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Living Through Literacy Experiences Versus Literacy Analysis: Examining Stance in Children's Response to Literature

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In her transactional theory of reader-response, Rosenblatt (1978) has hypothesized that a reader's stance, or focus of attention when approaching literature, affects the individual's reaction to and understanding of a work. An efferent stance indicates the reader's attention is focused on the information to be learned and can lead to a study of the text. From an aesthetic stance, on the other hand, the reader's focus is upon the lived-through literary experience and the experiences, thoughts, feelings, images, and associations which are evoked.

Although theorists, researchers, and practitioners interested in response to literature have focused on the aesthetic stance as a point of discussion or as an underlying assumption in their works (Corcoran, 1987; Probst, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1938/1983, 1978) only recently have Rosenblatt's concepts of efferent and aesthetic been investigated through research. Cox and Many (1992) found fifth-grade students' written responses to range from efferent to aesthetic, with some mingling aspects of both. The more aesthetic responses correlated with higher levels of

personal understanding. Many, examining the responses of eighth-grade students (1990) and fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade students (1991), found the relationship between stance and level of understanding to be consistent across texts. She also noted (1990) a high degree of creativity in the aesthetic responses and a shallowness and analytical distance in many of the efferent responses. Rhodes (1990) analyzed the oral responses of six eighth-grade students to one novel, through individual interviews and group discussions. She found that students often used overlapping stances, with both efferent and aesthetic stances occurring concurrently.

The purpose of this study is to add to the literature on the stances students take when responding, by analyzing the complexity of responses written from different stances by students at different grade levels. Specifically this study sought to: 1) analyze the effect of grade on the stances students take when responding to literature; 2) investigate the qualitative differences found in responses written from different stances and determine if any differences are related to the grade of the responder.

Method

Subjects. Subjects consisted of 43 fourth-grade, 47 sixth-grade, and 40 eighth-grade students in six intact classes. A stratified cluster sampling was obtained by choosing classes from one elementary and one middle school from a low socioeconomic area and one elementary and one middle school from a middle to upper socioeconomic area. Two classes at each grade level were chosen at random from available classes. All students in each class participated in the data collection but only data from on-level subjects (as determined by standardized test scores given the previous spring) were used in the data analysis.

Materials. Three realistic short stories were chosen through a field testing of possible selections and a pilot study. Research indicates realistic stories to be preferred reading in the upper elementary grades (Golden, 1979; Purves and Beach, 1972). The initial field testing provided feedback on appropriate story length and student interest and led to the selection of six stories which were used in the pilot study. These stories were examined by a panel of three reading experts and were rated as above average using a story evaluation instrument (Sword, 1985) on the criteria of plot unification, plot believability, imaginative plot, main character portrayal, believability of main character, use of vivid imagery, and establishment of mood.

The stories rated highest by all students from the fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade classes used in the pilot study (one class at each grade level) were chosen for use in the study. The ratings of the three selected stories (1 = high, 5 = low) were: *The Runaway* (Holman, 1976) rated 2.63; *The Dollar's Worth* (Werner, 1979) rated 2.72; and *The Secret of the Aztec Idol* (Bonham, 1976) rated 2.72.

Procedure. For each story, subjects read and then responded freely to the following probe, "Write anything you want about the story you just read." Data were collected on three occasions across a nine-week period. Story order was counterbalanced to account for possible effects of story sequence on response.

Responses were analyzed according to the stance taken using the following classification (adapted from Cox and Many, 1992): 1) primarily efferent (responses analyzing the text as an object or relating what the story was about; 2) no primary focus (responses containing no identifiable stance or responses including both efferent and aesthetic

elements); 3) primarily aesthetic (responses giving clear evidence of the lived-through experience, sometimes by giving attention to specific parts). Interrater reliability for the holistic rating was established at $r = .79$. To examine for possible qualitative differences, responses written from the same stances were then sorted using Beach's (1985) clustering technique. Repeated passes were made through the data checking for similarities with regard to the specific content with clusters emerging based on the content of the response.

Results and conclusions

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for grade and text on the variable of stance revealed no significant main effects for grade. Main effects were found for text, indicating text to be a factor which can significantly affect the degree to which students assume an efferent or aesthetic stance, $F(2,344) = 6.53, p < .01$. These findings were not surprising given the body of research documenting the effects of text on students' response to literature (Golden, 1979; Purves, 1981). It is interesting, however, that no interaction effects were found between grade and text. This indicates that, for at least these three texts, students tended to assume similar stances when responding, regardless of their grade levels.

