

***Young Children's Responses to Picture Storybooks:
Five Types of Literary Understanding***

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I am very grateful for the invitation to speak about my research. For most of my professional career as a teacher, school board supervisor, graduate student, and university professor, I have been fascinated by young children's responses to literature, especially by their responses as picture storybooks are read aloud to them, by a teacher or a parent. This lecture is the result of 14 years of research in this area, in Kindergarten, first- and second-grade classrooms. In the United States, children in Kindergarten are between 4 and 5 years old; children in first grade are 5-6 years old; and children in second grade are 6-7 years old. My research thus deals with the first three years of formal schooling in the United States. My studies are similar in the following ways: in addition to all focusing on young children in classrooms, the great majority of the children in my studies are not children of privilege—they represent a variety of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. I found that the children were sophisticated literary critics. As well, in each study, the teachers were knowledgeable and experienced about children's literature, and were experts at conducting discussions that encouraged children to respond freely, rather than simply answering the teachers' questions. Data analysis for all my studies is based on established qualitative methods for analyzing conversations, which involves coding procedures that establish conceptual categories, resulting in grounded theory. I did not begin with an already established framework, but build the framework from the data themselves. In other words, rather than coming with an *a priori* theoretical conceptualization of literary understanding, I wanted to let the children's talk during readalouds of picture storybooks reveal what literary understanding was for them; My talk today, however, does not focus on my methodology, but rather the theory of young children's literary understanding that I have developed over the 14 years I have conducted formal research.

Briefly, the theory suggests that there are five basic types of responses that young children make while discussing picture storybooks that are read aloud to them. Moreover, I suggest that these five types of responses represent five different types of literary understanding. In the rest of the talk, I want to explain and give examples of these five types. My hope is that, by describing the five ways children respond to stories, teachers and other practitioners, as well as scholars and researchers will gain insight into the ways in which children talk about stories. This insight, I further hope, will result in greater appreciation of children's abilities as constructors of literary understanding. I will talk more about the significance of this work for both teaching and research towards the end of my lecture.

In the first type of response,
The Analytical,
the children use information from the text and illustrations of the book being read aloud to interpret setting, characters, plot, and theme. They also analyze the illustration sequence and other elements of the picturebook, such as the endpages, title page, and front and back cover. Although there are five sub-categories of this type of response, I

am going to show only two examples from this category; the first is an analysis of text, and the second is a visual analysis of illustrations

First the textual analysis from this category.

<p>Conceptual Categories: Five Aspects of Literary Understanding</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Analytical2 Intertextual3 Personal4 Transparent5 Performative
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During the reading of Paul Galdone's version of Cinderella, Mickey asked an intriguing question:

Why doesn't the slipper disappear at midnight, along with the rest of Cinderella's magic clothing? This represents what literary critic Wolfgang Iser would call a gap in the text; the text does not tell us. And the illustrations don't help to fill in this gap, either. After the teacher (indicated by a T) validates Mickey's question, some of the other children generate a series of hypotheses (which are marked with an H). Cal thinks it has to do with the *size* of the slipper; a child I couldn't identify suggests that the material--glass--has something to do with it. Gordon (at H3 and H4) introduces the idea of the fairy godmother's *intentions*, and then suggests that maybe the slippers have to be together to disappear. At H6, Terry suggests that maybe the glass slippers weren't the fairy godmother's doing at all; maybe Cinderella got them from the stepsisters. Kevin disputes this, *because the text says* that they were Cinderella's old, dirty shoes to begin with.

Mickey: Why doesn't the slipper disappear?

T: Why doesn't it disappear? I haven't figured that out yet, Mickey, either. Maybe:

H1 Cal: Maybe it's when, it turns into a very small size.

H2 ?: 'Cause it's glass.

T: That's why it doesn't disappear? Because I've always wondered; the rest of her clothing disappears. Why not her slippers?

H3 Gordon: Because, um, the fairy godmother gave it to her to keep.

T: Do you think that was in the plan, then, when the fairy godmother designed /her outfit?

H4 Gordon: Maybe not// Maybe it just didn't disappear; maybe, maybe it didn't have to be on her. Maybe

she's have to take it off or something for it to disappear.

H5 ?: Maybe she'd have to have both of them.

T: For them to disappear? And because she doesn't have the one, the magic doesn't work all the way?
Terry.

