Teaching and learning have always been inseparable for me. This was especially true recently, when I took a graduate course in children's literature while teaching third grade. What a perfect opportunity this was to expand my own perspectives about reading, literature, and response to literature, by combining my role as teacher with that of researcher.

As an experienced teacher, I was aware of the importance of introducing children to a wide variety of books and fostering diverse responses to literature. My reading program had always consisted of a more integrated approach than that provided by the basal series used in my district. It included abundant opportunities for sustained silent reading of student-selected materials, various writing activities, as well as opportunities to listen and respond to a variety of literature.

One of the cornerstones of my program was the daily reading of literature to my class, because I knew that reading aloud to children stimulated their interest and imagination, as well as their emotional development and language use (Trelease, 1982). In my program I selected stories from not only the district's and the state's recommended readings in literature, but also from my favorite and my students' favorite books. We read everything from Dr. Seuss (inspired by an exhibit of his books at a local museum) to classic folk and fairy tales, to the light fantasy of Winnie-the-Pooh, to realistic and historic fiction including Dear Mr. Henshaw and Sarah, Plain and Tall. Some books we simply read and enjoyed without further response, while at other times, students engaged in various creative and exciting responses to literature. Frequently, I solicited oral responses, which sometimes took the form of lively discussions about books and their characters. Readers Theatre (Cullinan, 1989; Johnson & Louis, 1987) and role playing were also favorite ways my students responded, particularly when we were reading fairy tales and folk tales. The children loved performing in front of their classmates or audiotaping their scripts so they could listen to themselves. Choral speaking (Monson, 1986a) of favorite poems by large and small groups of children was also popular. After rehearsing a chosen piece, students would delight in performing for other classes.

Response to literature in my class took many other forms. Students enthusiastically engaged in art activities related to books we read, activities that included wall hangings, collages, flannel board retellings (Cullinan, 1989), and dioramas. Illustrations for students' own book productions (Johnson & Louis, 1987) were also a rich source of responses to literature. In addition, children loved to recommend books to each other in book sharing groups, and by writing reviews
of books they had read that we kept in a card file for reference by other students. A format for book reviews described by Monson (1986a) was similar to ours: we included title, author, short plot summary, comments indicating what the student felt was good or not good about the book, and a place to note whether or not the student recommended the book to others. Students also had opportunities to experiment with writing their own stories and poems, inspired by books and poems they had heard or read.

Overall, what I was doing as a teacher was substantiated by what I was learning in my children's literature class. In addition, I learned that the concept of response to literature included a facet previously unknown to me. One requirement for the course was that we read certain books and write about these books from a personal perspective, resulting in reader response to literature. Our response to literature was based on the work of Bleich (1978) and Petrosky (1982). In preparing to respond we addressed three issues: (a) what was noticed in the book, (b) how we felt about the book, and (c) how the book was related to our own experiences. This preparation to respond was interesting and stimulating and promoted individual thinking with no "right answer"; Bleich's prompts also promoted a sense of ownership of each piece of literature I had read and written about.

I was intrigued by the idea that the process I had engaged in might be valuable in encouraging my own students' interactions with literature, while providing opportunities for students to go beyond literal levels of thinking. I decided to conduct some research in my third-grade class by systematically including Bleich's prompts to prepare students to respond to literature with the activities already employed. My purpose was to examine the nature of third graders' responses to the literature I read aloud. I wanted to know how students would react to Bleich's prompts and how their responses to literature would develop over the course of the year. I hoped that my classroom research would help me better understand my students' thinking about literature while at the same time foster their ability to connect literature with their own lives.

**Reader response and reading theory**

In addition to my personal, positive experience with reader response, the rationale for using this format in my classroom fit well with my view of reading as an interactive process, one in which readers interact with text to construct meaning based on their background knowledge (Adams & Collins, 1985; Anderson, 1985; Mason, 1984; Rumelhart, 1984). One crucial element of this model is that it allows for different interpretations of text depending on what the reader brings to the reading.

**Responding to literature by sharing how a book makes you feel is one way students can relate story events to their own lives.**

Photo by Mary Loewenstein-Anderson
It appeared to me that encouraging students to respond to literature provided the framework for this interaction between reader and text, and an examination of the literature regarding the use of responding to literature in the classroom revealed that there was support for this approach. As Monson (1986b) indicated, as early as 1966 the Dartmouth Conference papers addressed the importance of encouraging personal response to the literary experience. In addition, Britton (1979) argued for the infusion of broad, open-ended questions about stories rather than piecemeal analysis that interferes with comprehension.

