

# A Case Study of the Role of Reader Response in Two Elementary Classrooms

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this case study was to identify the role of reading response in two elementary classrooms: one first-grade and one fourth-grade. The study examined the structured and incidental opportunities students had for response, the formats of their responses and the utility of the responses to each teacher. Qualitative data collection methods, including classroom observation and semi-structured interviews were employed. Analysis of the data led to four major conclusions. First, a sense of classroom community fostered authentic, aesthetic responses to text. Second, tensions existed between the prescribed curricula and teachers' attempts to promote authentic reader response. Third, reader response was used for accountability and assessment. And finally, students' prior experiences and skill levels impacted the teachers' perceptions of their abilities to respond to texts in meaningful ways.*

Louise Rosenblatt's (1982) transactional theory explains that the reading process is an interaction between the reader, the text, and the context of the reading event in order to construct understanding of the text. The author, the text, and the reader all have a role in the interpretation of meaning. Meaning cannot be *found* in the text or *found* in the reader but in the interaction between the two. In line with Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist notions, Rosenblatt (1978) asserts, "the reader's creation of a poem out of a text must be an active, self-ordering, and self-corrective process" (p. 11). The text merely activates the thought processes already existing in the reader. The value of a text is not the text itself, but rather a reader's experience with it. In fact, subsequent readings of the same text by the same reader are likely to

differ as the reader has a changed understanding.

The meaning a reader constructs is heavily impacted by the stance the reader takes, which exists on a continuum from efferent to aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1978). Features of the text or the purpose of the reader contribute to the choice of reading stance chosen. When reading with an efferent stance, the reader is mostly concerned with the information he/she needs to retain while reading the text. The reader's attention is focused on determining importance and locating key facts. Text features that prompt a reader's efferent stance include text titles, bolded headings, illustrations, photographs and captions. When reading from a primarily aesthetic stance, the reader predominantly attends to what is felt and experienced during the reading event. Taking an aesthetic stance

compels the reader to connect with the reading in personal ways.

Written responses to reading have been used to assess the transaction between a reader and text in order to explain why there were variances in responses (Richards, 1929). Subsequent studies suggest students' developmental levels and teachers' teaching approaches impact the content of students' responses to texts as well as their stances toward literature (Purves & Rippere, 1968; Many & Wiseman, 1992; Wiseman & Many, 1992).

Instructional approaches that foster an efferent stance include promoting strategies for locating information, identifying main idea, and determining the author's intended meaning. Annotating text sections or reading a set of questions before reading the text also prompts students to take an efferent stance. Instructional methods that foster an aesthetic stance include encouraging students to make text-to-self connections to what they have read or drawing on students' experiential knowledge to encourage predictions, visualizations, and creative questions to further their construction of meaning. In their exploratory study, Sinha and Janisch (1995) found that teachers might disregard the stance suggested by texts or adopted by readers for the sake of teaching particular reading skills that can limit students' responses to primarily retelling surface information from the text.

## Methods

In light of the relationship between teaching approaches and reading response, this qualitative case study sought to

examine the role of reading response in two elementary classrooms: one first-grade and one fourth-grade (Wolcott, 1990). The purpose of the study was to identify the structured and incidental opportunities students had for response, the formats of their responses and the utility of the responses to each teacher. The case to be studied was the role of reading response as it was demonstrated in a first-grade classroom and a fourth-grade classroom during daily reading instruction.

## Setting and Participants

The study took place in a Title I elementary school, in a mid-sized city in Texas. The school was most recently rated Acceptable by the Texas Education Agency as the result of the students' state test scores in 2010-2011. In the 2011-2012 school year the student body consisted of 19.1% African American, 46.4% Hispanic, 27.1% White, and 2.1% Asian students as well as 4.5% of students of two or more ethnicities.

## Students

Twenty-eight students participated in the study. There were 12 first-graders (three girls and nine boys), and 16 fourth-graders (eight girls and eight boys). Their ethnicity mirrored that of the school.