H6 Terry: I think I know why they didn't disappear. Because she didn't make 'em, she probably bought 'em. They probably got 'em from the stepsisters.

T: You think they were the stepsisters' shoes, originally?

Kevin: No, because they were old dirty shoes to begin with.

T: Kevin?

Kevin then generates two more hypotheses; the second one, H8, might be called the "Energizer Bunny" hypothesis: maybe the wand ran out of power. Trudy's hypothesis at H9 moves the discussion back to Gordon's previous idea of the *godmother's intentions*: maybe the godmother *planned it all along*. The teacher supports this and expands on it. At H10, Cal suggests that the godmother *planned* that Cinderella would lose the slipper, and after Terry shifts the discussion again to *Cinderella's intentions*--that she didn't want to get caught by the prince, Cal backs this up by suggesting that she didn't want to get caught in her old clothes. The discussion actually goes on for a few more pages, moving from Cinderella's embarrassment at the prince seeing her in her old clothes to the idea that the prince must have been a pretty superficial guy if he only liked her for her clothing!

The second example from the category of the Analytical is analysis of illustrations. The following example is from the readaloud of the dark and eerie version of Red Riding Hood by Christopher Coady, a version in which both Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are eaten by the wolf, and never rescued by a vigilant woodsman: at the end of the story, they're dead, and they stay dead.

The title page is correspondingly dark and disturbing, with its image of a full moon, a bare tree, and streaks of red in the tree branches and the lower border of the oval.

1 Sean: At first there's some red strokes over the moon.

T: Some red strokes over the moon.

Sean: And down here, too [pointing to bottom curve of vignette]

2 Nicole: Because it's Red Riding Hood.

3 Mickey: Because when, um, the hunter cuts him open, there's blood in the story.

4 T: Do you think that might be something we call foreshadowing, to let you know? Foreshadowing is what allows you to predict what might happen. Because when the illustrator and the author give you little

clues to foreshadow what will happen next, and to let you know what will happen next. Julie?

5 Julie: It's October because the leaves aren't on the tree.

T: And look at that moon: a full moon.

6 Charles: It's a warning of blood from the wolf that's goin' to eat the grandma.

Here is part of the discussion about this page. At 1, Sean notices the red strokes (notice his use of the word "strokes") over the moon and along the border. At 2, Nicole suggests that the color is appropriate for Red Riding Hood. At 3, Mickey connects the red to the blood in the story. At 4, we see the teacher taking advantage of the children's observations to make a point about foreshadowing: this is a "teachable moment," as Eeds and Wells suggest. At 5, Julie remarks that it must be the fall of the year, and the teacher adds a reference to the moon. Then, at 6, Charles sums it all up: "It's a warning of blood from the wolf that's goin' to eat the grandma." The code of color (to use William Moebius' terminology) is important in picturebooks. Red can mean excitement and joy; but it can also be a sign (in the semiotic sense) for danger, or warning, or blood. The children are learning how to analyze these visual metaphors and symbols: this *visual text*. They're also learning that the opening illustration can set the stage for the book, giving us an idea of the tone of what follows.

In summary, the responses in the category of the Analytical reflect an aspect of literary understanding similar to the concerns of the New Critics: "close reading" and interpretation of the verbal or visual text, and an understanding of the traditional "elements of narrative": characters, plot, setting, and theme.

The second category,

The Intertextual

reflects the children's abilities to relate the story being read aloud to other cultural texts and products: other books; movies, videos, advertisements, TV programs, or the work of other illustrators and artists. For example, children made links between various visual texts, comparing the grainy texture of the illustrations in Chris Van Allsburg's The Sweetest Fig to the pointillist art of Seurat, which we had discussed a few months before.

As another example of this category, I would like to show the little vignette with which I began this presentation. It took place during the reading of The Rough Face Girl, a Native American variant of the Cinderella story.

Mickey: Good always wins over evil in fairy tales.

Charles: No it don't—what about that original version of Red Riding Hood when the wolf eats her and she never gets rescued?

Peggy: Yeah, and what about Goldilocks—she was the bad guy, and she got away.

In this brief discussion, Mickey makes a generalizing statement that relies on his knowledge of many tales, not just the one being read aloud at the moment. Charles and Peggy disagree, also relying on their knowledge of other specific stories, Red Riding Hood and Goldilocks. These intertextual connections function to assist the children in refining and extending their schemata for fairy tales—to discuss characteristics of genre. In the study, there were seven other ways in which intertextual connections were utilized; these are listed in the paper.