Furthermore, studies focusing on intermediate and secondary students' responses to literature had been reported (Farnan, 1986; Five, 1986; Galda, 1982; Simpson, 1986; Squire, 1964), and investigations examining responses across grade levels had been described (Applebee, 1978; Farnan, 1988; Hickman, 1981; Purves, 1975). Two studies examined responses made by fifth-grade students. Galda (1982) studied oral responses of three fifth-grade girls, while Five (1986) conducted an indepth examination of fifth-grade students' written responses in literature journals. Both investigators gained valuable insight into their students' development as readers. A question resulting from Five's study was how can teachers encourage children to take risks when interpreting what they read. It seemed to me that the prompts used to encourage students' response to literature would encourage risk-taking in my students.

**Perspectives on reader response**

A foundation for the reader response perspective that guided my classroom activities can be found in the works of Rosenblatt (1978), Petrosky (1982), Bleich (1978), Farnan (1986, 1988) and Simpson (1986). Rosenblatt's (1978) view of readers' transactions with text, i.e., that comprehension of the text involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it, coincided with my constructivist view of reading.

Petrosky (1982) suggested that students who write about what they read would better understand these texts. He further indicated that Bleich's (1978) three-part response format, described earlier, provided a framework through which students were able to represent their comprehension in writing and make meaning for themselves. One of the two studies reporting successful response to literature at the junior high level used Bleich's prompts (Farnan, 1986). Farnan's reading, thinking, and writing strategy (the TAB Activity) was similar to the response probes I adopted. She reported that the TAB activity encouraged her seventh grade students to go beyond simple retrieval of information. It encouraged "active, reader responses to a work, thereby promoting comprehension, enjoyment, and cognitive development" (p. 20).

Also at the junior high school level, Simpson (1986) employed oral reading and a response journal to integrate reading with writing and to promote literature. Simpson indicated that communal sharing of responses promoted an appreciation of the contribution that each student brought to the event. Furthermore, critical thinking and active listening skills were developed; and by listening to the teacher's oral reading, students were encouraged to read on their own.

**Engaging students to respond to literature in my classroom**

All 28 students in my multiethnic third-grade class participated in activities that encouraged response to literature. The students' reading levels ranged from first to fourth grade. Due to the variance in reading abilities and because of the success Simpson had encountered, I decided to introduce responding to literature by reading a wide variety of literature aloud to the class rather than having students read silently.

I used Bleich's (1978) prompts to encourage response, which included the following: (a) What did you notice in the story? (b) How did the story make you feel? (c) What does this story remind you of in your own life?

In the next two sections I will explain how I introduced the prompts first as an oral language activity and then as a written activity. Following that, I will discuss students' oral and written responses to literature, including samples of their responses.

**Phase I—recording oral responses.** Beginning in the fall of the year, I gradually integrated responding to literature with the other modes of response used in my classroom. In this first phase, which took place during October and November, I read stories to the class; and approximately once a week, Bleich's
prompts were used in whole-group activities. I recorded student responses to each of the prompts on sheets of butcher paper, in much the same way that students' words might be recorded in language experience activities. These response charts were then displayed in the room so they could be reread by students. This structure permitted students to engage in responding to literature without requiring individual written responses. It also allowed students to hear each others' thoughts about the story, demonstrated that all responses were valid and valuable, and showed that there was not just one "right" answer. In other words, it provided a framework and guided practice for future opportunities to respond to literature.

Phase II—written responses. In the second phase, which began in January and continued until the end of the school year, I again read stories to the class; however, instead of students responding orally to the Bleich prompts, they had 5 minutes to respond in writing to what was read using the prompts as a guide. This initial 5-minute limit was based on Farnan's (1988) research, indicating that 5 minutes allowed enough time for students to individually respond succinctly to each prompt, and that timed writing focused students' attention and bolstered fluency. The response time was extended slightly as the year progressed based on input from the students. By the end of the year, students wrote for approximately 7 to 8 minutes. I encouraged students to write for the full time allotment for each prompt and told them not to worry about spelling; however, because students are often slowed in their writing due to their inability to spell words, I wrote several words on the board common to the story, including items such as characters' names. In addition, I circulated among the students during the writing sessions to assist with spelling if a child requested it.

Following the writing, students were given an opportunity to share their responses with the class. This provided a format for both speaking and listening. Written responses were then collected so that I could read them. I did not "grade" responses, but commented informally as one might comment in response to journals. I collected a sampling of these responses to include in student portfolios. Others were returned to students after I duplicated them for my files.

Examination of student responses

Below I describe two different response modes. The first mode was designed to provide practice that facilitated a smooth transition to the next mode.