## Teachers

The first-grade teacher, Mrs. Parker (pseudonym), a white female, graduated from a four-year university. She was in her first year at this particular campus but had seven years of previous teaching experience. Her previous experiences included two years of kindergarten and five years of pre-kindergarten. Mrs. Parker was introduced to balanced literacy approaches during her undergraduate teacher

preparation. In response to prevailing practices when joining her current campus, she engaged in a self-study of the Daily Five (Boushey & Moser, 2006) approach using books, videos, and informal dialogue with colleagues before beginning her first-grade placement. She explained that since her previous teaching experience was with younger children, she felt confident in teaching reading skills, she but believed that she needed to grow in the area of teaching reading comprehension strategies. She listed many professional books that she was reading in an attempt to grow in this area.

The fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Anson (pseudonym), also a white female, graduated from a four-year university and was immediately hired to teach in one of the elementary schools with which her alma mater has a professional development partnership. At the time of this study, she was in her second year of teaching. Her university literacy training focused on readers' workshop and she embedded those philosophies into her teaching. Since graduating, she continued to receive both formal and informal professional development from professors at the university. Her school implemented a balanced literacy approach during her first year of teaching, and university liaisons aided the teachers in that transition. Mrs. Anson reported that she reads often outside of school, and she desired to pass her enjoyment of reading on to her students. In her lessons, she aimed to focus on the idea that "reading is a real life thing" (personal communication, November 2, 2012). In order to do so, she avoided using the basal reading series and instead allowed students to self-select books that were

appropriate for their reading levels and that interested them.

### **Procedures and Data Analysis**

Four sources of data were collected over a five-week period during the fall semester. First, three semi-structured interviews (Appendix) with each teacher were conducted (Seidman, 2006). The first interview took place prior to any other data collection and focused on each teacher's preparation for teaching reading, her teaching experience and her personal experiences with reading and responding to reading. The intermediate interview took place during the window of classroom observations and focused on each teacher's perceptions of their students as readers and the ways that they see their students respond to their reading. The final interview was conducted after the conclusion of the classroom observations and focused on the perceived utility of the students' reading responses.

Second, each classroom was observed and qualitative field notes were taken. In the first-grade classroom, the researchers observed a one-hour block of reading instruction two times per week for a three week period, totaling six observations. In the fourth-grade classroom, researchers observed two times per week for two weeks as well as one additional observation during the third week, totaling five observations. Observations were conducted until a point of data saturation was reached in each setting. Researchers discontinued observations at the point when the routines, teachers' roles, and student activities yielded no new significant data. During the observations, the focus was on the opportunities students had for

response and the formats of their responses as well as each teacher's role in allowing, promoting, or structuring those responses. Last, the teachers' lesson plans and student work samples were collected as sources of data triangulation. The teachers' weekly lesson plans were examined to confirm that the observed lessons were an authentic representation of larger units of study. On occasions when the student work samples included responses to their reading, the researchers collected copies of that work as evidence of the students' application of the lesson. In the first-grade classroom, student work samples included one list of connections to a story read aloud and three worksheets with one text-to-text connection written and drawn. In fourth-grade class, this included two sets of reader response journals.

Data analysis was ongoing and recursive. The researchers began analysis using open coding methods, independently identifying broad themes. The researchers then worked collaboratively to compare, collapse, and revise themes as needed. This initial stage of analysis resulted in five broad themes. Next, each grade-level case was analyzed independently using these themes, resulting in further refinement of the data display. Finally, the two grade-level cases were re-examined through the lens of the initial findings (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

## Findings

### First-Grade Classroom

The focal point of Mrs. Parker's classroom was an interactive white board and large area rug at the front of the room. On the edge of the rug were an easel and the teacher's chair. The students' desks were

arranged in groups of four and five. Other desks were pushed against the wall, creating stations for computer work, writing, math, etc. The room also had a kidney-shaped table and a class library. Mrs. Parker's curriculum followed the district-mandated scope and sequence, and she used the lesson plans provided by that program as a resource for her lesson planning. Mrs. Parker expressed concern that her students did not begin the year with the prerequisite skills required to progress at the pace dictated by the district-mandated program. She reported that her students were not yet able to self-select texts and that they struggled with writing independently. The struggle was observed in one lesson during which she instructed the students to write a connection to their book. After seeing the students' attempts, she modified the assignment and asked the students to draw a picture of their connections. In a subsequent lesson, she provided sentence stems for the students to complete. Despite their struggles, Mrs. Parker described the students as readers and stated that they "amazed (her) with their growth" (personal communication, November 14, 2012). She used a combination of whole class instruction, student workstations, and guided reading groups in her daily reading class time.