In summary, the responses in the category of the Intertextual reflect that aspect of literary understanding that understands texts from the perspective of other texts. Stories, as author Jane Yolen puts it, “lean on other stories,” and one aspect of literary understanding is placing stories in this great literary narrative matrix.

The third conceptual category is

The Personal

Another aspect of literary understanding is the ways in which we draw a story to ourselves, making connections between our lives and the plots, situations, and characters of stories. Children utilize some experience from their lives to understand or illuminate the text being read aloud; or they use the text in order to understand or illuminate something in their own lives. These are what Marilyn Cochran-Smith has called “text-to-life” and “life-to-text” connections.

For example, Terry, a first-grade boy, made a rather courageous personal connection during the reading of Mary Hoffman’s Amazing Grace, in which the main character is taken to a ballet and then pretends to be a ballerina. At this point in the story, Terry turned to me and said in a low voice,

Terry: I’ve got a secret to tell you, Mr. Sipe, but don’t tell anybody else. I like to play ballet at home...Sometimes I do it in the house. It’s fun—I like it.
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Personal connections were also made by the whole group. During the reading of Princess Furball, a Cinderella variant that begins with illustrations of the funeral of the princess’ mother, the children were moved to begin to speak about the deaths of people they had known: a neighbor, a grandmother or other relative. During this lengthy and serious discussion, Mickey described how he had gone to a funeral of a friend of the family, a mechanic who had died of a heart attack and was cremated: “You get burned into ashes, and that’s all that’s left.” Children spoke of visiting graves and placing flowers there, and Mickey shared his disappointment that he had never known one of his grandparents who had died before he was born, and of his jealousy of his older brother who had known this grandparent. The teacher wisely let this discussion go on during the readaloud because it seemed so meaningful for the children.

Children personalized stories in other ways. For example, they gave themselves agency in stories, arguing what they would do if they were a certain character. These “I would” statements allowed the children to insert themselves in a story and shape it, like clay, nearer to their own view of how things should proceed. For the children, stories were not malleable, not immutably etched in stone. There was room in the stories for

them—their personalities, their choice-making, and their capabilities. This recognition led them to another way of personalizing: envisioning themselves as the tellers of the entire tale: During the reading of *Red Riding Hood*, Krissy said, “we could make a story about Little Red Riding Hood, like a puppet show. We could make a puppet show about Little Red Riding Hood, after reading a whole bunch of stories about her.” In this way, Krissy imagined giving herself and her friends agency, not in specific details of episodes of the story, but rather over the entire story.

In summary, the aspect of literary understanding that is highlighted by this conceptual category is the aspect that is valorized by reader-response criticism: the readers’ awareness of their own reactions, feelings, and personal associations with the text.

The responses in the fourth conceptual category,

The Transparent

suggests that the children had entered what Michael Benton calls the “secondary world” of the text; that they are having what Louise Rosenblatt describes as a “lived-through” aesthetic experience of the story. I call this category the “transparent” because it seems that the children’s world and the world of the story have become momentarily transparent to each other. Because this degree of involvement was probably most in evidence while the children were silently listening, *verbal* responses in this category were rare, indicating, like the tip of an iceberg, the depth of their engagement. In these types of response, children talk directly back to the story characters, as if the children were actually in the story itself; or they make other comments that indicate their deep immersion in the story.

For example, during the reading of *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters*, one of the characters, the proud and ungrateful sister, declares vehemently, “I will be queen. I will be queen.” Immediately after the teacher read this, several children said quietly, “No you won’t!”

Another example of a response in the transparent category occurred when the children were looking discussing Martin Wadell’s *Owl Babies*. In this story, the three owlets wait for their mother to return to the nest; they become increasingly frightened.

When the children saw the illustration of the mother owl returning to her babies in Martin Wadell’s *Owl Babies*. Rose, who rarely said anything during the readalouds, whispered slowly, quietly, and with great emotional intensity, “here she comes. Here she comes.” She was looking directly at the illustration as she spoke, not at any other children. My inference is that Rose was, for the moment, placing herself in the world of the story as one of the owl babies, and that her utterance was intended for herself alone, as she experienced the joy of the babies (who had been feeling frightened and abandoned) at seeing their mother return to their nest.

The aspect of literary understanding that responses in this category represent is the ability to position oneself in the dynamics of a narrative to such an extent that the story and one's own life, for an evanescent moment, merge with and are transparent to each other.

