Reader Response to Literature

In Early, Middle, and Senior High Classrooms

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate what teachers in a Western Canadian province were doing when engaging their students with literature. Forty two teachers from Kindergarten through to Grade 12 were interviewed, which allowed us to get a broad perspective on the types of reader response activities that are being taught in the classroom through the different grade levels. We were interested in discovering whether the teachers treated literature as communication or as transaction/construction. We also wanted to see if they were creating situations that led to aesthetic readings of texts rather than efferent. In addition, we wanted to discover in which of the five categories/orientations (textual, experiential, psychological, social, or cultural) proposed by Beach (1993) teachers used to engage students in reading and studying literature. Finally, we were interested in the goals, activities, and materials used by the teachers and how those were chosen. This study provided answers to questions about what teachers are doing with reader-response in the classrooms. The results, for the most part, were very similar across grade level which was a surprising discovery considering the age range of the students.

Introduction

Reading has long been viewed as a communication act between author, text, and reader. It is this interaction that influences reading and responding to literature (Galda, 1990). Applebee (1978) explained that the reader's past experience, reading ability, expectations for reading, reading preferences, and concepts about story influence response. Galda (1990) expanded this list to include other factors that she saw as influencing reader response including cognitive developmental level, the variety of textual factors (style and form), the theme of the text, the age of the characters, the genre, and context. Galda explained that students are a part of a community of readers who necessarily respond to literature based on their social and cultural values. Applebee (1978) further noted that how individual teachers approach literature plays a role in determining how their students will respond to texts.

The conversation on how to engage students with literature has evolved from a time when readers were seen as "passive" (Straw & Sadowy, 1990, p. 23) and the text was the driving force for meaning. Readers were skilled if they were able to decipher the author's intent. In the early years of the development of literature instruction, the transmission model of reading was employed that is "moving knowledge from author to reader" (Straw & Sadowy, 1990, p. 22) via the text. Reading meant that "reading the text [is] the same as reading the author" (Straw, 1990, p.53). In other words, the meaning of the text resides with the author through the text, rather than the reader. According to Hirsch, this makes "the reader's intention to discover the author's intention" (as cited in Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 111). This view documents much of the early history of response to literature where the readers were to take in the author's (and teacher's) knowledge in an effort to understand what the text meant.

The next transition of reading response was the interaction theories (Straw & Sadowy, 1990). Reader and text interaction became recognized as a more complete picture of meaning-making. As this ideology developed, the transactional and constructivist models appeared. Straw (1990, p. 68) suggested that in the transactional theory, readers own experiences and prior knowledge play a large role in the reader response to literature. While in the constructivist theory the "integration of reading and writing" and the "socialization of reading" began to play a larger role (Straw & Sadowy, 1990, p.79).

With the influence of scientific thought and objectivity in the early 20th Century, literature ironically became viewed as art again, but the focus was on the text itself to the exclusion of all other sources of meaning. The New Critical Approach to reading was based on the belief that the text could have multiple meanings and that the words on the page were the most important and that meanings from outside the text were irrelevant and distracting (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946). The New Critical approach to reading the text was popular from the early 1920's until the 1960's and it ignored the role of the author to focus on a close reading of the text. A reading act became one of translation, the reader invisible as s/he objectively ignored the affective and instead searched for the correct meaning (Straw, 1990). This close attention to the text involved a study of structure, syntax, organization, literal and figurative meaning, as well as literary devices which served to reify the text. Teachers, of this school of literacy response, sought to build critical readers who possessed the necessary skills to get at a text's determinate meaning – to become, in effect, mini-literary critics.

Neither the transmission model nor the New Critics/Translation model allow the reader him/herself to have any subjectivity influence over how to read and interpret a text because the meaning is already known either through knowledge of the author or through knowledge of the

text. Beach conducted a survey on reader response in 1993 and noted, "Despite the dramatic

shifts in interest in literary theory in the past thirty years, secondary and postsecondary literature

teachers in general continue to employ methods reflecting New Critical orientations (p.2).

  The translation model, however, has given way to newer interaction theories, where the

meaning is said to reside in the activity of reading, along with the other factors that can influence

the reading such as the background of the reader, the cultural values of the reader, and the social

influences that impact how the reader responds to the text.   A growing body of theory and

research suggests that knowledge is both socially and contextually constructed. Vygotsky's

(1978) social interactionist theory of language development, Fish's (1980) community of

learners, Rosenblatt's (1978) Reader-Response theory, Bogdan and Straw's (1990) suggestion

that reading is a socially constructive act, Vipond and Hunt's (1984) view of reading as an active

negotiation between reader and text, and Bahktin's dialogic interillumination, "a process through

which different points of view inform and illuminate each other in a person's consciousness"

(Edmiston, 1994; Willhelm & Edmiston, 1998, p. 129), all support the notion that reading is a

transaction between reader and text.

  Research in reading and response to literature proposes that teachers use a transactional

model of reading where meaning and interpretation emerge from a conversation between the

reader and the text. According to Rosenblatt (1994) this dialogue is an "experience shaped by

the reader under the guidance of the text" (p. 12). This ongoing, non-linear process relies on a

reader's past experiences to work in concert with current expectations of text to create an

interpretation of what is being read. Straw (1990) argues that notions of response to literature

should move from "text-based meaning – meaning getting – to a conceptualization of reading as

meaning-making" (p. 131). Citing Bleich (1980) and Tompkins (1980), Straw (1990) contends that:

> if reading is really interactional and transactional, then transmission methods – methods
> that assume the transmission of knowledge from author/text (and by proxy, from the
> teacher) to reader, that deny the unique constructions of meaning on the part of students –
> are at odds with the goals of our reading programs, which are to foster mature readings of
> texts. (p. 131)

For the most part, reader-response theories suggest that readers engage in a variety of responses depending upon purpose, text, and situation (Beach, 1993). This opinion is reflected in the research of Vipond and Hunt (1984). Teachers can use responsive strategies such as "engaging, conceiving, connecting, explaining, interpreting, and judging" (Beach, 1993, p. 6). Beach (1993) suggests that there are five primary theoretical perspectives that allow the reader, text, and author to form connections:

> the textual (readers rely on knowledge of text and genre conventions), experiential (the
> way the reader experiences or engages with text effects their response), psychological
> (focuses on the cognitive or subconscious processes of the reader), social (the interaction
> of open-ended responses with the reader and text), and cultural (belief that the cultural
> roles, attitudes, and values of readers effect their response to texts. (p. 8)

The basis of these theories is that reading is non-existent unless readers are able to make sense of the text based upon their transactions with the text. Making meaning is the essential ingredient when reading and responding.

McGee (1992) suggested that teachers and researchers decades ago drew on

psycholinguistic and sociocultural theories to explain and guide instructional practices. Now, the

emphasis is on theories of literary criticism usually referred to as reader response theory. This

has led to a focus on aesthetic and efferent teaching, literary experiences, literature logs, reader

response prompts, novel studies, literature units, and cooperative learning groups such as

literature circles. The emphasis is on children's response to and interpretation of literature. The

concern is on the process of how individual readers construct personal and shared meanings. She

cautions against using these activities as prescriptions for instruction.

Rosenblatt (1988) notes that whether or not we agree on the author's intentions, the

reader must still necessarily interact with the text, suggesting that the reader-text relation is more

important than the author-text dynamic or any interdependence between the two relationships. In

her view, the text does not have meaning but rather guides the active construction of meaning.

One of the main reasons that students have traditionally found English instruction to be

frustrating is that getting at what the author intended to communicate is often considered to be

the question of supreme importance – either that, or the teacher authority insists that he or she is

absolutely certain as to the author's precise intentions, despite any evidence to the contrary. The

author is considered to be a vastly superior creature to the lowly reader, when, in fact, alternative

interpretations for the same information can be derived (Rosenblatt, 1988).