### Whole Class Instruction

Mrs. Parker began each reading class by directing the students to come to the rug. She read a book out loud and taught her reading lesson using the book. These lessons were focused primarily on reading comprehension strategies. During her read-alouds, she modeled the reading strategy that she was teaching and also shared her affective responses to the texts. During these times, the students also shared their

thinking and responses, both solicited and spontaneous. While the topics of the lessons were directed by the scope and sequence, Mrs. Parker drew on several professional resources to find book recommendations and ideas for how to communicate and model the strategies.

### **Workstations**

After the whole-group lesson, the students were dismissed to complete an independent reading assignment, often in the format of a worksheet. The assignments had a direct connection to the whole-group lesson. For example, after a lesson on making text-to-self connections, the students were given a page to draw a picture from the text and a picture from their own lives. Upon completion of the worksheet, the students began independent tasks including independent reading, reading with a partner, listening to an audio book, writing in journals, and practicing their spelling words. These tasks were dictated by a schedule posted on the white board. Most students were engaged and on-task during this time. Though it was uncommon, the students most likely to be off-task were the ones working on their spelling words or writing in journals. They demonstrated a clear preference for listening to the audio books and reading with a partner. When reading to a partner, the students often followed the reading with a discussion of the book. They would go back to favorite pages or illustrations or express an opinion about the characters. At times, students would carry their books to Mrs. Parker to show her something in the book they were reading. The students read from their library books during the independent and partner reading rotations. Mrs. Parker explained the challenge of helping the students make their selections;

initially, they grabbed books with no intentionality. By encouraging them to examine the cover and read the first pages of the books, she reported that they have made some progress. She also explained that the students enjoy checking out books that she has mentioned reading or enjoying.

### **Small Group Instruction**

During the students' independent work time, Mrs. Parker worked with groups of two to five students at the kidney-shaped table using leveled texts. Mrs. Parker considered her guided reading lessons to be the time when she taught the more basic "skills of reading" (personal communication, November 14, 2012) as opposed to the more complex and aesthetic comprehension strategies she addressed in her whole group lessons. Each began with a preview of the book that included a discussion of the cover, genre, and predictions followed by the students reading aloud independently while the teacher monitored and assisted as needed. The sessions concluded with a brief retelling of the book's content followed by a brief opportunity for students to respond orally to the text. The texts were added to the students' book bags to read at home. Mrs. Parker explained that she often used her small group time to assist her students in completing tasks that, according to the scope and sequence, her students should be doing independently. For example, rather than independently selecting a book, reading it, and then writing one text-to-self connection, Mrs. Parker gave the students the opportunity to orally share a connection that they made with the leveled text. After the first small group, Mrs. Parker directed the students to their second round of independent tasks and worked with a second small group. At the conclusion of

the second group, she instructed the students to put their things away and transitioned to the next part of their day. In the first-grade classroom, most of the students' opportunities to respond to their reading were incidental. The students made comments during a story read aloud by the teacher and shared their responses when reading with a partner, but the teacher did not prompt those responses nor were they recorded or used in intentional ways. The students did have structured opportunities to share text-to-text connections during that series of lessons and those responses were collected and assessed by the teacher. Her assessments served to adjust her delivery of that series of lessons and to document the students' mastery of the curriculum standards. However, before that series of lessons, and at its conclusion, the opportunities for structured or solicited reading responses were minimal.

