each intact class. Each three-book cycle was organized in the same way. I first provided information about literature circles based on the model set forth in Daniels (1994), and provided sets of children’s literature to be read and discussed. The literature included either award winning or multicultural children’s literature for children or young adolescents. I selected award-winning literature for content and interest level and multicultural literature as part of my commitment to diversity. A list of books used is included in Appendix A.

To form literature circles, students were directed to list their names and their first, second, and third choices from books I offered. I then formed the groups, usually in the presence of the students, balancing choice with availability. Students who did not get their first choice in one cycle were assured of getting their first choice in the second or third cycle.

Newly formed literature circles of four to six students met immediately to discuss a set of “get-acquainted” questions prior to reading the book. Students then had one week until the next class meeting in which to read and respond to the literature.

Table 1. Participants in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Number of Females</th>
<th>Number of Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class &quot;A&quot;</td>
<td>Fall 1997</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class &quot;B&quot;</td>
<td>Spring 1998</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class &quot;C&quot;</td>
<td>Summer 1998</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Responding Using the Dialectical Journal

In each class, the first written response method required was the Dialectical Journal or split page journal. An example of the dialectical journal format from the course syllabus is shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation from Text</th>
<th>Response to Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;He was a sloppy eater.&quot; (p. 6)</td>
<td>I can remember how hard it was for me to eat chicken with a knife and fork. It slid all over the plate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I encouraged students to choose any quotation from the book that was meaningful to them and then respond to it in any authentic manner they desired. I placed no limit on the number of entries they might make; one entry per chapter of the book was required. I modeled examples of both aesthetic and efferent responses for the students.

Responding Using Role Sheets

The second required written response method consisted of "role sheets" (Daniels, 1994). Six roles were used: Discussion Director, Illustrator, Summarizer, Vocabulary Enricher, Connector, and Literary Luminary. Students decided who in the group would take each role. We varied from the Daniels (1994) book in that students completed their role sheets after reading the complete novel rather than after agreed-upon segments of the book as young students would do.

According to Daniels, role sheets give purpose and focus for the reading. They act as an organizer for discussion. For example, the Discussion Director (the only required role) is charged with formulating a list of questions that the group might want to discuss about the part of the book being read. In our literature circle, the list of questions was for the entire book. Sample questions are provided (e.g., What are one or two of the most important ideas? or Did today’s reading remind you of any real-life experiences?) to give the student an idea of where to start.

After reading the book, students responded on the role sheets. Since the maximum size of a group was six, there was a role for everyone. Occasionally, groups were smaller so not all roles were filled. Students’
responses varied; in some cases students confined their written responses to the photocopied handout, while in other cases students augmented the role sheets with additional written text, often voluminous. Illustrator projects were often quite elaborate and creative.

**Responding Using a Written Product of the Student’s Choosing**

The third written response method involved student choice. Students could elect to reprise previous methods of written response, or they could choose to do any other written response they preferred.

While I taught several response types over all three classes (see, for example, Yopp and Yopp, 1996), I also used student suggested literature in my courses and initiated various responses to these. For example, in one class students were asked to construct a storyboard to respond to each chapter in my read-aloud of *The Midwife’s Apprentice* (Cushman, 1995). Thus, each semester, there was some variation in the types of responses I taught directly. In addition, students brought in several other techniques that they had learned elsewhere in other teacher education classes or in their field placements. I made no effort to control these choices and each class seemed to have varying preferences. I allowed complete choice.

**Literature Discussion Circles**

After students read each book and responded in the appropriate written method, they discussed the books. Class time was set aside for small group discussions ranging from 20 minutes to over half an hour. I observed discussion sessions and took field notes. Book discussions took place simultaneously in small groups placed around the classroom. They were entirely student-run, since I wanted students to experience self-directed discussions. I circulated throughout the room, listening to discussions, making notes about them, and occasionally participating if students wanted me to comment and to facilitate group process. A short whole class period would follow in which I would query each group about the effectiveness of the discussion and take general comments about the LRC process.
Student groups then cooperatively planned a presentation to "share" their book with the rest of the class. Presentations were made during the class meeting following discussions and used a number of presentational styles. For example, one group that had read Catherine, Called Birdy (Cushman, 1994) wrote letters from different characters' perspectives which they read aloud in character. Another group reading the same book, made hand puppets and put on a puppet show to highlight certain key vignettes in the book.

Data Collection

First, all dialectical journals and all role sheets were collected with students' permission for use in this study. Selected "choice" written projects were collected, although some were constructions which didn't lend themselves to collection, such as the "triarama."