Rosenblatt (1988) uses the term efferent when referring to reading in which ". . . attention

is centred predominantly on what is to be carried away after the reading event . . ." (p. 5) and

aesthetic reading, on the other hand, involves the kind of reading in which the reader ". . . adopts

an attitude of readiness to focus attention on what is being lived through during the reading

event" (p. 5). We ask, therefore, has there been some movement in the last couple of decades towards an acceptance of a multiplicity of meanings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate what teachers in a Western Canadian province were doing when engaging their students with literature. We were interested in discovering whether they treated literature as communication or as transaction/construction. We also wanted to see if teachers were creating situations that led to aesthetic readings of texts rather than efferent. In addition, we wanted to discover in which of the five categories/orientations (textual, experiential, psychological, social, or cultural) proposed by Beach (1993) teachers used to engage students in reading and studying literature. Finally, we were interested in the goals, activities, and materials used by the teachers and how those were chosen.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. How are texts selected to be read in the classroom and how do the purposes that teachers have for selecting specific texts impact their approach to response to literature?

2. What are teachers doing on a day-to-day basis to enhance their students' responses to literature, and why have they selected these particular approaches?

3. Are transactional and constructivist models of reader response to literature in evidence in the classrooms of the teachers interviewed for the study?

Methodology

Participants

The forty-two participants (10 male and 32 female) in this study are all certified teachers from a Western Canadian province. All were volunteer participants and were selected on the

basis of convenience sampling. The over-representation of women was expected, based on the

distribution of the sexes in the teaching profession in the province. To obtain a broad-based

sample, participants were drawn from public schools, private schools, and parochial schools. The

teaching experience among the participants ranged from first-year teachers to teachers with over

20 years of experience. The grade level composition consisted of nine teachers who were

teaching in the early years (Kindergarten to Grade 4), 17 teachers who were teaching in the

middle years (Grades 5-8), and 16 teachers who were teaching in the senior years (Grades 9-12).

In order to provide some context to the findings, data were also collected on the area of the

province in which the teachers were located: 14 participants were teaching in a low socio-

economic area of a large metropolitan city, 17 participants were teaching in suburban areas of the

same city, and 11 participants were teaching in rural areas.

Procedures

This study involved collecting data at two different times. Each time data was collected

the same protocol was followed. Semi-structured interviews (see appendix 1 for outline of

interview protocols) were conducted with classroom teachers in a Western Canadian province.

Upon analyzing the individual interviews, it was our determination that the results were the same

in both phases. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to collapse the findings into a single pool of data

and the data from both phases are reported here as if the studies were a single entity. For this

study, the aims were to discover teachers' perceptions of their goals, activities, and materials that

were used in their classrooms specifically as they pertained to students' response to literature.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed to address the research questions.

Results and Discussion

The results are divided into two sections. The first addresses the *a priori* categories we identified earlier: communication vs. transaction/construction; aesthetic vs. efferent; and, Beach's five categories (textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural). The second section is discussed according to the three research questions and addresses themes that arose from the data employing multiple readings of the transcripts by the two researchers with agreement on themes identified.

Before the discussion of the results of the study, it is worth acknowledging the fact that before the 1990`s, literature based instruction was none existent in early and middle years classrooms (McGee, 1992). McGee (1992) pointed out that before the 1990's the texts that were used were very prescriptive. Teachers were told what questions to ask and what activities to carry out with each story read. Increasingly teachers are now teaching using books that are literature based. This shift in teaching pedagogy has led to a change in reading instruction that focuses less on text-based knowledge and more on reader-responses to students' own lived experiences.

The province where the study took place has three distinct grade classifications within the school system. We have used those same classifications in our discussions: early years (Kindergarten to Grade 4); middle years (Grades 5-8); and, senior years (Grades 9-12).

Communication vs. Transaction/Construction

A transactional approach to reading implies that the reader's response and the text both contribute to the meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978). In this study reader response looks slightly different at each level. In the early years classrooms (K-Grade 4) the response is oral. Students discuss stories and nonfiction texts under the guidance of their teachers. This is not surprising

considering these young children are just learning how to read and write. In the middle years classrooms (Grades 5-8) response to literature is a combination of oral and written responses. The teachers facilitate both types of response through questions that are, for the most part, generated by them according to themes or topics. The questions tend to be based on having students form a connection between what they are reading and what is happening in their own lives. In the senior years classrooms (Grades 9-12) response to literature turns more to written responses. There is still classroom discussion but the discussion comes after students have had a chance to write out their responses. The teachers still facilitate most discussions by choosing the themes of the books and providing prompts for students' oral and written discussions. In the senior years classrooms there appears to be a trend for teachers to provide texts that deal with social issues and how those issues impact their students' lives. Students are required to provide written pieces that detail their self-reflections based on the theme of the book read.

It was discovered that only one out of the 42 teachers in this study used a transactional approach in her classroom when teaching literature. The teacher taught at the middle year's level. This teacher let students choose their own books and helped them extend meaning by allowing them to connect their personal experiences to the story. The teacher appeared to trust that her students could make a personal connection to the text which is in keeping with Rosenblatt's (1978) definition of transactional theory. It is worth noting that none of the senior year's teachers employed a transactional approach in their classrooms considering Applebee (1978) found that as students matured they were more able to make the personal connection to the text that a transactional approach requires.

Applebee (1978) studied the reading responses of 6-, 9-, 13-, and 17- year old children through interviews and questionnaires. One of his findings was that evaluations of literature

change as a function of age. Applebee divided evaluation as a four-stage process. The first stage

is an undifferentiated response in which response and object are not separated. The second stage

involves what he called *categoric* evaluation in which the responses are linked to categories with

clear attributes. He found that the first two stages of response are literal and are directly tied to a

child's personal experience. The third stage he called analytic evaluation which he identified as

readers having a preoccupation with how a literary text works. His final stage was referred to as

generalization which he defined as students being concerned with understanding the world

through the texts.

While Applebee (1978) indicated that students mature in their stages of response, Galda

(1990) reported that early years students' responses to literature can reach the higher levels of

abstract and critical thinking that are usually associated with the responses of middle years and

senior years students through the teacher modeling a variety of kinds of responses. Wiseman,

Many, and Altieri (as cited in Galda, 1990) in their study of early years students response to

literature gathered data under three conditions: (1) when the books were shared in a literary

experience presentation; (2) when the books were shared in a literary analysis presentation; or (3)

when there was no discussion during presentation. The conclusion, in their study, indicated that

"student-centred discussions where students own comments, questions, and concerns directed the

discussion about literature did not produce as high quality responses as discussions led by

teachers who prompted discussion of the lived-through experience of reading" (p. 532).

Similarly, Paris and Jacobs (1984) discovered that an unskilled (or novice) reader has

many differences to a skilled (or experienced) reader:

> Skilled readers often engage in deliberate activities that require planful thinking, flexible
>
> strategies, and periodic self-monitoring. They think about the topic, look forward and

backward in the passage, and check their own understanding as they read. Beginning

readers or poor readers do not recruit and use these skills. Indeed, novice readers often

seem oblivious to these strategies and the need to use them. (p. 2083)

Paris and Jacobs further stated that unskilled readers tend to focus on reading as a decoding

process rather than a meaning-making activity. Skilled readers use their general world

knowledge to comprehend text literally as well as draw valid inferences from texts.