Oral responses. Initially, responses I recorded during Phase I were brief and usually related only to one incident in the story. For example, in October after listening to *Horton Hatches the Egg* by Dr. Seuss (1940), students' responses, generated from the question "What did you notice in the story?" resulted in simple descriptive statements such as "I noticed animals making fun of Horton" and "Horton sitting on an egg in a tree." A few students gave responses that were more inclusive of the story, such as "The lazy bird didn't want to take care of the egg until it was hatching."

The other two prompts evoked similarly brief responses. The question "How did the story make you feel?" resulted in such answers as "Sad because Horton was on the egg so long." The third question, "What does this story remind you of in your own life?" also prompted simple responses such as "People teasing me."

These one-line responses dominated my students' initial attempts to respond to literature using the prompts. However, as students became more familiar with being given the opportunity to respond to literature, their responses became more detailed. After listening to a version of *Cinderella* in November, students' responses to the first two questions included the following:

**Response 1**
I noticed when the beggar came to the door and Cinderella gave him a piece of bread and two stepsisters ran after the beggar and he said 'If only you knew who I was.' In the beginning the guy was poor and he made Cinderella do all the work.

**Response 2**
It made me feel lucky because Cinderella had to do a lot of work and I feel like I have to do all the work.

**Response 3**
I felt happy she got married and lived happily ever after. The book made me feel sad because he couldn't find her.

During discussions of the questions about what they noticed and how they felt about the books, students often indicated that they agreed with other students' responses by saying, "That was what I was going to say." This was not the case for the question relating story events with their own lives, a question requir-
ing more personal responses. One student said, "It reminds me of when I have to do work—housework plus the dishes," whereas another expanded even further about his own domestic duties, "It reminds me of when I have to scrub the floor and clean the bathrooms and do the dusting and I have to take out the trash."

In examining responses by students of varying reading levels, it was interesting to note that all students, regardless of reading ability, responded in a meaningful, albeit sometimes brief manner, and all were able to relate story events to events in their own lives. The progressive increase in length and depth of responses during the oral response sessions may indicate that, as students were learning to trust themselves and the teacher, they were more willing to contribute their own ideas.

Written responses. After responding orally to literature, we made a transition to responding in writing. This transition was an easy one, perhaps because students were accustomed to thinking about the prompts. Furthermore, my third graders were easily able to respond in writing to the questions within the allotted time.

During the initial transition sessions, students listened to Charlotte's Web by E.B. White (1952, 1980). Although an analysis of responses showed that the better readers were also more fluent writers, all students responded to each of the prompts. The following examples of student responses were edited for errors in spelling and grammar to facilitate understanding. Therefore, analyses of these errors will not be addressed in this discussion. However, a general statement about improvements noticed over time will be included at the end of this paper.

When I asked students what they noticed in Charlotte's Web, those reading below grade level were more inclined to focus on one or two story events, such as "I noticed the rat named Templeton that took the rotten egg that Avery smashed" and "Wilbur had 3 friends. Wilbur won first place. Fern had a brother."

In contrast, students reading at or above grade level wrote more summarylike descriptions of the story.

Response 1
The pig won grand prize at the fair and the best thing about the story was when Charlotte had some babies and when they were flying off in the balloons.

Response 2
I noticed a lot of things in the whole story. But at the end it was nice because there was 583 little babies. It was sad when Charlotte died.

All students were successful in connecting incidents in the story to experiences in their own lives. There were fewer differences between good and poor readers' responses to the question "What does this book remind you of in your own life?" One student reading below grade level responded with the following:

It reminded me of when I saw a pig in the mud and I thought that pigs were always clean. And it reminded me of when I played in the mud yesterday and a girl put a little piece of mud on my hair.

A grade-level reader was reminded of his own day at the fair after listening to a chapter in Charlotte's Web:

The book reminded me of when I went to the fair and won a monkey doll and when I went on the ferris wheel I stayed on the top and I could see the whole fair.

When students were asked to write about their feelings regarding the book, responses were usually longer than those given in the oral response sessions, and most students elaborated on more than one feeling or single event. A typical example of this is seen in the following response: "It made me feel sad because Wilbur was going to get killed. It made me feel happy because Charlotte had 514 eggs."

Written responses increased in length as students had more practice with the activity. This may have reflected an increase in fluency encouraged by the timed aspect of the work; it may have also reflected growth over time due to practice with several writing activities. Other changes in response patterns were also apparent near the end of the year. Students of all reading abilities were inclined to write more elaborate summaries to the question "What did you notice in the story?" For example, after listening to Milne's (1926, 1954) Winnie the Pooh, a student whose reading performance was below grade level noted several events:

Eeyore has a birthday and Piglet was going to give Eeyore a balloon and he was running along to get to the lake first and then Bang. He popped the balloon. Pooh was giving Eeyore a pot and he went to owl to ask him to write happy birthday on it.