At the end of the semester, I asked Class "A" (Fall 1997) students to write a narrative response to me about their preferences concerning the three types of written response, indicating which led to the richest discussion, and talking about their choice activity. The questions were listed on an overhead but not all students gave complete answers to the posed questions, thus for Class "B" and Class "C" a data collection form (Appendix B) was used which was much more effective in capturing the desired data.

Following the completion of the Literature Circles in Class "C," I interviewed four students who volunteered. During the last class period I asked for volunteers to be interviewed by passing around a sign-up sheet. From this list of 13 students, I randomly selected four to interview about their experiences. The interviews took place either on or off campus at a place and time convenient to each student. I asked each person the same set of questions (Appendix C) regarding the nature of response to literature and how they might structure their classrooms to use literature in the teaching of reading. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.
Data Analysis

Analysis of quantitative data involved the compilation of descriptive statistics and construction of figures to reflect the data (Spatz & Johnston, 1989). These figures and comments are presented in the findings section of this paper.

Analysis of qualitative data involved the coding of themes for the research questions from the field notes, written responses, and transcribed interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). On the narrative letters (Class “A”) and data collection sheet (Classes “B” and “C”), I read and re-read the students’ comments. After I had listed the themes that emerged from the comments, I read again to confirm or disconfirm my categories. Some categories were eventually combined. An example of a category that was eliminated is “group composition made the difference in quality of discussion.” I eliminated it as a finding due to insufficient data after reviewing book choices, discussion notes, and responses to books. I triangulated data throughout the study.

I analyzed dialectical journals, role sheets, and projects for the type of response to the literature. The dialectical journal entries were read and categorized by type of response (aesthetic, mixed or efferent) as shown in Appendix D using the same process of triangulation. I also examined choices and entries by gender.

Findings

Quantitative data provide one portrait of student responses to the literature. I calculated student preferences on specific questions (from the narrative data and the data collection sheets) which gave an overall picture of the types of responses made and preferences per class. The same was done with the question regarding which mode of response led to the most productive discussion.

Preferred Written Response

The data for preferred written response mode are summarized in Table 2.
Table 2. Preferred Written Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Response</th>
<th>Class “A” N=26</th>
<th>Class “B” N=30</th>
<th>Class “C” N=22</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialectal Journals</td>
<td>17 (66%)</td>
<td>16 (53%)</td>
<td>16 (73%)</td>
<td>49 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Sheets</td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
<td>13 (43%)</td>
<td>6 (27%)</td>
<td>27 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Preference</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Class “A” data indicate that 17 students (66 percent) selected the Dialectical Journal as the preferred choice of written response to the literature, while 8 students (31 percent) preferred the role sheets. One student expressed no preference. When it came to choosing a written response for the choice cycle, Class “A” chose the following in order of quantity: character map (4), dialectical journal (3), regular journal (3), story frame (3), summary (2), timeline with pictures (1), role sheet (1), triarama (1), freewrite (1), acrostic poem (1), Literary Report Card (1), ABC poem (1). Four students neglected to specify their choice for the third response (See Table 3).

Class “B” data indicate that 16 students (53 percent) preferred the dialectical journal while 13 students (43 percent) preferred role sheets. As with Class “A,” one student expressed no preference. With regard to choice activities, Class “B” chose the following in order of quantity: dialectical journal (11), poetry (8), regular journal (4), character map (2), folded book (1), Webbing (1), Role Sheet (1), Song (1), illustrated limerick (1), and not specified (1).

Class “C” data indicate that 16 (73 percent) preferred the Dialectical Journal while 6 (27 percent) preferred role sheets. With regard to the choice activity, Class “C” chose the following in order of quantity: Role sheets (7), Literary Report Card (4), Venn diagram (4), Dialectical Journal (4), Polar Opposites (2), regular journal (1).

For the question involving favorite written response type, no student chose any alternative to the dialectical journal or the role sheets.
Preferred Choice Responses

I used Yopp & Yopp (1996) as the primary resource for teaching literature responses, but augmented those variably over each semester. Thus there appears to be no clear pattern in the choice responses. However, those written response types which appear in the Yopp textbook are starred. These data are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Choice Activities in Written Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice Responses</th>
<th>Class “A” N=26</th>
<th>Class “B” N=30</th>
<th>Class “C” N=22</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialectical Journals*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10 (12.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Sheets</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9 (11.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Journal*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Map*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literary* Report Card</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 (6.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venn Diagram *</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Frame</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (3.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polar Opposites *</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (2.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assorted (1 each of response)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 (6.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>78 (99%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thirty-four percent of the students chose either the dialectical journal or the role sheets for their choice written response in each of the
three classes. Analysis of choice project dialectical journals and role sheets reflect a similar tendency to respond aesthetically. The second largest category of choice response was poetry, which is entirely an aesthetic response.