The findings of Applebee (1978) and Paris and Jacobs (1984) concerning reader-response

as a function of age were corroborated in this study. The students who were in the early years

classrooms responded to books through activities such as re-telling or summarizing the story,

while middle years students began to make personal connections to the text scaffolded by their

teachers, and in the senior years, teachers expressed that one of their goals was to make their

students independent critical readers.

Efferent vs. Aesthetic Activities

In the personal interviews it was apparent that all teachers at all grade levels shared

similar views regarding both efferent and aesthetic reading activities. According to Rosenblatt

(1988) the question that needs to be answered is why the reader is reading and what the reader

aims to get out of the reading. In an efferent reading the reader's attention is primarily focused

on the information to be acquired. In an aesthetic reading readers are engaged with the text itself

and how they relate to that text. Rosenblatt argued that readers have to adopt a stance, or

purpose for reading and it is the stance that determines how the text will be read. She sees the

reading-event as falling "somewhere on a continuum which is determined by whether the reader

adopts . . . the predominantly aesthetic stance or the predominantly efferent stance" (p. 5). The

difference in stance determines where the reader places his/her attention when interacting with a

text. In this study, the books used in the classrooms, across all grade levels, were chosen almost exclusively (41 out of 42) by the teachers and the teachers determined the themes that would be explored, therefore, it may be concluded that the teachers set the purpose for reading.

Efferent teaching, in this study across all grade levels, included activities that (a) focused on individual meaning of words through vocabulary study; (b) discussed structures of language such as text features; (c) focused on information to be learned from the text (knowledge-based questions or prompts by the teacher); (d) required students to recall or summarize the story; (e) asked students to identify characters, traits, theme, climax, point of view, and setting; (f) critiqued the text for pre-determined themes; and, (g) used the text to create something else (e.g., presentations, art). McGee (1992) characterizes these activities as dealing "more with the features of the text, [readers] approached meaning as if it were located in the text, and [readers] focused attention on information to be carried away from the reading" (p. 533).

In contrast, aesthetic reading is when "the primary concern is what happens during the actual reading event" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 24). Rosenblatt (1978) further clarifies this by pointing out that "in aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p. 25). Employing Cox and Many's (1992) definition of what activities constitute an aesthetic reading, it was determined that, in this study, aesthetic teaching across all grade levels included activities that (a) allowed children some choice in books and personal responses to those books; (b) encouraged children to draw connections to the text based on their personal experiences; (c) called for extending the reading of the text (e.g., presentations, discussions, literature circles, graphic organizers); (d) allowed children to imagine themselves in a character's place or in story events; and, (e) helped children visualize the text (e.g., role playing, improvisation, reader's theatre).

In this study, based on the above definitions, it was discovered that all 42 teachers had their students employ both efferent and aesthetic readings of texts in their classrooms. This was accomplished either through the use of both nonfiction and fiction texts in the early and middle years classrooms, or by using literature to teach topics across the curriculum. In the senior years classrooms (Grades 9-12) it was not surprising that the teachers focused primarily on teaching their students to read texts aesthetically although some of the activities they used could be classified as efferent (e.g., vocabulary building, teaching to themes, using teacher-initiated questions, writing summaries).

One of the early years teachers, Caitlin, described her approach to literature this way, which is representative of the comments made by other early year's teachers:

> The literature that I bring into the classroom is also the core knowledge in many of the subject areas so that helps them in understanding that [comprehending the text]. And to bring in literature that helps them with how print is organized, distinguishing a letter from a word, a word from a sentence, all of the early literacy skills that they'll need as they move along in the classes.

A characteristic example from a middle year's classroom teacher, Janet, is "literature exists in all of the subject areas in the classroom. It is absolutely embedded in everything we do, so we don't pull it apart, we don't say, 'oh we're doing literature today'". A typical response from a senior year's classroom teacher, Laura, is:

> [We read] WW2 books because they [the students] are interested in the Holocaust. We read and look at school bullying and school shootings, we read *Give a Boy a Gun . . .* we talk about issues that are going on in our world.

There was no evidence to suggest that teachers, in this study, were consciously choosing to have students read efferently or aesthetically. The teachers, across grade levels, relied on teaching books based on themes and topics, and teacher-led discussions, prompts, and questions which necessarily led to a more efferent reading of the books used in the classrooms. It was not that teachers didn't also provide some opportunities for an aesthetic reading of texts but even during those times the teacher was still directing the types of responses that they wanted from the students.

Beach's Five Categories

The data concerning different theoretical perspectives on reading response was also investigated concerning the different aspects of the text-author-reader relationship. The types of reader-response that teachers, in this study, discussed fell into the social and cultural categories as defined by Beach (2000). Social theorists focus on the influence of the social context between the reader and text interactions while cultural theorists focus on how the readers' roles, attitudes, and values, as well as the larger cultural, historical context shape response. Beach (2000), in his discussion of the contribution of Rosenblatt to reader response found that "it focused on readers' construction of meaning within a social context" (p. 238). Rosenblatt (1988) proposed that readers are in charge of creating the story when they read books. She said that a text is merely words on a page until the reader shapes the meaning by interacting with the text. Mellor and Patterson (as cited in Galda & Beach, 2001) in their discussion of what shapes individual reader response found that:

Readers have expectations for how people ought to behave, expectations that are shaped by the cultures in which they live and work. These expectations hold true for characters'

behaviours, as well, as many readers treat characters as people regardless of the fact that

they exist only in the literary transaction. (p. 65)

Galda (1982) discovered that readers often reject the actions of characters when those

actions are not consistent with their own experiences. Galda and Beach (2001) found that

"literary response researchers in the 1990's have focused increasingly on response not simply as

a transaction between texts and readers but as a construction of text meaning and readers' stances

and identities within larger sociocultural contexts" (p. 66). Literature instruction that is present

in many classrooms tends to focus on requiring students to draw inferences about the characters'

acts, beliefs, and goals (Beach, 2000). These are in response to questions posed by their teachers

such as 'what is the character doing'; 'why did they do x'; or 'what is the character's purpose'.

Students make these inferences based on their social and cultural beliefs (Beach, 2000). Galda

and Beach (2001) hypothesized that

students learn to respond to literature as they acquire various social practices, identities,

and tools not only through participation in interpretive communities of practice, but also

through experience in acquiring social practices and tools in constructing identities within

specific cultural worlds. (p. 66)

Similarly, Lewis (2000) argues that "the interpretation itself is a social act and that

understanding the transaction between reader and text involves examining the many social

conditions that shape the stances readers take up as they interpret and respond to literature" (p.

258). Lewis questioned how students can change their perceptions of self and others within the

context of examining inequalities in multi-cultural texts without taking into account the

sociocultural and political identities of the time. By asking students to relate books to their own

personal experiences teachers are asking them to search for a universal commonality which tends

to minimize the political message of texts and could threaten their own values and identities (Lewis, 2000). Lewis (2000) characterized readers as being insiders or outsiders to the text. Insiders are readers who have personal knowledge of the experiences of the characters which allows for an aesthetic reading of the text which includes identification with character and plot. For readers who are outsiders to the experiences, the reading is not about personal identification, but about understanding how the text works to deepen the understanding of the characters lives as separate from the reader's own.

In the same way, Galda (as cited in Sipe,1999) observed that there are two types of reading response that characterize reading; for children with a similar culture books can act as a mirror, allowing them to see themselves in the story. For children who are from a different culture, a book can act as a window, allowing them a vicarious experience of what another culture is like. Sipe (1999) continued this point by stating that "children with various cultural backgrounds bring a great diversity of experience to their classrooms, [however] the culture of the classroom can actively support or clash with the children's family and neighbourhood culture" (p. 126). Sipe (1999) went so far as to say that current literary response seems to ignore what the author intended to convey with the text in favour of letting readers come to their own meaning of the text based on their own literary experiences and their social interactions with each other. This can have the effect of limiting response to the popular culture that students experience through television, news media, and movies. Beach (1995) found that "cultural models also consist of categories for judging or labelling others according to one's cultural attitudes. People also use these categories to determine how to react to others" (p. 87). When readers label people they know how to react to them because they can be socially verified and constructed through sharing responses to others who think similarly. However, Beach also found

that "like fish in water, students are generally not aware of their own cultural models" (p. 92).