### **Fourth-Grade Classroom**

Mrs. Anson arranged her students' desks in groups of four to six students. At the end of each table, she kept a plastic, rolling set of drawers. Each table of each reading class had its own drawer in which to store their books, their reading response notebooks, and other supplies. At the front of the room, a colorful wooden chair and a flip chart faced a large circular area rug where the students sat during direct instruction. Mrs. Anson devoted one of the classroom's bulletin boards to book recommendations. Slips for recommending books were always available for students, and they had the opportunity to encourage others to read certain books and justify their endorsement of the book. In addition, Mrs. Anson recommended books. She explained that

even though the fourth-graders were typically able to choose books themselves, "some of them still [would] ask [her] for recommendations, or they ask each other" (personal communication, December 2, 2012).

### **Whole Group Instruction**

Mrs. Anson began each reading class with a brief writing assignment. She used the interactive white board in her class to display a prompt such as "nobody knows how to read as well as you do. Tell me your biggest strength in reading (something you do well) and your biggest weakness (something you have trouble with)" (personal communication, December 2, 2012). Students wrote down their responses to the prompt on small slips of paper. Next, the class transitioned to the day's focus lesson. Mrs. Anson used this time to provide a small amount of direct instruction on a specific reading skill. At times, she also used the time to review classroom procedures or to split students into "buzzing groups," groups of two-four students sitting next to each other on the rug, to discuss their reading or create written artifacts of their reading and thinking (personal communication, December 2, 2012). During the direct instruction, Mrs. Anson shared her responses to reading and called on students to do the same as it related to the day's lesson. During buzzing time, the students were instructed to share their responses with each other. On Fridays, Mrs. Anson read poetry aloud, shared her personal responses and encouraged her students to share their responses with the class. At the conclusion, Mrs. Anson called the students to return to the rug for sharing time. Mrs. Anson asked them to share a comment with the rest of the class that pertained to the

day's lesson; for example, one day she asked each student to tell the class his or her book's purpose. The primary focus of the regrouping was for the students to have opportunities to share their responses with Mrs. Anson and their classmates. Sharing time marked the conclusion of the reading class time.

### **Individual Work and Conferences**

After the time on the rug, the students took their books from the drawers or from labeled tubs on the bookshelf and chose their spots for reading. Occasionally, multiple students chose to read the same book at the same time, and Mrs. Anson provided an opportunity during the independent reading time for that group of students to discuss their books. Each day, Mrs. Anson called on a different group of students to choose from a selection of large floor pillows and body pillows. She played instrumental music and the students read by lamplight and natural light. Each week, Mrs. Anson expected the students to create written responses to their reading via a password protected website. In each response, she asked the students to include a brief summary of the book, their thoughts about the reading, and questions they had about the reading. In her online responses, Mrs. Anson answered their questions, demonstrated her own thinking about the book, and posed questions and recommendations to the students. She asked open-ended questions so that students could write about what they knew rather than trying to solicit specific answers. Mrs. Anson believed that the strategy avoided question formats that "those lower-levels [students] might be able to answer" and which "the higher-level [students would consider] a breeze for them, and it doesn't challenge them or stretch them in any way"

(personal communication, December 4, 2012). Mrs. Anson used the reader response letters to assess the students' critical thinking levels and their ability to make connections, predictions, and conclusions with supporting details. Because state testing requires higher-level thinking, she believed that reader response letters accurately assessed their preparedness for the test. The letters requiring students to connect their reading to their lives "make them really think deeply about their book" instead of simply reading it "cover to cover" (personal communication, December 2, 2012). She believed that the assessment was reliable because generally the quality of the response letters aligned with the students' data from formal assessments.

### **Independent Time**

During independent reading time, Mrs. Anson conferred with students at a table to the side of the classroom. Sometimes, she asked students what they "notice about this book"; other times, she asked questions such as "how do you know this is nonfiction?" (personal communication, December 2, 2012). At times, she drew a student into the conversation by asking him or her about the characters or other features of the text. The questions she asked did not always address a specific reading skill, but they provided students examples of how to engage with the text. Mrs. Anson followed a pre-determined student rotation and typically met with five to six students during the time allotted for independent reading. She believed that conferring with the students scaffolded their comprehension and helped them respond appropriately to a wide variety of self-selected texts. It also provided a means of monitoring and accountability.

