Dear Author, Your Book Is Important To Me

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Research with letters written to authors for a contest showed that students often responded to literature in different ways according to the subgenre. Contemporary realistic fiction elicited many personalized responses while historical fiction elicited more responses that informed students' lives. Students noted that high fantasy and science fiction affected their writing skills, while mystery and other series fiction supported reading growth. The research indicates that writing letters to authors is a viable response activity for students.
THE LITERATURE CHILDREN read is an invitation to articulate their knowledge of themselves, their emotions and the actions that shape their future (Probst, 1998). Although many studies report the importance of choice and interest for children’s reading (Gambrell, 1996; Wright, 1998), few studies report children’s responses indicating their interactions and insights with text choices. Teachers who use trade books in their reading programs seek evidence that students are growing as literate people through their reading, and they need ways to provide rewarding response options for their students. Probst (1998) stressed the value of writing letters to authors as a valid reader response, noting, “It (a letter) typically explores something of significance to the writer, perhaps to the reader too, and so it matters. It encourages the student to visualize a particular reader, sharpening his sense of voice…” (p. 137). Our research centered on letters written to authors by fourth through sixth graders involved in writing for a national contest. The authors to whom students wrote could be anyone – living or dead, so the sense of audience varied from writing to a living author in anticipation of a return letter. Responses proved to hold interesting and enlightening information about students’ connections and relationships with particular texts (Rosenblatt, 1978).

As we reflected on the numerous responses of children in letters written to authors, we considered how those transactions might look in light of the circumstances and purposes within the parameters of the contest invitation. Although data provided many and varied examples of children sharing personal responses to books they had read, we did find some commonalities among those responses. We found particularly insightful responses in connection with the subgenres of realistic fictional works (historical and contemporary) and subgenres of fantasy (high fantasy and science fiction) (Goforth, 1998).

Transactional reader-response theories that highlight the role of readers and their stance toward texts guided our research. Grounded in work by Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) and others who have researched student literary responses (Beach & Hynds, 1991; Tompkins, 1980), the responses of children to books they have read and why they have read them can provide insight about the genre they choose to read. Recent research in the field of reader response has often used case studies or
data collected from one classroom (Becker, 1999; Moss, 1998; Newton, Stegemeier & Padak, 1999; Sipes, 1998). The insights from individual responses indicate each reader's unique perspectives. Although the richness of multiple responses from one reader was not available, through means of one type of written response from many different students we found it possible to fit general themes of responses from across many students' letters into genre and author categories.

The unifying concept of transactional reader-response as developed by Rosenblatt is that meaning and purpose for reading ultimately lie with each reader (Karolides, 1999; Rogers, 1999). Mizokawa & Hansen-Krening (2000) urge educators to consider the ABCs of attitudes of students toward reading. They refer to psychologists' use of affect, behavior, and cognition to understand people. Likewise, researchers can consider these ABCs of readers' responses to literature. Our look at responses started with a student's behavior of writing a letter to an author. Responses themselves included affect (why they liked the book) and cognition (what they gained or learned from the book).

The Letters and Authors

In a national contest, students were encouraged to write to an author (living or dead) and explain how the piece of literature impacted them. These directions provided context for students' written responses and guided them more toward aesthetic than efferent responses as described by Rosenblatt (1978). Contest directions encouraged readers to bring their own personal lives and environments into their letters. They wrote, however, for a contest with the possibility of winning (even if students were aware that their chances were slim). Children in fourth through sixth grade from all parts of the United States penned these letters. They typed some letters, but also handwrote some (making many difficult to read). The children wrote letters as long as two to three pages, though most wrote about one page in length. In our analysis, we included all letters in the database, regardless of length or other factors.

Although the contest was open to all public, private, and home-schooled children, a teacher usually submitted entries. Contest rules provided a general guideline for the focus of the letters; however, we
could not conclude teachers’ exact presentation and requirements of the children writing the letters. Some letters appeared to follow a standard format while others appeared to be self-generated responses. Not knowing the instructional procedures for writing the letters may be considered a limitation of the study. We eliminated letters that came in groups from one teacher since it seemed likely that the teacher had assigned the writing experience after the class had read a certain novel. Our goal to consider students’ personal responses seemed better served when group submissions included several authors and books. The diversity of responses from so many children across the nation is an advantage in the study. Other than first name, grade level, and geographic location, contest participants were unknown to researchers. The children wrote mostly to authors of fiction, with 64 percent realistic fiction categories and about 25 percent for fantasy categories. We questioned how students might respond similarly or differently to different types of fictional works.