This is especially true for students who have no exposure to alternative cultural perspectives.

In order to take reader responses from the superficial to the critical, Long and Gove

(2003) state that teachers have to help scaffold students' responses. In their study of how fourth

grade students interacted in literature circles, they found that students were not skilled enough to

have internal dialogues with the text without some guidance from the teacher. Initially students

did not go beyond simple text-based re-telling of the story. Long and Gove theorized that:

> When teachers engage with their students in well-chosen literature, we believe that they
>
> should interpret from more than one perspective and point of view; be purposeful and
>
> reflective; and create an environment that promotes curiosity and questioning (inquiry) and
>
> pushes reading, writing, thinking, feeling, talking, and taking action beyond the obvious.
>
> (p. 350)

Long and Gove concluded that when the teachers began by reading the texts aloud and inviting

students to make connections with, reflect upon, and question the text, the students' responses to

the text became more critical and they engaged more effectively with one another.

In this study, the majority of the teachers at each level (K-Grade 4, 7/9; Grades 5-8,

10/17; Grades 9-12, 13/16) made comments that indicated their expectations that students would

form both a social and cultural response to the texts they were reading in class. In an early years

classroom, one of the kindergarten teachers, Lori, said when asked what she does with literature

in her classroom, "so talking about experiences they bring to that story, talk about things that are

happening in the story, talking about new vocabulary". A grade four teacher, Emily phrased it

this way when discussing how she has her students respond to literature, "[I am getting them to]

make a connection to the war, so it connects to Remembrance Day. And so they have to make a

personal connection to something they have read" and, "connecting to themselves and to the world around them, such as has this ever happened to you or does this remind you of anything". One of the grade three teachers, Caitlin, summed it up this way,

> we focus on making connections, self to text, text to text, and a world to text connection . . . however, making world to text connections is very difficult just because they are really just beginning to understand the global society, and the thought that there is life beyond [their home town].

A teacher in grade four, Melissa, said that she talks about the author and the period when the novel was written such as when teaching *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*,

> we'll talk a little bit about what was going on at that time and what it was like to be part of the war and what it's like in Japan and how that was all affecting to give the kids a good idea of that before they go in because it's obviously not part of their culture.

A middle year's teacher, Bonnie's, comments were similar:

> I want them to make a personal connection somehow . . . I ask them what reminds you of this or what are you reminded of or even have you ever had this experience and then take it a little further and inferring the information and that they learn even a newer piece of information and build on what they already know.

In talking about her goals, a grade five to nine teacher, Pam, said, "I want to encourage appreciation of the works in relationship to their culture and the relevance in the current society". Likewise, a grade eight teacher, Debbie, said, "I want the students to be able to put themselves in the character's shoes". In the case of a grade seven teacher, Darlene, she had as one of her goals "I pick novels that have a social concern, a social issue, so it teaches a broader perspective . . . I want them to have a broader perspective about the world".

A senior year's teacher, Jennifer, expressed her goals this way:

To make literature and what we read relevant to them . . . I try to make connections, choose

literature that can connect to them, help them learn about themselves, create more empathy

within them, or understanding about other cultures, kind of social awareness.

Similarly, another teacher, Abby, said her goal was, "to keep them engaged and have them understand that what they're reading relates to their own life". A grade nine teacher, Bob, articulated his goal was "to have students connect the literature to their own lives in order to learn some of the more moral and ethical ideas that are presented and put them into context". These comments are representative of the senior year's teachers who want their students to make a connection to the texts based on prior knowledge or something that is happening in their lives.

In this study, the majority of teachers across all grade levels wanted their students to be able to make personal connections between their own lives and the lives of the characters in the books they were reading. This practice started at the early years level when teachers asked their students to remember a time when something similar might have happened to them. Middle year's teachers, through non-fiction books, extended their students understanding of the text by asking them pointed questions about what it is they learned from reading the book. The senior year's teachers were interested in discussing current social issues and how those issues might have impacted their students.

The next part of the discussion centres on the three research questions that were identified earlier.

Research Questions

The first question was: *How are texts selected to be read in the classroom and how do the purposes that teachers have for selecting specific texts impact their approach to response to*

literature? In this study we discovered that texts, used in classrooms, are almost exclusively

selected by the teachers (41 out of 42) for a variety of reasons. Some teachers are limited by the

books that are available in their schools; this was a dominant theme with the teachers who were

teaching in senior years classrooms (12 of 16). Teachers who were in the early and middle years

schools had more options available with the texts they chose.

Choosing Books Based on a Theme

When teachers, in this study, chose books to use in the classroom, they used two basic

approaches: (1) novel study where teachers read aloud or children read and responded to one

book; and, (2) literature units where children were allowed to choose books from a selection

provided by the teacher. In both instances teachers provided the books that were read daily,

either aloud or silently, or students participated in activities such as reader's theatre. The

children had multiple opportunities to explore literature by answering questions, speculating on

outcomes, evaluating characters, and making connections to personal experiences. However,

when asked how they chose books for their classroom, 41 of 42 teachers admitted that they made

the choice based on a theme that they wanted to teach (early years – 9 of 9; middle years – 16 of

17; and senior years – 16 of 16). This is consistent with the research which states that "much of

literature instruction is currently organized around predetermined topics or themes, which

students then use to frame their responses to literature" (Galda & Beach, 2001, p. 70). Only one

middle year's classroom teacher let her students choose their own novels based on personal

interest. This teacher made the choice to allow her students to choose their own books because

of extenuating circumstances. Her Grade 7/8 classroom had a wide variety of reading levels and

a high rate of student mobility (68%) that made implementing a whole class novel study

unrealistic and difficult.

Some comments from the early years teachers are as follows "we also do authors of the month . . . sometimes there is a specific theme or story associated with some of those activities" (Lori); "I have topic books, or whatever units we happen to be discussing at the time . . . I try to bring in as many books around that topic . . . " (Katie); and "books are chosen around topics, we read [like] Owls in the Family . . . and there's a couple of other books that are just different ones that have owls in them" (Melissa).

For middle years teachers, the literature selected: "is based on theme, mainly . . . it's all thematic based . . . I try to make it a theme or bunched thing . . . I'm trying to keep it all theme-based . . . it's like we're doing this theme" (Ross); "well when I pick the novel, I want it again to be something that's a social concern, a social issue, so it teaches a broader perspective" (Darlene);

> the theme typically comes first, and then the literature is used to enhance the theme . . . I do
>
> literature circles for my novel study, that's usually theme-based . . . so the theme is chosen
>
> before the books are selected, so the theme is driving the selection . . . the literature is an
>
> enhancement of the themes. (Patricia);

"our school has a theme. Every month is different, different virtues . . . I select books that I think will teach them a lesson, they will learn something from it" (Terry).

In senior years, teachers said: "we work around themes . . . but the themes are class novels . . . [I choose books] that have themes . . . the more abstract the theme, the better I feel they are at finding where their novel examines the theme . . . " (Colin); "the harder the novel . . . the more I try to connect themes" (Craig); "and every story deals with a different theme or idea" (Judy); "the way we select the literature is based on the theme, so then the activities will also be

related to that theme" (Alan); "the books that I picked are related to issues that are happening in

the world today . . . the books are issue-based" (Laura).