The fifth and last conceptual category is

The Performative

Although the responses in this category were rare, they are some of the most interesting in the data sets. Here, children are playfully manipulating the text in order to use it for their creative purposes. The text seems to function as a launching pad or platform for the children's own creativity and imagination. These responses are often mildly (or wickedly) subversive, transgressive, or Dionysian: in some classrooms, they would probably be considered simply "off-task."

I have chosen an example of the performative from Jon Scieszka's *The Stinky Cheese Man* (1992), a wry and witty book that plays with language and the conventions of the picturebook, telling such bizarre stories as "Little Red Running Shorts" and "The Princess and the Bowling Ball." Even the endflap is intriguing:

Just after I read this, the following discussion occurred:

L: ... **New! Improved! Funny! Good! Buy! Now!**

1 Terry: Why?

2 Julie: It got a medal, too!

3 Gordon: "Why," just say "why," just say "why," Mr. Sipe, just say it.

L: What? OK, Why?

4 Gordon: How come? Because. Where? When? Who? [dissolves into giggles]

L: [laughing] OK. **New! Improved! Funny! Good! Buy! Now!**

5 Terry: I don't wanna go "bye" now! I don't wanna go bye-bye now!

?: Bye-bye!

6 Terry: I don't want to go to the bathroom, and be the stinky cheese man!

?: [uproarious laughter]

7 Sally: [laughing] Enough of this goofiness!

At 1, Terry interrogates the text: why should we buy the book, just because the text says so? Julie tries to keep us on track with her comment at 2, but the other children are having none of it. At 3 and 4, Gordon sets up an imitative display of the language in the book: "How come? Because. Where? When? Who?", which I feed into by rereading part of the text. At 5 and 6, Terry makes moves that the deconstructive critic Geoffrey Hartman would be proud of, punning and using the text as a springboard for his own transgressive text-to-life connection. At 7, Sally brings us back to earth. To use the French critic Roland Barthes' term, this is a text of bliss--"jouissance"--for the children; they become happily lost in it, and, like little deconstructionists, they treat the text as their playground, as a totally free and anarchic play of signifiers, in a manifestation of what, following Bakhtin, I call a "carnavalesque romp."

Another example of performative response is provided by Terry's comments on the final page of Anthony Browne's Changes, in which a small boy sees his new baby sister, just come home from the hospital. The illustration shows a close-up of the baby.

L: [laughing] **When the door opened, light came in, and Joseph saw his father, his mother, and a baby.**

Tyl: WAHHHHH! [screws up face and opens mouth wide, pretending to be the baby]

L: **"Hello, love," said Mom.**

Tyl: [high-pitched, coquettish voice] "Hello, my love, kiss, kiss, kiss."

L: [laughing] Kissy, kissy!

Tyl: Ooh, gulp, I swallowed a sucker! [laughing and making choking noises]

As I read the text, beginning "when the door opened," Terry becomes the baby, and then the mother, crying like an infant and then imitating a female voice. At 5, I play along, and at 6, Terry gives his star performance, again becoming the baby: "Ooh, gulp, I swallowed a sucker!" In order to understand this, we must return again to the illustration and take a close look at the baby's tongue, which, indeed resembles a lollipop inserted *the wrong way* in the infant's mouth.

There is a sense in which these performative responses interrupted or disrupted the serious meaning making that was the principal activity in which the children were engaged. However, another way of looking at these responses is to conceptualize them as expressively aesthetic acts on a high level. They represent an aspect of literary understanding which sees the texts as "a vessel of associations helplessly open to the mastery of our response," an infinitely malleable play of signifiers.

These five conceptual categories, taken together, describe what constituted literary understanding for the kindergarten, first- and second-graders in my studies: what they (and their teachers) had constructed as the appropriate ways of displaying what Jonathon Culler (1975) calls "literary competence." The children (1) analyzed the text;

(2) linked the text with other texts and cultural products; (3) formed relationships between the text and their own lives; (4) entered the world of the text and allowed it (momentarily) to become their world; and (5) used the text as a platform or playground for their own creativity. I have further analyzed the relationships among these five aspects of literary understanding by (1) the stance taken by children in relationship to the texts; (2) the actions children took with respect with the texts; and (3) how texts functioned for the children.