Most Productive Discussion

Students were almost evenly split over whether dialectical journals or role sheets provided the basis for more "productive" discussion. Unfortunately, in Fall 1997 (Class “A”), some students did not attend directly to this question in their narrative responses to my questions and data were unusable. Table 4 summarizes the quantitative data on best discussion.

Table 4. Responses to the question, "Which was your best discussion?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Dialectic Journal</th>
<th>Role Sheets</th>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>No Pref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;A&quot; N = 26</td>
<td>*Not Avail</td>
<td>*Not Avail</td>
<td>*Not Avail</td>
<td>*Not Avail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;B&quot; N = 31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;C&quot; N = 22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Spring 1998, although Class “B” students preferred responding in dialectical journals (16) over role sheets (13), the data reflected that role sheets provided for best discussions. Students indicated that the best discussions occurred when role sheets (14) were used, as contrasted with dialectical journals (12), choice (1), and no preference (4). In Summer 1998, students chose the dialectical journal (10) over the role sheets (7) and choice (3). Two students had no preference. There were no gender differences evident in the data set.

Data for Class "A" were partial perhaps because students felt that the structured responses led to the best discussions. This was interesting in view of the fact that students tended to comment favorably about choice.
I analyzed data collection sheets for the last two classes to see if the book selections themselves were influential in which discussion was preferred. No patterns were apparent to suggest that the book was more significant than the response/discussion type in creating a "best" discussion. For example, Class "B" favorite books were split: Children of the Dust Bowl (5), Children of the River (4), The House on Mango Street and Walk Two Moons (each 3), Freak the Mighty (2), and Catherine, Called Birdy, Number the Stars, Yolanda's Genius, and Maniac Magee (each 1). Books not named as favorites were Hatchet, Year of Impossible Goodbyes, and Bridge to Terabithia. Response types and favorite discussions were spread along unrelated lines.

_Aesthetic v. Efferent Responses in the Dialectical Journals_

From the 78 dialectical journals from all three preservice classes, 89 percent of the entries were aesthetic in nature. Qualitative data provides an intriguing look at the way student teachers think about and respond to literature. Here are two of the numerous examples of aesthetic responses students made to the literature in the dialectical journals.

From _Number the Stars_

P. 4 The soldier reached down and stroked her little sister's tangled curls. Stand still Kirsti, Annemarie ordered silently, praying that somehow the obstinate five-year-old would receive the message. I thought about the scary position the children were in with the soldiers. How vulnerable and helpless Annemarie felt at that moment with her little sister.

From _Bridge to Terabithia_

We need a place, she said, just for us. It would be so secret that we would never tell anyone in the whole world about it. (p. 38) As a kid, my secret places I had with my friends were so cool. They built a special bond between that group of friends because it was something that was just ours. This is a wonderful feeling.
This was coded aesthetic because it relates the reader’s personal experiences.

Mixed responses are exemplified by the following:

From Hatchet

Ch. 16 “Brian jumped on it and grabbed it and slammed it against the ground once, sharply, to kill it.” It’s hard to believe that this is the same boy that was in the plane crash. He was so squeamish to touch the dead pilot and now he seems so confident in touching “death,” in fact, doing the killing. Obvious indication of how Brian has changed.

Coded mixed because there’s a personal tone to the event, but it is described efferently.

The efferent responses are represented by the following:

From Children of the River

“Cambodians think it’s bad to touch a little kid’s head.” (p. 109) Ravy explains Cambodian belief to Jonathan, as a way of the author to introduce cultural differences.

Coded efferent because reader relates to literary device.

Dialectical journal entries tended to be either efferent or aesthetic. Students rarely combine response types. A journal tended to be almost all aesthetic or almost all efferent. Mixed responses were not common.

Qualitative Data on Written Responses to Literature

Students who preferred the dialectical journal stated that this mode of response helped them to reflect about the book more deeply and personally. They related the book to their experiences in their lives. Students mentioned that they also learned more about each other when they compared quotations because the dialectical journal “forced” them
to select what was really moving and important to them personally. Students mentioned that the dialectical journal response encouraged them to become "attached" to the text. Some students also mentioned that the dialectical journals led to group discussions that were personal and thereby more meaningful than other discussions. One student commented that she would "never forget the book she read because of the dialectical journal."