The majority of the teachers admitted that they first came up with a topic, or a theme, and

then chose the books based on that theme. The themes vary by grade level, but they are still

theme-based. In early years, teachers chose the themes based on what they are studying in the

classroom. It is more topic-based. In contrast, teachers in the middle years, and senior years,

tend to chose books that have as their over-riding theme a social issue that they want their

students to be aware of. The books chosen often relate to broader issues happening in the world

outside the classroom.

Enhance Student Responses to Literature

The second question was: *what are teachers doing on a day-to-day basis to enhance their*

students' responses to literature, and why have they selected these particular approaches? The

activities selected are similar between grade levels. The top five activities selected by early

years teachers include: getting students to make predictions before and during reading (7/9), read

alouds by the teacher or by students (6/9), vocabulary study (5/9), activating prior knowledge

before reading (5/9), and, whole class and small group discussions (5/9). The top five activities

selected by middle years teachers include: vocabulary study (14/17), getting students to make

predictions before and during reading (14/17), novel studies (13/17), use of questions to guide

reading comprehension (12/17), and, reader reflection and response journal writing (11/17). The

top five activities selected by senior year's teachers include: whole class and small group

discussions (14/16), reader reflection and reader response journals (12/16), novel studies (12/16),

vocabulary study (10/16), and activating prior knowledge before reading (10/16).

Other activities that were mentioned by all teachers regardless of grade level include: having students read independently based on free-choice books (early years 4/9; middle years 8/17; senior years 5/16); guided reading (early years 3/9; middle years 4/17; senior years 2/16); teacher modelling (reading strategies for comprehension, questioning techniques, how to write summaries, early years 3/9; middle years 10/17; senior years 3/16); the use of literature circles (early years 2/9; middle years 9/17; senior years 3/16); and reader's theatre (early years 2/9; middle years 5/17; senior years 6/16). Read alouds were also a popular activity among all grade levels (early years 6/9; middle years 9/17; senior years 8/16).

Results from Qualitative Interviews

In analyzing the teacher interviews, four themes emerged as the most dominant across all grade levels. Of the four themes, three of the themes have to do with teacher behaviour: importance of fostering an enjoyment of literature; importance of building background knowledge; and importance of teacher engagement. Only one of the major themes deals with student behaviour: importance of talk in the classroom. When reading through the discussion, it is significant to note that while the terms used by the teachers were the same, the activities associated with those terms changed depending on the grade level.

Importance of Fostering an Enjoyment of Literature

In analyzing the data concerning stated goals, 21 of the 42 teachers, across all grade levels, stated that one of their goals was to get their students to enjoy literature. This can be further broken down by grade levels: 6 out of 9 early years teachers (Grades K – 4) said that getting their students to enjoy literature was their main goal; 9 of 17 middle years teachers (Grades 5-8) want their students to develop a love of reading; and, 6 of 16 high school teachers (Grades 9-12) reiterate the view that fostering an enjoyment of literature is important for them in

terms of their overall goal. Other teacher goals included: promoting life-long literacy, developing comprehension skills, getting students to become critical thinkers, having students connect the literature to their own lives, and connecting reading and writing.

Helping students become engaged in literature for enjoyment at the early years level is shown by the following quotes: "I guess my overall goal is to develop a love of literature with my kids . . . I try to expose them to lots of different forms of literature and make connections with what they are doing" (Emily); "I want to instill that love of reading" (Caitlin); "I want to teach the kids how to read. I want them to read fluently, to understand what they read, and to get them to enjoy reading" (Jackie); and, "sometimes, honestly literature is just for the fun of it, and I think it's good for kids to see that not every piece of literature is there for a learning activity because then it becomes not fun anymore . . . to make it [reading] an important part of their lives . . ." (Melissa).

In the same way, teachers in the middle years, admitted that one of their major goals was to get students to enjoy reading: "my biggest goal . . . my number one goal would be to have students enjoying literature (Ross); "I want them to find a novel that they really enjoy . . . to develop the lifelong reader, that's my goal . . . [and] on a personal level for them to be future readers" (Darlene); "number one [goal] would be to develop a love of literature for the kids . . . that they want to enjoy reading for reading sake" (Patricia); "[develop] a love for reading . . . when students are reading, engaged, and enjoying it . . . such goals are to become a better reader. That comes hand in hand with the love for reading" (Terry).

Of the three groups, the senior year teachers (grades 9-12) were below 50% (6 of 16) in terms of having as their stated goal developing a love of literature: "my goal is to hopefully get them [students] to enjoy literature . . . I want my students to become more literate in all of the

reading they encounter in the world . . . to become lifelong people that appreciate literature . . . ” (Alan); “I guess you’re hoping they are going to enjoy it [literature]” (Jan); “I want my students to be lifelong readers . . . I want them to enjoy reading . . . I want kids to get excited about learning and reading” (Ryan); and, “I pretty much just want them to read and to like reading . . . reading should be fun, it shouldn’t be a chore” (Laura). The rest of the senior years teachers (9 of 16), stated that one of the goals was to have students relate the literature they were reading to their own life in a meaningful way.

It appears that the goal of reading for enjoyment is much more prevalent with the middle year’s teachers, then the early year’s teachers, and it tapers off at the senior year’s level. Despite teachers at each of the levels stating that their goal is to get students to enjoy literature, there seems to be a slightly different focus at each of the levels. In early year’s classrooms, teachers want students to develop a love of reading; in middle years, teachers want their students to enjoy reading; and, in senior years teachers are looking to encourage lifelong reading habits.

Importance of Talk in the Classroom

When discussing activities in the classroom, 36 out of 42 teachers, across all grade levels, stressed the importance of using talk-related activities in their classroom. In analyzing the difference at each of the grade levels the following was discovered: 7 out of 9 early year’s teachers mentioned incorporating oral language in the classroom; 10 out of 17 middle years teachers use oral language activities; and, 14 out of 16 senior years’ teachers use some form of oral language in their teaching. It is interesting to note that discussions in classrooms are for the most part teacher-directed.

For early years teachers, activities that incorporated oral language included: (1) read alouds “yes, lots of read alouds . . . lots of repetition of familiar books and familiar poems (Lori);

"I read aloud to the class" (Emily); "You will see me doing lots of read alouds" (Caitlin); (2) In addition, teachers stress discussions to develop oral language: "lots of oral language to tell the story . . . lots of oral language development" (Lori); "[we also do] whole group discussions" (Emily); "I think that is one of the main things I try to do is include everybody in the conversations" (Katie); (3) Using reader's theatre, and getting students to do plays is another activity that is used to develop oral language: "[we do] reader's theatre" (Lori); "later in the year we'll do reader's theatre . . . at the end of the year we do plays" (Jackie); and, "they'll get a chance to do plays" (Melissa).

In the middle years, talk is used for discussion purposes: "I'll have a lot of students taking literature that they've read and then discuss it . . . you would see students talking about their literature . . . I love novel studies for the conversation piece" (Ross). "We would partner read a couple of chapters together . . . they would meet and talk to their partner about what happened . . . we'll respond orally where we will talk about, discuss in class . . . " (Janet); [if someone came to my class] they would hear my students engaging in discussions about literature, talking about things they didn't understand or what they liked . . . we [also] do small group discussions . . . they would hear me reading aloud to the students, explaining concepts, or idea sharing personal stories" (Terry).

The use of drama is also employed in developing students' oral language at the middle years level: "I get students to dramatize scenes [from a book]" (Darlene); "you'll see them presenting . . . presenting to class possibly dressed up as one of the characters in their story (Patricia); "we do puppet plays . . . reader's theatre . . . visual story telling" (Janet); "I have students do skits . . . role-playing . . . [I like to] bring drama into the classroom" (Terry).