Pedagogical Implications In my studies, about two-thirds of the children's conversational turns took place during the reading of the story; one-third of the turns took place after the story had been read. This suggests that allowing children to talk during the readaloud may result in a richer socially constructed meaning for the story, and a wider range of responses. In the case of young children, asking them to hold their response until the story is finished may simply result in the suppression of the response. The storybook readaloud situations were important sites for the formation of a literary "interpretive community" (Fish, 1980) in the classroom. Teachers may want to reflect on how their own storybook readaloud practices, rules, and routines assist in the formation of an interpretive community in their own classrooms.

In most literature circles, literature discussion groups, and classroom book clubs (Daniels, 1994; McMahon & Raphael, 1997), the discussion takes place only after the story is read. Storybook readalouds offer the possibility of scaffolding the children's meaning construction as it is in the process of being constructed.

The typology of children's responses suggests that there are at least five aspects to children's literary understanding. Teachers can consider how they may increase their students' repertoires to include a greater portion of this spectrum.

The importance of the peritextual features of picturebooks, as well as the illustration sequence, should not be underestimated. In order to understand the potential for meaning-making offered by these aspects of picturebooks, teachers may need to refine and extend their own understanding of art, illustration, and picturebook theory. By according illustrations equal importance with the text, teachers can encourage a richer diversity of interpretation, and facilitate children's ability to integrate visual and verbal information.

Because intertextual connections were found to be pivotal in many interpretive moves, teachers can encourage children to make these connections by (1) reading many variants of one story; and (2) directly asking, "What other stories does this story remind you of?"

Implications for Further Research Research is needed that makes clear the connections between literary understanding and the broader cognitive processes involved in learning to read and write, and that places the literary understanding of young children in the wider context of emergent literacy learning. We know that narrative literature is highly motivating for children; what other qualities make literature a powerful tool in learning to read?

The connection between literature and children's writing seems to be very powerful. As we expand our view of what constitutes literary understanding beyond the traditional "elements of narrative," this broader view may reveal more connections

between literary understanding and writing ability. How, for example, would a child's aptitude for performative response impact on the ability to write forcefully and with strong rhetorical purpose? Of what use are intertextual connections in learning to present a cohesive argument? How might the development of the personal response assist children in generating written text that "speaks" to its readers?

Longitudinal studies of the developing literary understanding of the same children over two or more years would be extremely useful. Researchers could investigate how new elements are added to the children's "literary tool kit" and utilized in increasingly complex ways.

The five types of literary understanding represented by the five conceptual categories of children's responses in this study need to be tested across more cases in order to validate, extend, and refine them. What modifications or refinements are necessary in order to characterize the literary responses of older children? My studies utilized picturebooks in three different genres: contemporary realistic fiction; traditional fairy-and folk-tales; and contemporary fantasy. How would the use of other literary genres impact on literary understanding? Is there evidence for the pivotal importance of intertextual connections in other classroom contexts?

The integration of visual and verbal sign systems is one of the most salient characteristics of picturebooks. Children's learning of illustration codes and conventions deserves more attention by researchers.

Broader significance:

I conclude with the observation that, while literary knowledge is important in and of itself, it also leads to intellectual and emotional growth. Literary discussion encourages higher level cognitive skills, such as inference-making, prediction and confirmation, integrating details in order to see the "big picture" of the story, and high-level abstraction from the story (as in understanding the theme or underlying message of the story). Stories provide children with a way of experiencing reality vicariously, giving them new experiences which they would not have in their everyday lives. Interpreting stories allows children to become more knowledgeable and tolerant of cultures and customs that are not their own. Stories also assist children in detaching themselves from the stream of life, so as to become more objective and reflective about many aspects of life. In other words, stories and the literary understanding that children bring to these stories enhance, deepen, and expand their conceptions of who they are and how they are a part of their family, their community, and the wider world.

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Notes on transcription conventions:

- **Bold-face** font indicates that the text of the story is being read aloud.
- Slash marks (/ and //) indicate overtalking: One speaker talking at the same time as another speaker.
- ?: indicates that a child whom I could not identify is speaking.
- ??: indicates that several children whom I could not identify are speaking.
- Brackets [] indicate audible but nonverbal behavior, such as laughing, as well as nonverbal behavior that is not audible, such as facial expressions or actions, such as pointing.
- Elipses (...) do not indicate omitted speech; they indicate brief pauses in speech.
- Single-spacing indicates all of one person's talk.
- Double-spacing indicates a change of speaker.