Another change that occurred in written responses to this question was that some students went beyond the literal retelling and
summarizing of story events in their observations. Despite the fact that in the following examples both students were reading below grade level, they wrote rather sophisticated observations about the style of the literature. One student pointed out the use of fantasy by the author, whereas another noticed differences in the British author's use of language:

Response 1
I noticed that donkeys can't have birthdays, they can't even talk, but it is a book. They can do anything they want. They were imagining things.

Response 2
I noticed that they spelled some words different in the book and I noticed that they wrote different in the book than we do and pronounced some words different and some words wrong.

One of the interesting things about my students' responses to the prompts about how the book made them feel was that they seemed progressively more able to put their feelings into words as the year passed. This may have been due to a gradual improvement in writing skills over time, or it may have been due to the content of these latter selections that often contained events with which students could identify. Students frequently noted a range of feelings elicited by incidents in the stories.

Response 1 (responding to *Winnie the Pooh*, Milne, 1926, 1954)
It made me feel sad when Eeyore felt sad because everyone forgot about his birthday. It made me feel happy when Winnie the Pooh gave Eeyore a pot that Eeyore could use. It made me feel happy when he liked the pot.

Response 2 (responding to *Stone Fox*, Gardiner, 1980)
It made me feel sad because the dog died of a heart attack. And happy because he won the sled race and mad because he had to pay taxes.

Response 3 (responding to *Blind Colt*, Rounds, 1941, 1960)
When the blind colt was stuck in the snow, I was sad because he was so little and because I like horses. And the part where Whitey got to keep the horse I was happy because he really loved the blind colt.

One student made an interesting observation about the feelings she experienced while listening to *Winnie the Pooh*. She did not refer to specific events but to a general feeling about the reality of the book:

It made me feel like it was really in front of my face in real, like speaking to me and my classroom because it sounded so real to me and I liked it.

Responses to the question asking students to relate the story events to their own lives often resulted in what Monson (1986b) referred to as “the emotional reaction,” an indication that students are making personal responses to the story. Students wrote accounts of specific events in their lives that were triggered by story events. Some students wrote long, detailed responses, whereas others wrote brief replies.

Response 1 (responding to *Winnie the Pooh*)
When I was five years old and it was my birthday I thought everyone forgot my birthday. I was mad but they had planned to go to Disneyland and I did not know. I was mad and they tricked me. It was great.

Response 2 (responding to *Winnie the Pooh*)
It reminds me about when my mom only bought me a cake and we just got to eat a cake and had no presents.

Response 3 (responding to *Stone Fox*)
It reminded me of when the first dog I got was run over on Halloween night. I cried for two weeks and I felt like I was going to die but my mom and dad got me a new dog. Then I felt happy again.

There were noticeable differences between the written responses obtained at the end of the year and those obtained earlier. Students' responses displayed increased fluency and greater detail, as well as fewer errors in sentence structure and spelling. There was evidence of more summarizing by almost all students in response to the objective question about what was noticed in the story. In addition, some students made observations about the author's style and the use of fantasy, which had not been noted earlier in the year. Students' responses also increasingly reflected emotional involvement (Monson, 1986b) when relaying feelings or relating story events to their own lives. These changes may have been fostered by the reader response activity itself, as well as from exposure to a wide variety of literature.

**Closing thoughts**

Giving students the opportunity to respond to literature added a substantive element to my literature program. Regardless of reading ability all students were successful in responding to literature, guided by the prompts. Allowing students to respond in both oral and written formats fostered written and oral expression. Responding to literature promoted students' ability to connect their prior knowledge and experiences with the text, and encouraged personal response to literature. By engaging personal responses, I was able to encourage students to go beyond literal retell-
ings to more indepth analyses and emotional interpretations of literature. In short, allowing students to respond to what they read or heard from a read-aloud provided the framework for what Piaget (in Gallagher & Reid, 1983) referred to as the active involvement in learning through the construction of meaning.

Students' responses to literature provided me with a systematic way to observe and evaluate student interactions with literature. By collecting student responses, I was able to document both individual and class development in response patterns over time. Moreover, on another level, not only were students actively involved in both written and oral response modes, they were enthusiastic about literature, and their enthusiasm was sustained throughout the year. Overall, responding to literature fostered comprehension, discussion, and writing skills, and promoted emotional involvement with and appreciation of literature.

References