In the senior years talk is seen as a way to encourage learning: "I'm just trying to get my students vocal about literature . . . I have them do a lot of well-prepared and organized speeches to give a voice to their writing . . . we use talk as a way of learning" (Colin); "we use in class discussion, group activities, and oral presentations to share our findings . . . we do a lot of debates, both informal and formal, presentations, group discussions" (Craig); "a lot of discussion [is incorporated in the classroom] (Judy); "I think discussion is very valuable. Kids show me what they know by talking . . ." (Jan);

In addition to large and small group discussions, like the middle years teachers, senior high teachers use drama: "there's lots of participation in dramatic activities such as role playing, improvisation, reader's theatre, poetry recitation, oral reports, storytelling, drama, choral reading or speaking . . . " (Craig); "we do character interviews, and we interview the character . . . sometimes we even do talk shows" (Judy); "we do anything from dramatic monologues . . . I kind of incorporate a bit of drama . . . we have done reader's theatre, tableaus, a variety of different dramatic presentations" (Paul); "they [students] do monologues" (Jan); "they [students] might be preparing a skit . . . they might be preparing a conversation with an author or character" (Ryan); "I read aloud . . . we might do reader's theatre" (Laura); and, "we take parts [when studying plays] . . . we also do choral readings" (Colin).

Despite teachers at all grade levels reporting that they use a number of oral language activities in their classrooms, there is a difference in how they use the different types of activities. In early years, oral language takes the form of read alouds both by teachers and by students. Students read aloud repetitious books and poems. Talk is also used to develop students' oral language in the early years. In middle years, oral language is used primarily for discussion purposes, to talk about what they are reading. In addition, the use of oral language

activities manifests itself in drama. In the senior years, oral language is seen as a way to encourage learning through discussion, and dramatization.

Another way that talk is incorporated in classrooms is through direct explicit instruction and teacher modeling.

Direct Explicit Instruction and Modelling

There were nine early year teachers interviewed (two taught Kindergarten, one taught Grade 1, one taught Grade 2, one taught a straight Grade 3, two taught a straight Grade 4, and, two taught a Grade ¾ split). The teachers, at this age level, spend a great deal of their time on direct explicit instruction. This usually takes the form of modelling concepts and skills to their students such as how to discuss books, how to make a personal connection to the books, and, how to comprehend the meaning of the text. As Gail commented:

> I don't think they [students] know what the lit[erature] blocks are for. When you get a group of kids together to discuss books and do activities. They have to mature and be responsible enough to handle it. Another thing we do is buddies with another grade. I have found also it doesn't work very well and there needs to be guidelines for these activities.

Similarly, "I think that what students can do is answer a factual question but the higher level thinking questions are really hard for them and I need to model that for them" (Amy).   The goal of these teachers was one of scaffolding instruction so that they could move their students to a level of independence which varied with the grade and age level of the students. The students at this level are learning how to read so their responses to literature are necessarily limited in scope. Teachers want them to learn to read and to enjoy reading. These goals are accomplished by

having the students form personal connections to what they read, whether it is a fiction or a non-fiction text.

There were 17 middle years teachers interviewed (three in Grade 5, two in Grade 6, two in straight Grade 7, two split Grade 7/8 classes, four in straight Grade 8, one split Grade 8/9, and three split Grades 5-9). Similar to the early years teachers, middle years teachers spend a lot of time on direct explicit instruction. They also used modelling to teach concepts and skills to their students in terms of how to respond to literature, how to discuss books, how to make a personal connection to the books, and, how to comprehend the meaning of the text. For the most part the teachers put their students in levelled books for novel studies and gave the students questions that helped them comprehend the text. Teachers also used literature to teach a subject area, which is to be expected since most middle years classrooms are not differentiated by subject area specialists. Unlike the early year's teachers, the middle year's teachers did not have to spend as much time teaching decoding skills such as letters and their sounds. However, the students still needed to learn new skills such as how to conduct literature circles, how to critically read, and how to formulate questions that were relevant to the text they were reading. Marie said, "It is very guided but how else do you teach analyzing . . . [then you can] gradually release responsibility because if you don't teach it they are not going to be able to do it independently". Marie also said, "I tried to sketch a prediction and it was a write off because they didn't know how to predict, so then I did a mini lesson on how to [predict], so you can't just give these responses to the students, you have to teach them how to respond."

In the senior years (Grades 9-12) there were 16 teachers interviewed (four in straight Grade 9 classes, one in a 9/10 classroom, two in classrooms from Grade 9 to 12, five in Grades 10-12, two in Grades 11-12, and two in straight Grade 12). Similar to the early years and middle

years teachers, senior year's teachers spend time on direct explicit instruction. They also used

modelling to teach concepts and skills to their students in terms of how to respond to literature,

how to discuss books, how to make a personal connection to the books, and, how to comprehend

the meaning of the text. For the most part the teachers used levelled books for novel studies and

gave the students questions that helped them comprehend the text. Six of the teachers also used

literature to teach social issues such as the Holocaust, racism, child trafficking, and stem-cell

research. Teachers at this level try to give their students more independence in terms of the

activities they can do with each novel, however, the teacher still guides them in terms of theme

and questions related to the text. Within these limitations students are required to make a

personal connection to the books and come up with a reading response.

Importance of Building Background Knowledge

This category includes all of the activities that teachers use to build background

knowledge: making predictions, vocabulary development, prior knowledge; teaching dictionary

skills, brainstorming, graphic organizers, anticipation guides, summarizing, and K-W-L

strategies. When these activities were combined, it was found that 36 out of the 42 teachers

interviewed used various activities to build background knowledge. When looking at the

different levels: in early years, all of the teachers (9 of 9) interviewed incorporated strategies for

building background knowledge, compared to 12 out of 17 teachers in middle years, and 14 out

of 16 senior years teachers used some kind of activity to build background knowledge.

In the early years teachers rely on activities such as predicting, discussions of prior

knowledge, and vocabulary development: (1) predicting: "lots of predicting . . . drawing on past

experiences . . . " (Lori); "I would take the book, and hold it up and talk about what we think the

book is about, just judging by the cover and the picture" (Emily); [Before and during reading]

I'm asking lots of questions . . . making them predict more . . . I will talk about the title and the cover" (Caitlin); I encourage the students to look at the book, and because we have been doing connections, start thinking . . . what this is helping them do is just to make predictions" (Katie); "I ask them to tell me what they think the book will be about . . . what do they think will happen next" (Jackie); (2) accessing prior knowledge: "drawing on past experiences . . . so talking about the experiences they bring to that story . . . "(Lori); ". . . and because we have been doing connections, start thinking, what does this remind you of?" (Katie); I want them to make a personal connection somehow . . . I ask them what reminds you of this, or what are you reminded of, or even have you ever had this experience . . . build on what they already know . . . try to build on prior knowledge" (Bonnie); (3) vocabulary development: "talking about new vocabulary [is one of the activities I use]" (Lori); [I use] word wizard for vocabulary development" (Emily);

In the middle years classrooms teachers build background knowledge by using strategies such as predicting, and vocabulary study: (1) predicting: " . . . getting them to predict what the story might be about . . . make some predictions about the story before they start reading it . . . you know predicting what will be happening" (Patricia); "they do their prep work before, they do a little bit of what do they think is going to happen because that's sort of being the front end" (Janet); ". . . and they are expected to talk about their book and look at the front cover before they start reading . . . " (Marie); (2) vocabulary: ". . . and they also pick out their spelling words for their readings . . . (Ross); "[before reading I] . . . give them the appropriate vocabulary that they will need" (Marie).