When students chose role sheets over dialectical journals as a response type, the most frequently stated reasons were (1) reduced amount of writing required and (2) disliked having to stop during reading to do the dialectical journal.

Students who named role sheets as their favored response type frequently stated that structure provided comfort or the role itself provided a frame or perspective through which to view the literary work. They enjoyed being the "expert" and having their own time to speak during small group discussion. Students commented on the "balance" of areas covered through the role sheets and also appreciated that every group member had to participate. Students who commented negatively about role sheets generally called them "boring."

Many students commented that they loved having been provided choice in the selection of the literature and the selection of the response types. Those who expressed no preference in response mode often lamented that it was too hard to choose because all the discussions had been rich.

Student Interviews

Through the student interviews (Class "C" only) I attempted to determine what effect responding to children's literature in their preservice class might mean to the individual's attitude about using literature groups their own classrooms. I also wanted to determine whether participation in literature discussion groups might have influenced the way that student teachers valued the aesthetic stance toward literature and aesthetic response. Student interviews occurred after classes had ended and grades had been turned in so that students
would have no reason to “please” the instructor with their responses to the questions.

Three of the four students interviewed were easily able to define efferent and aesthetic responses more than two weeks after class had ended. Here is Olivia’s definition: “Aesthetic response to me means the way literature makes you feel, the way it effects your taste, if it seems good or not in a very general and personal way. Efferent I’m less sure about, but I would assume, in opposition to aesthetic, that it means more the information that you gain, the specific facts that you derive from the literature, and not how you feel about it.” The fourth student remembered both terms after being prompted.

Transcripts of the interviews disclosed that literature discussions were largely personal rather than professional in nature. Students reported that they did not spend any significant amount of time talking about how to “teach” the novels they were reading. These data were consistent with my field notes and the written responses to support the predominantly aesthetic nature of the responses that the students made to the literature.

Students reported that the most prevalent “professional” response was, “Would you use this book in your classroom? If so, what grade?” (Melissa, August 1998). Students did discuss literary elements of the books during literature discussions, and these discussions tended to be woven among more personal and intertextual connections students made to the novels, demonstrating that all types of responses to literature were valued and mirrored the complexity found in children’s responses by Almasi (1995).

As for the value of aesthetic response, all four interviews provide evidence that students had been reflective about its significance. Zoe expressed it well, “I think that if you connect with a piece of literature on an aesthetic level, that tends to be with some feeling or experience you had. and if you do that with a piece of literature, it makes it relevant to you and it makes it something that you care about. If you care about it, you are likely to remember more of the elements of the story, so if you
grab the student’s interest in the piece of literature then I think you have them.”

Discussion

Students were split on their decision regarding response-type preference: dialectical journals, role sheets, or own choice. While dialectical journals command a clear numerical majority, a number of students preferred role sheets. All three response-types led to valued discussions during literature response circles and all three were well-received written response modes. Yet it was choice itself which students said positively impacted them. An important question then follows: will these teacher candidates afford their students choices? This seems a likely follow-up study once these students have been teaching for a while.

The preponderance of personal or aesthetic responses (89 percent) to the novels surprised me. Students tended as a whole across all three groups to respond in a personal vein to the children’s novels. When given choice, students responded personally across all three cohorts, supporting the assertion that aesthetic response is both desirable and necessary. While efferent responses are no less important, I maintain that it is the aesthetic stance that needs the conscious support of teachers.

In a study of veteran teachers, Grisham, (1997) found a bias in favor of efferent responses over aesthetic responses. Participants in this study, however, are student teachers not yet fully socialized into the profession. Communities that surround our schools may see aesthetic responses as frivolous. This, I believe, is a valid concern. If we accept that aesthetic response is a desirable precursor to efferent response (Daniels, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1994; Samway and Whang, 1996), then educators have a responsibility to effectively communicate this to parents. We should be able to use the research to convince parents and other community members of how critical aesthetic response can be to the student’s motivation and engagement with text so critical to the depth and meaning of efferent response to literature and other texts.
There is no clear evidence for the superiority of either response-type affecting literature discussion. Students were evenly divided in attributing the most meaningful discussions to either dialectical journals or role sheets. Students reported enjoying all the discussions.

Some evidence for the quality of the discussions came from the interview group. Two of four students interviewed indicated that they felt the books and/or the composition of the groups had an effect on discussions. I could find no other data to support this. Lack of evidence for what transpired during discussions is a limitation of the study. Although this one study contains limitations such as data and findings based on three separate groups of teacher education candidates from one institution, this study represents the “tests of truthfulness” of qualitative data as set forth by Franklin & Jordan (1995).