Both structured and incidental opportunities for reading response were woven into the daily routine of the fourth-grade reading class. Students had the opportunity to share their responses to reading during buzz groups, individual conferences, and sharing time on the rug. Mrs. Anson used the notes from her conferences and the reading response journals to assess the students' comprehension and critical thinking and to hold them accountable for their reading time.

## Conclusions

Both of the classroom teachers described themselves as readers and recounted authentic ways that they respond to the texts that they read in their personal lives. In their classrooms, however, opportunities for their students to respond authentically to texts were varied as were their uses of the students' responses. Analysis of the data led to four major conclusions regarding the role of reading response in the two classrooms.

First, a sense of classroom community fostered authentic, aesthetic responses to texts. Mrs. Anson reflected on her own reading and desire to talk about what she read, and she wanted her students to have a similar experience of reading, having opportunities to share their responses with each other. Mrs. Parker's descriptions of herself as a reader included relational contexts; she recounted stories of sharing reading experiences with family members, friends, and roommates. Perhaps because of their own experiences with reading and aesthetic response, both teachers modeled such responses for their students. Teacher

modeling and participation in the community reinforced the relevance and authenticity of reader response. In the fourth-grade classroom, structured and unstructured responses occurred within the contexts of relationships. Even though the response journals were a required assignment, an element of community existed; the students were writing personal letters to Mrs. Anson, and she was responding to them in relational ways. Additionally, the buzzing groups, reading groups, and whole-group time on the rug provided the time, space, and opportunities for students to share their reading responses within the context of the classroom community. Even in first-grade, where reading responses were not integrated into the daily classroom routine, unsolicited response occurred in the whole-group time on the rug, small group instruction, and partner reading--all times of social interaction. As Mrs. Anson noted, reader response allowed for multiple answers, permitting all students the opportunity to contribute to the classroom community. From a transactional perspective, the context of the reading impacts the reading event, thus impacting the readers' response. It follows that a relational context where the students believe that multiple perspectives are valued is likely to nurture authentic responses to reading.

Second, there was tension between the prescribed curricula and the teachers' attempts to promote authentic reader response. Even when working within the constraints of the mandated curricular and testing expectations, Mrs. Anson hoped that reading and responding to authentic texts invited the students to understand that reading is more than a school subject.

Mrs. Anson invited the young readers to make connections between books and their personal lives; during one reading conference, she asked a student whether he thought he “would make a good spy” (personal communication, December 4, 2012). Other such questions asked students to realize that reading has significance to their lives outside of what’s on the page. In fourth grade, holding to a personal philosophy of establishing authenticity despite the constraints of mandated curricula encouraged students to develop into lifelong readers who enjoy reading. In first grade, tensions existed between what the teacher felt that she was “supposed to do” and what seemed natural or made sense to her, though she tried to create links between the two (personal communication, October 16, 2012). This tension impacted the forms and functions of the readers’ responses. This is not to say that curriculum standards were always in opposition to reading response. In the first-grade class, structured opportunities for response only occurred when prescribed by the mandated curriculum. In their attempts to prevent reading from becoming just a school subject by incorporating opportunities for response, however, it may be that reader response was simply being added to the list of school subjects.

Third, reader response was used for accountability and assessment. Reading responses helped both teachers monitor their students’ understanding of lessons. In first-grade, Mrs. Parker adjusted her expectations and approached her lessons in new ways after seeing her students struggle to share text-to-text connections. In fourth-grade, Mrs. Anson used students’ responses to determine whether they were meeting the state’s curricular standards, the Texas

Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The extent to which a teacher is able to use reading response to assess her students and inform her instruction is related to how intentionally she incorporates response into the reading class. In first-grade, responses that were required by the curriculum were graded formally and assessed the students’ ability to construct a response to a given text. The other limited opportunities for responses were only able to provide vague information. In fourth-grade, Mrs. Anson purposefully incorporated time for students to share what they read on a regular basis. By doing so, she was able to gather more specific data regarding her students’ interests and levels of reading comprehension. At times, she asked the students directly whether or not they understood what they were reading and the reading strategies that they learned during the focus lesson; “it helps [her] know what they are really getting and what they are not more than a test would” (personal communication, December 2, 2012). If most of the students in the class did not express and demonstrate understanding the new concept through their reading responses, then she decided to reteach it. While the connection between response and assessment was somewhat valuable for the teachers, it remained questionable in both classrooms whether the students’ responses could be accepted as authentic or whether their reading stances aligned with textual cues if the students understood that their responses were being evaluated.