Like the early years teachers, senior high teachers rely on making predictions, accessing prior knowledge, and vocabulary study as a way to build background knowledge before

beginning to read a book: (1) predicting: "we do a lot of predictions" (Colin); "before reading, I have the students write out their predictions of what the story might be about" (Craig); "we also look at the title, try to guess what the book might be about" (Judy); "they do future predictions" (Ryan); "they make predictions about what they think will occur . . . the predictions are done orally" (Laura); (2) accessing prior knowledge: "I think they need to understand or to relate to that text to begin with . . . " (Alan); "I try to bring in things we have discussed in class before . . . " (Ryan); (3) vocabulary study: " . . . sometimes I give them a complete vocabulary of some difficult words, and see if they can piece together the context of the novel . . . " (Colin); "I give students about 10 words from the story, and using those words, have to predict the themes and ideas in the novel" (Craig); "[I build] vocabulary related to the books that we're reading" (Jan); "I try to go over vocabulary in advance . . . we do some vocabulary assignments. I try to teach spelling and vocabulary at the same time" (Ryan).

We found that the types of activities used by classroom teachers in all three streams are very similar. The early years and the senior year's teachers rely on making predictions, accessing prior knowledge, and vocabulary study to build background knowledge, while the middle years teachers only made mention of making predictions and vocabulary study. Making predictions looks the same at all levels of instruction, students are asked to look at the cover of the book, and make their predictions. Accessing prior knowledge in early years builds on students' past experiences by discussing how those experiences are similar to the story being read. In the senior years classrooms teachers see accessing prior knowledge as important so that students can relate to the text being used. Vocabulary study in all levels of schooling seems to be used in the same way; teachers teach vocabulary so that students are able to understand the text that they read.

Importance of Teacher Engagement

It was interesting how many teachers at all grade levels spoke about the importance of being personally engaged in the material that they used in their classrooms. Overall 25 out of the 42 teachers interviewed said that it was important that they enjoyed the literature that they were using in the classroom, and that they had a hard time teaching books that they didn't personally enjoy reading. In the early year's classroom, 5 of the 9 teachers interviewed expressed the view that they had to be engaged in the material they presented so that the students would be interested. In middle years, 11 of the 17 teachers expressed the opinion that it was important for teachers to enjoy what they were teaching, and 9 out of 16 senior years' teachers felt the same way.

Early years' teachers commented that: "usually it's a book that I really like . . . because I find that if I really like it, I can speak to it more with the authentic, you know I'm authentic about what I'm saying . . . if I'm not really keen . . . I'm not as excited about it, I mean the stories are fine and I just don't find that they move me the way some other books do" (Emily); "[when choosing books to read] sometimes I choose ones that I think are really good " (Jackie); "[when choosing books to read, I pick a book] that I think is really good or an author I think is good" (Melissa); "with read-alouds . . . a lot has to do with literature that I love and the classics . . . but it is things I enjoy reading too, and I think if it would interest them" (Bonnie). Similarly, "I think as educators we sort of gravitate to teach what we are comfortable with. We have to come out of that because I don't love music and drama but I have to shed my shell a little bit because there are the kids who are very artistic and musical" (Amy).

Middle years' teachers observed that: "it has to be something I enjoy reading 'cause if I teach it from year to year, I have to have interest in it" (Darlene); "I'm also a reader and sharing

my love of reading, so I read to them every morning" (Patricia); "so it's just based on what is

exciting and interesting to me [the teacher], if I don't find the literature interesting, I don't think

the kids will find it too interesting" (Janet); "I also select [books] based on what I was interested

in. I also sell books as the ones I read when I was young, so I will buy a book I used to read and

I also tell them this was my favourite book . . . when I select literature for myself, I have to enjoy

it . . . if you show an interest in it, it's easier for them to engage in" (Marie). Similarly, "I choose

the text which I myself enjoy so that the kids can get my enthusiasm for the book from the text

and which the kids themselves will be engaged in . . . and I want to be motivated myself. I don't

want to read a text which I know is not entertaining or is not engaging" (Brad).

The senior years teachers expressed similar views as the middle year's teachers: "I have

to say that students are usually pretty excited if I get excited about it, so the engagement is

contagious" (Colin); "I pick something that I really like so that I can sell it to the kids. If I am

not interested then it is hard for me to get the rest of the class interested" (Alan); "I [choose]

novels I have enjoyed teaching because if I don't enjoy reading something, I can't sell it to the

kids, if I don't feel for it. if I really enjoy a story . . . then I can sell it to the kids and show my

excitement about the story to the kids and I think that makes a difference . . . I try to pick topics I

am interested in . . . I am particular, if I don't like the book I don't like to teach it. It needs to

spark my curiosity and interest (Ryan); "I still buy books I like to read and I read them first, and

then I recommend them" (Laura); "Ok, let's look at boring old Hamlet . . . if you're doing

Hamlet, I think you have to resign yourself as using it as a centre around which you use other

things . . . I still have to admit, Hamlet, it's long (Colin). "I hated questions when I was a kid so I

don't do anything that I hated when I was in school. I pick the literature . . . I try to remember

what I liked [in high school] and what I didn't like; I try to remember what affected me. "I also

work under a government system that says these are what you have to do, these are the goals and

the outcomes and the objectives your students have to meet" (Lee). "Sometimes I will give them

an idea of what I want them to look for [when reading a novel]" (Abby).

Once again, while teachers at all of the different grade levels speak about the importance

of choosing books that they like, the early years teachers choose books that they enjoy reading

because they think their students will also enjoy them. In the middle years teachers feel that

students will be more interested in a book, if they [the teacher] can speak about it with

enthusiasm. Like the middle years' teachers, senior years' teachers feel that it is important for

them to enjoy the book. If they like a book then they think they can sell the book to their

students as one that is worth reading.

Transactional and Constructivist Models

The third question was: *Are transactional and constructivist models of reader response to*

literature in evidence in the classrooms of the teachers interviewed for the study? In this study,

only one teacher got her students to follow a transactional model of reader response to literature

(K-Grade 4, 0/9; Grades 5-8, 1/17; Grades 9-12, 0/16). The transactional model is where the

meaning is constructed from the text by the reader in an active role (Rosenblatt, 1978). What the

reader brings to the text is as important as the text itself. The teachers discussed asking their

students to construct meaning from the texts they read. They also expected their students to

develop meaning based on their social experiences which is following a constructivist model.

The reality, however, is much different. Almost all of the teachers (41/42) who were interviewed

teach books based on a theme which they give the students. Once the theme has been

established, the students read the books with a set of questions, developed by the teacher. This

practice does not really allow much interpretation by the reader, and it is more in line with a

transmission model of reading where the teacher provides the meaning to the students. The

reader is treated as a passive reader, for the most part, looking for the meaning that the author

intended to transmit based on what the teacher provided prior to, during, and after reading.

In the early years classrooms the activities are all teacher-directed. This may be a result

of the limited skill sets that students have in K-Grade 4 classrooms. The teachers (9/9) reported

that the classroom activities are designed to teach students about print, about sounds, and how to

begin to comprehend the stories they hear and read. An example of a representative comment

from an early year's teacher when discussing what she does with literature in her classroom, "I

might have a purpose myself that I may not share but I always have this reason in myself"

(Emily). Another early year's teacher also reported that she used questions to aid comprehension

"And posing those higher-level questions and having them make connections to really

understand the full purpose of the story" (Katie).