After first dividing titles into categories of genre, subgenre, category (in contemporary realistic fiction), and author, then numbering each letter, we used spreadsheet software to randomly select 15 letters from those written to the authors who received the greatest number of letters in each category. The subgenre labeled contemporary realistic fiction received the most letters, and we analyzed letters addressed to authors Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, and Gary Paulsen. In the historical fiction subgenre, we analyzed letters to Lois Lowry, Scott O’Dell, Mildred Taylor, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. A realistic fiction category of mystery (Goforth, 1998) received a significant number of letters, so we also analyzed letters to Frank Dixon, Mary Downing Hahn, Carolyn Keene, and Joan Lowery Nixon. We saw Roald Dahl, C. S. Lewis, Brian Jacques, and J. K. Rowling as authors with the greatest number of letters for high fantasy, and K. A. Applegate, Michael Crichton, and R. L. Stine as the primary science fiction authors.

**Children Share Responses to Books with Authors**

We read and categorized those responses that related to the text and author. We first categorized responses into the types of literary responses developed by Sipes (1998) in his research with first and second graders.
Sipes found that students’ responses were generally subsumed into categories of:

- analytical
- intertextual
- personalizing
- transparent
- performative

These categories are demonstrations of affect and cognition. Because we limited responses to letters and not personal knowledge of students, we did not consider the performative response as an option. As we further analyzed the data, other subcategories emerged, particularly in the personalizing category. Three readers coded the letters to control for reliability, and final decisions were made when at least two readers agreed on the category or subcategory. After reading many of the letters, we added the category informing life in order to accommodate children’s many responses that fit there more clearly than in any other category. This category coincides with Manning’s (1995) suggestion that children can find some purpose and direction in their own lives from the experiences of others who live in literature.

Through this qualitative research, we looked at patterns of response that occurred frequently within subgenres to indicate differences of affect and cognition of students about these books. Because of the contest guidelines, we expected that more responses would be in the personalizing category than any other, and approximately half of the units coded fit in that category. These letters contained personal reference to children’s families, pets, school experiences, and more. From hundreds of examples, we have chosen just two to exemplify the personal connections indicated in many of these letters. In a letter to Gary Paulsen about the book Tracker (1984), a boy wrote, “We both shared many problems. He’s losing a grandparent and I lost one it’s hard. We both get sort of lonely. We both keep to ourselves and we don’t talk a lot.” After mentioning her pleasure at Leigh’s chance to see his dog and his dad in Beverly Cleary’s Dear Mr. Henshaw (1983), a female reader projected, “Leigh is probably blaming himself because I blame myself that my parents split up. I know how he feels only to see his
mom.” These examples of aesthetic personalized responses support the contention that writing to authors, even for a contest, provides response opportunities that invite text connections to self—an important reason to read (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). The personalizing category contained many responses, and as patterns emerged, we defined subcategories. Those subcategories included:

- friends
- family
- life issues
- events in life

Of particular interest to literacy teachers were personalized responses about reading and writing as academic subjects in school. Reading was mentioned in contemporary realistic fiction’s subcategory of mysteries. A girl wrote to Carolyn Keene about her books in general, “When I was 8 I didn’t like reading at all, but when I got part of your series of Nancy Drew books I got addicted to them. Now whenever I have a free moment I sit down and read, trying to solve the mysteries for myself.” A letter to Frank Dixon noted, “Your books have improved my reading skills by reading them so much and enjoying them. I want to thank you because reading your books has helped me to improve my reading skills and comprehension.” One can speculate that mysteries in general, as a genre with such strong plots, draw readers forward to learn the answer to the mystery. Nodelman and Reimer (2003) note that series books serve a purpose for developing readers because of their predictability and comfort. Keene’s and Dixon’s books are both mysteries and marketed in series. These students’ letters support Nodelman’s and Reimer’s understanding of series books’ value.

While series mysteries invited reading, science fiction, and high fantasy seemed to invite writing. R. L. Stine has materials and invitations of various types to young writers, so it is no surprise that a girl commented in her letter, “Because of your books I would like to be a writer. Doesn’t that make you [feel] good?” Some students were very specific about an author’s inspiration. Writing to K. A. Applegate, a boy wrote, “Each of your stories has many details in it, and that is what changed my writing . . . . your stories taught me how to elaborate and
make things interesting.” J. K. Rowling also received praise for inspiring writing by making “me learn bigger words” and helping learn to “write a good book by reading one.” Authors C. S. Lewis and Roald Dahl inspired students about learning to use similes, action verbs, and conversation words instead of “said.” We found the insights of these young writers intriguing.