This whole study in literature response experience positively influenced preservice candidates’ attitudes towards teaching children’s literature, particularly their attitudes toward aesthetic responses. Written data reflect a high level of confidence among participants about using literature groups in their future classrooms and all four students interviewed reflected positively on the nature of aesthetic response. These limited data are encouraging.

In conclusion, virtually all students tell me through the data collection sheets, their course evaluations, or personally, that they “love” reading the children’s literature, even though it is “extra” reading. They “love” responding in various written modes to the literature, discussing in small groups, and giving presentations to the whole class. For example, “This was my favorite part of our class this semester because it was fun and different from anything else we’ve done. Thanks, it was great!” While many students tell me they “will” use literature response groups if they get jobs in upper grades, they also say they will rely on the basal programs. When I asked one student what place she envisioned literature having in her literacy instruction, she replied with a question. "Did I consider the stories from the basal as part of literature instruction?" In good professorial fashion, I asked her what she thought. “See, I would say yes. And in that case, I’m sure I’ll use the basal quite a bit. And I mean I would definitely like to do a few novels, but I can’t
imagine novels ever replacing the basal in the elementary school classroom for the whole year." I believe that intelligent students such as this one need the experience of aesthetic response to literature in their preservice classes to balance the pressure they may receive in their student teaching placements to use the basal program.

These data strengthen my belief that literary discussion should always make room for aesthetic response despite the pressure we all feel for accountability. It is true that students need to be able to analyze a literary work, but the *enjoyment* or “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995) of interacting with a literary work is also critical to the development of readers. It is the deep engagement of the student with the text that makes the literary analysis more than an exercise to demonstrate a skill. Indeed, the intellectual and emotional gifts we must develop for a true quality of life outside of our profession demands that we do more to acknowledge this critical part of reading pedagogy.
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Appendix A

List of Children's Literature


Appendix B

Data Collection Form

Name (optional) ____________________________ Class, Semester

Please list the three books you read and how you responded in writing to #3.

1. ____________________________ (Dialectical Journal)

2. ____________________________ (Role Sheet) Your Role: _______

3. ____________________________ Response: ____________________________

Use the rest of this paper and the back if you'd like to respond to the following issues:

1. What was your favorite book?

2. What was your favorite written response type?

3. Which was your best discussion?

4. What effect did the response type have on the discussion?

5. What is your confidence level about using LRGs in your own class?

6. How did you feel about each of the response types?

7. What else should I know?

Mark: _____ Male     _____ Female
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

1. If you remember back to our class you know that there are different kinds of responses to literature. One kind is aesthetic response and the other is called efferent response. If you remember them, could you put into your own words what they mean to you.

2. In your responses to the literature we read in class, what kind of written responses did you make? Would you characterize them as aesthetic or efferent?

3. In the literature discussions, do you recall what kinds of talk happened about the literature?

Prompt: Would you characterize them as mostly aesthetic or mostly efferent?

4. In the book discussions, how much of them had to do with professional issues, such as how you might teach the book, or if you would teach the book?

5. What part do you think literature is going to have in your teaching of reading language arts? When you get your class next fall?

Prompt: What types of literature do you envision using in your classroom?

Prompt: What about the basal? What part do you see the basal playing?

6. What effect, if any, has participating in LRG's had on your attitude about teaching literature to children?

7. My last question is, we learned so much about aesthetic response during the literature discussions, how do you see the value or the importance of literature response as far as children are concerned?
Appendix D

Coding for Aesthetic/Efferent Dialectical Journal Entries

**Aesthetic:** (focuses on personal connections to text or character; links to emotions/values or life experiences)

Example from *Walk Two Moons*:

My father looked uncomfortable. “No,” he said. “I tried—but she doesn’t want to know.”

When my parents split up, I remember overhearing my father’s conversation with his new friend. He thought we didn’t but we did want to get to know her. Thank the Lord my parents reconciled.

**Mixed:** (focuses partly on connections to self, but may use a more detached voice, or may focus on literary elements, such as character, or professional concerns, in a more personal way)

Example from *Catherine, Called Birdy*:

“You want me to pay you to take that girl?” (p. 69)

All through the novel, the father (the beast) constantly haggles for the best deal in trade for his daughter. This is another example of a suitor she thwarted.

**Efferent:** (focuses on literary elements, or professional elements--how to teach--of the book)

Example from *Maniac Magee*:

There he was, passing Red Hill, a book in his hand. (p. 21)

Here again early in the book the author demonstrates how Jeffrey is always running, apparently for the sheer joy of it, yet continuing to show respect for the book and the person to whom it belongs.