In the middle years' classroom a teacher explained what she does in her classroom "I'm

looking for their [students] going beyond simple comprehension. I want them to tell you how

[they] connect up with the story, have you been in this situation before, who is your favourite

character and why, so providing examples from the story to support their thoughts and feelings

about the story" (Patricia). Although Patricia also said, "I'll prepare [questions] and I'll look

through and I'll try to draw what I think are the important comprehension pieces . . . so I try to

break through [their distractions] and try to get the main focus of what it is [meaning of the

text]." Bonnie mentioned that "I introduce the reading response using a book that I am reading

out loud to the class and then we do . . . I model it for the class . . . guided by me". Marie found

"[Some students] have no idea what they were reading about [but] when you give them a purpose

and you can give them a meaning it makes more sense to them and they actually get more

involved in the book . . . I am guiding my students and they [visitors] would hear them [students] kind of mimicking what I am doing". Maggie commented that "I give comprehension questions they have to answer but some of them are open-ended. I usually give them a question or prompt to respond to, otherwise the kids might not write anything." "[I want] to make sure they understand the story and the point that the author is trying to make, you know to make sure they understand what the book is really about". Brad said that "We do novel studies almost like a project base where I give them the questions beforehand, before we read the text and the expectations and then we go through it and they kind of do the activities". Pam, in her interview, commented that "I'll read one of the books to them; giving them the idea of what I want them to look for in the book . . . I like to direct some of the things like theme and get them thinking more about what the theme is or the characters".

In the senior years Craig (Advanced Placement class) identified what he does in his class "I have questions prepared for each class. When they come in everyday, they begin by reading for 15 minutes, and answering a question on the board" and "I've found that it [small group discussion] is far more interesting when everyone is part of the same discussion [and] I can give a topic [for them to discuss]." He further clarified what happens in his classroom by saying:

"I know that it is important to use a clear schemata with my students. I have to help them codify their experience. To do this I help them make the connection between past information and new information . . . the harder the novel, whether it be length or actual reading difficulty, the more I try to connect themes and information in little bits with them instead of sending them off on their own".

"[There is] a lot of discussion, a lot of debate . . . [based on] a question I ask at the beginning [of class]." Although he also said, "Everyone has their own view on what they've read. And I have

to give them a chance to express that . . . "(Craig). Similarly, "we're doing a theme poster where they pull out of a hat, like determination, ambition, power, greed, whatever . . . they now have little recipe cards, and they're just starting the play and they have to jot down, like lines that um pertain to say ambition" (Paul). "If you read literature right, you can get an understanding of a particular aspect of the world, a particular way of thinking about the world . . . reading with an open mind . . . experience literature the way it was meant to be experienced" (Alan). "I try not to impose you know this is what you've read about . . . [however] I find that even though you're asking then to do that [discover their own meaning] you kind of have to sometimes really structure things a little bit, like asking them questions about the work to really help them think about some of the issues or ideas or the things that an author is doing in the book . . . a structured discussion" (Jan). A senior year teacher, Bob, described his approach to literature "I'm guilty of looking more at the curriculum map and I look exactly at the skills that we're trying to teach. Based on those skills, I will choose a particular novel or piece of literature that I think I can successfully use to train the student in the skill department".

Despite the literature that supports a transactional approach (Rosenblatt, 1978) to reader-response in classrooms; most teachers, in this study, do not use a transactional approach in their classrooms. In fact, this study showed that the majority of teachers still expect their students to follow the more traditional transmission model (Beach, 1993) where students are expected to read texts efferently and look for pre-determined information guided by teacher prompts.

Conclusions

This study involved interviewing 42 teachers from Kindergarten through to Grade 12 which allowed us to get a broad perspective on the types of reader response activities that are being taught in the classroom through the different grade levels. Our *a priori* categories

consisted of identifying the following: communication vs. transaction/construction, aesthetic vs. efferent, and, Beach's five categories (textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural).

In a transactional approach to reading, the reader makes meaning from the text; every reading act is a transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Rosenblatt (1988) believed it was through the cues provided by the text that readers were able to make the connections to a lived experience. In this study, a great deal of class time was spent having students make connections from the text to their own lives through activities such as writing response journals, reading logs, and extend the story activities. However, the students were not able to make their own personal connections to the text because these activities were for the most part directed by the teacher through the use of prompts or knowledge-based questions. These activities did not appear to allow students to make their own unique connections to the story which is part of a transactional approach to reader-response.

The activities that teachers chose to use in their classrooms lent themselves to a more efferent reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) (e.g., summarize, re-telling, knowledge based questions, teacher-led discussions). Again, this practice was identified at all grade levels. Students were also directed, through teacher prompts, to make connections to their own lives and the larger social order which corresponded with Beach's (2000) social and cultural responses to literature. The aesthetic stance was characterized by the personal, consisting of teachers asking students to identify with the characters in the text and respond experientially. But, even within these activities teachers still gave the students text-based questions to answer that limited their responses to what they saw as important in the text which on Rosenblatt's (1978) continuum would have been closer to efferent than aesthetic.

The texts selected to be taught in the classrooms were chosen, by the teachers (41 out of 42), based on themes or topics that they wanted to cover. Students had the chance to choose their own books when they were doing silent reading or when they selected books to read at home. Only one classroom teacher allowed her students to choose their own books for classroom study. Since the chosen books were based on themes or topics, teachers expected their students to create responses based on the theme of the text which limited the types of responses that the students could construct.

We also wanted to discover what teachers were doing on a day-to-day basis to enhance their students' response to literature. We discovered that teachers used the same basic activities in early, middle, and senior year's classrooms (e.g., prediction, summaries, response journals, reading logs, drama, writing activities). Of course, the activities were used in different ways but it was still interesting to see that there appears to be a finite number of activities that teachers can draw on when they are getting students to respond to literature. There were no clear reasons why teachers used these particular activities beyond a broad goal that they wanted their students to interact with the texts they were reading.

In this study, the data indicated that classrooms are for the most part teacher-directed with direct explicit instruction and modelling being the two ways that teachers teach literature. Reader-response to literature is also teacher-directed which according to Applebee (1978) is necessary because students are not mature enough to read texts without some scaffolding. He further hypothesized that children have few or no life experiences to relate to the texts they read which can reduce the types of reader-response they can be expected to provide. This study provided answers to questions about what teachers are doing with reader-response in the

classrooms. The results, for the most part, were very similar across grade level which was a surprising discovery considering the age range of the students.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the study was that all information collected was through self-reported data. There was no evidence to corroborate what the teachers said they were doing in their classrooms and what they were actually doing. Another limitation, which is often the case with qualitative research, is that the teachers who participated in the study all self-selected. And, the students in the classrooms were not always identified making it difficult to determine if the activities were chosen based on the student population.

Further Research

A study for further research would be to gather data from the actual classrooms by having interviewers observe what is happening in the classrooms in terms of reader-response. It would also be interesting to interview some of the students in the classrooms to get their views on how literature is being taught and the kinds of activities they do around reader-response. In addition, as the data suggests, it seems to be the prevailing belief that meaning somehow exists outside of the text in the reader's personal experience and this requires further research.

A follow-up study that asked teachers to explain why they used certain activities would be of interest. It remains to be seen if the activities are decided before the reading or if they are chosen based on the text. There is not enough data, in this study, to draw any conclusions.

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Appendix 1

Interview Protocol

Interviews were carried out by members of a graduate class in response to literature. Interviewers used all of the same questions and the same prompts for the interviews.

The questions asked in the interview were:

1. Tell me your goals in asking students to engage with literature in your classroom.

2. Tell me what you do with literature in your classroom.

3. If someone were to visit your classroom, what would s/he see or hear you doing? What would s/he see or hear your students doing? What types of activities do you do with students before, during, or after reading literature?

4. How is literature selected for use in your classroom?

5. Tell me how the ways literature is selected impacts the activities you and your students engage in.