In our research high fantasy, science fiction and historical fiction were the subgenres that seemed to evoke transparent responses. Sipes (1998) defines transparent responses as those where the reader “entered the narrative world of the story” (p. 47). An example from a young male reader writing to Brian Jacques reads, “Most books I have read didn't pull me in as much as yours did. It felt like I was actually in the story fighting the enemy. The book feels like I am being sucked in, and when someone says something to me I snap out of it. After I finished Redwall (1986), it was like I had just awaken from a dream.” Readers who enjoy fantasy can relate to the way this reader lived in another world for a time. This sense of place can evidently happen in class at school for some readers. In a letter to Mildred Taylor about Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry (1976), one female student wrote, “Reading your story was like going into a time machine and witnessing the truth. Sometimes, I wanted to jump in and tell the characters which way to turn or what to do. Then I would realize I was in class reading a story.”

Children wrote responses that informed life more frequently with historical fiction than other subgenres. Sipes (1999) discusses how literature can be life informing, although childrens’ responses can either “reinscribe or challenge their own ideology and worldview” (p. 123). In a letter for Lois Lowry after reading Number the Stars (1989), one student wrote, “This book really made me think about racism and why it happens.” In response to the same book another student wrote, “I learned that you should not judge people by their religion.” When students wrote responses that informed them in their lives, they most frequently mentioned Lowry’s Number the Stars and books by Mildred Taylor. In response to The Well (1995) a male student commented, “The book made me start to think about what I say to people. After I read the book, I made friends that are different then[sic] me. They are small, tall, black, skinny, and big.” At times responses fell in both the category we named
life and the personalizing sub-category of relating to self as is evidenced in this response. Bishop (1997) suggests that literature can act as a "catalyst for engaging students in critical discussions and for eliciting multiple perspectives and multiple voices in pursuit of understanding" (p. viii).

Although Sipes' (1998) analytical category can easily connect to books with illustrations, most responses from fourth through sixth graders' letters connected to novels and thus had few if any illustrations. Consequently, the analytical category refers to readers' construction of meaning by analysis of the text. Traditional elements of setting, characters, plot, theme, and authorial techniques would fall into this category. In our research, most of the analytical responses fell into the contemporary realistic fiction category of mysteries - with the exception of the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling. In a comment any teacher would love, one girl wrote, "Unlike most books, Harry is not Mr. Nice Guy or the opposite. He is like the majority of people - and because of that the magic means all the more." This contrast between flat and round characterization could come out of a textbook.

**How Does This Inform Literacy Teachers?**

Research on letters written to authors, even in the context of a contest, indicates that the exercise itself provides a chance for students to explain their connections and describe their relationship with a particular text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Teachers must find ways of encouraging students to read and respond on their own, rather than rely on some outside authority to decide what the text means and how students should respond (Probst, 1992). As these data indicate, students can find connections with their own worlds and many types of texts. Beach (1998) warns that teachers often fail to connect text worlds with real-world experiences, and these research results indicate that letters to authors are ways for students to share some of those connections.

Teachers can also consider the responses of children in the letters analyzed for this research and connect genre to strategy instruction. Although readers will always respond to texts in their own ways, this research is support for including various genres during instruction.
Teachers might look to science fiction and high fantasy for models for developing writers. As letter writers mentioned, they learned about similes, details, and elaboration. Although letter writers with analytic responses did not specifically comment about texts informing them as writers, their comments on character development, plot, and settings are cogent. Writers of science fiction and fantasy need to build worlds that are unfamiliar to their readers; consequently, the models they present may help writers see the craft very clearly in these subgenres.

Realistic historical fiction is written to give readers a glimpse into a past situation. By its very nature, the subgenre gives readers the chance to gain perspective from people very different from themselves. This reading experience differs from one where characters are like the reader. Advocates of multicultural education can take heart that readers can be informed about life and much more through these books. As Bishop (1997) notes, the connection is not necessarily automatic, but teachers who include well-written historical fiction - especially from authors of diverse backgrounds - may be adding to the perspective-taking skills of their students.

Non-fiction or information books made up a very small percentage of those that children chose to write about in these letters. Writers also rarely responded about intertextual connections. A question for further research would be to consider whether text to text connections (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000) are more common with non-fiction texts. Perhaps the contest parameters discouraged a more efferent response, but the lack of intertextual connections is worth considering.

Clearly, writers to this contest expressed affect about and for the books they had read. They indicated their wonder, enjoyment, appreciation, and connections to characters and stories. By perceiving different perspectives and recognizing how models of authors supported their own growing literacy practices, students shared cognition about more than aesthetic responses to story. They were noticing their own growth. Among the many options they provide students, teachers can be satisfied when students choose to write a letter to an author - even if it’s for a contest.
References


**Children’s Books**


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