Finally, students’ prior experiences and skill levels impacted the teachers’ perceptions of their abilities to respond to texts in meaningful ways. Mrs. Parker’s concern for the students’ delays and her awareness of her own need for professional growth in

this area of teaching may have contributed to her hyper-focus on teaching particular skills and strategies and a lack of attention to providing opportunities for reading response. In both words and actions, she expressed the belief that reading is a developmental process and that a minimal level of skills and experiences were necessary for meaningful reading response to occur. In fact, at times, she believed that the curriculum expected responses that were incongruous with what she believed her students were developmentally capable of doing. Her focus then was on developing the foundational skills for reading and scaffolding their opportunities for response. In fourth-grade, Mrs. Anson believed that the ability to construct meaningful responses began with teaching the students how to select a book that was appropriate for them in terms of both reading level and interest. She believed if students connected with their reading, they would naturally have responses to share. According to Mrs. Anson, many of her students began the semester claiming to hate reading and reading class. However, after about three weeks of choosing their own books and engaging with self-selected texts, these students began to love reading. Mrs. Anson believed that “even though they are not very good readers...if [she] can make them like reading, then [they] can start there and then build the actual reading skills” (personal communication, December 2, 2012). Though the teachers expressed differing beliefs about the relationship between authentic reading responses and reading skills, they both perceived a connection between the two, and that perception impacted the role of reading response in their classrooms. In summary, structured opportunities for reading response originated from both the

prescribed curriculum and from the teachers’ personal positions regarding the affective importance of reading and response. Incidental opportunities for response were often taken spontaneously by students and provided by the teachers in the context of community. The readers’ responses were used to further build those communities as well as to assess the students’ reading comprehension.

## Implications

In a world of high stakes testing and heavily prescribed curricula, opportunities for transactional reading events and authentic responses to reading may seem limited. However, teachers can focus on specific goals in their classroom to foster students’ responses to texts. First, teachers should take steps to create a positive classroom community. Readers often see themselves in relation to other readers, so teachers should intentionally create a community that invites learners of varying abilities, to engage in reading and response. These supportive communities provide a protected space in which to respond naturally and authentically to texts. Second, authenticity can offset the limitations of a prescribed curriculum. Students who are allowed to choose authentic texts and respond to them in both structured and spontaneous ways will learn that reading is more than a school subject. Teachers who model their own reading habits and authentic responses to varied texts further make this point. Finally, assessment should include more than items that a teacher can measure or grade. Students need to think critically in order to meet curricular standards, however test practice is not the way to develop critical thinking. Teachers need to continue using

written responses, oral discussions, and conference notes to assess their students,

promote critical thinking and inform their instruction.

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## **Appendix**

### **Initial Interview**

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How did you get into teaching?
3. What subjects have you taught?
4. What preparation have you had for teaching reading?
5. What experiences have you had teaching reading?
6. How do you usually feel about teaching reading?
7. What methods of teaching reading have you used?
8. What ongoing professional development have you had for teaching reading?
9. Are you a reader?
10. What do you read?
11. In what ways do you respond to what you read?

### **Intermediate Interview**

1. How are you teaching reading this year?
2. How do you feel about teaching reading this year?
3. How do your students seem to feel about reading class this year?
4. Do you believe your students are readers? Can you explain?
5. What patterns have you noticed in your students' reading?
6. What do your students read?
7. How do your students select books?
8. What patterns have you noticed in your students' reading selections?
9. What opportunities do your students have to respond to what they read?
10. How have you seen your students respond to texts?
11. How do you use the students' responses to what they read?

### **Final Interview**

1. In what ways have the students responded to texts they've read?
2. In what ways have you used students' responses to their reading?
3. How can opportunities for response be helpful to the students?
4. How can opportunities for response be helpful to you as the teacher?
5. What connections can you see between the ways you respond to texts and the opportunities your students have for responding to texts?