Although no significant differences were found between grade levels in terms of the range of efferent to aesthetic responses, close examination of the responses within each stance type using the cluster analysis technique revealed qualitative differences in the content and the complexity of the responses written from each stance. Some of these differences did seem to be related to the grade of the subject.

Efferent response clusters. As shown in Table 1, in terms of the efferent responses which focused on relating the story, fourth graders seemed less likely than the older subjects to write a synopsis of the story, focusing instead on elaborate retellings. This is consistent with earlier research (Applebee, 1978) which has found that a focus on retelling and summarizing decreases with age.

Table 1
Analysis of Efferent Responses by
Grade and Response Cluster

Content Cluster	Grade		
	4	6	8
Responses focusing on what the story was about	35 (77.1%)	21 (55.3%)	31 (70.5%)
Retelling	(33)	(16)	(26)
Synopsis	(2)	(5)	(5)
Literary analysis	11 (23.9%)	17 (44.7%)	13 (29.5%)
No reference to story content	(8)	(9)	(4)
Analysis ties into story content	(3)	(8)	(9)
Total efferent responses	46	38	44

The second content cluster of efferent responses focused on literary analyses. Sixth graders seemed more likely to write about the literary elements when writing efferent responses than did either the fourth graders or the eighth graders. When examining the responses within this cluster, strong differences in the complexity of the responses were also noted. Students at the fourth-grade level tended to write simplistic responses which did not make any references to the actual story content. For example, one

fourth grader wrote, *"It was a very good story. It had a very good plot and setting. Well defined characters. The story was well told. The story was very good itself. I think if they had a contest it would be in the top ten maybe even number one."* In such responses, the subjects were so detached from the text that the response itself gave no indication of the story which had been read. In contrast, the majority of the eighth graders' literary analyses were more complex, with references to certain events or characters used to substantiate specific aspects being critiqued.

Table 2
Analysis of Responses
No Primary Focus by Grade and Response Cluster

Content Cluster	Grade		
	4	6	8
Focus unable to be determined	13 (54.2%)	11 (44.0%)	4 (25.0%)
Efferent and aesthetic elements	11 (45.8%)	14 (56.0%)	12 (75.0%)
Unrelated efferent/aesthetic elements	(11)	(11)	(8)
Efferent analysis based on aesthetic evocation	(0)	(3)	(4)
Total responses with no primary focus	24	25	16

Cluster of responses with no primary focus.

Unlike Rhodes' (1990) study, which found that students' oral responses tended to reveal overlapping stances, the written responses coded as having no single primary focus made up the fewest number of responses at each grade level (see Table 2). When these responses were sorted into clusters, strong qualitative differences were apparent both between

and within the clusters. The majority of the fourth graders' responses fell into the cluster in which the focus of the response was unable to be determined because of brevity or because of the vagueness of what was written (e.g., "I enjoyed this story... I'd like to hear it again," etc.). In contrast, only 25% of the eighth-grade responses with no primary focus were included in this group.

The second content cluster was made up of responses which contained both efferent and aesthetic elements. Within this cluster, differences in sophistication of responses was also evident. In some responses, as illustrated below, the distinct efferent and aesthetic elements were unrelated bits of information.

I think this story was wonderful. I mosly like the characters, espeacialy Mr. Watts. All of these characters have parts in the story. The characters in this story are Trish, Mr. Watts. I like the part when she finds the 20 dollar bill and when Mr. Watts comes back to get it. This story tels you about onasty that is why I like it. (Emily, Grade 4 - The Dollar's Worth).

Emily's identification of the characters and of an "honesty" theme is characteristic of an efferent stance. Her attention to the part of the story which drew her attention, however, can be described as having a more aesthetic focus. While these efferent and aesthetic elements seem unrelated, in other responses the efferent analysis was clearly built upon an aesthetic evocation. This is evidenced in Kathy's response below to *The Secret of the Aztec Idol*, a mystery story about two boys who are tricked by an old con man when they agree to buy a secret from him.

...I think the best thing about this story was that it is creative. I hope to be a writer someday myself and wish

to have stories as creative as this one. One of the things I saw when I was reading it was that you didn't feel for the characters. You didn't feel silly or angry or scared for them or anything. I felt puzzled but that was all.

In a way the story was unbelievable because no one cared about the Aztec Idol except the boys and Secrets. I think if you were supposed to get the feeling that it was meant to be prise-less, he (Secrets) could have told the boys that Scientistes across America were looking for it and if the boys found it they would become heros. I just think this story had a good plot but to an adventurous reader it was nothing. I don't mean that every adventurer has the same opion but as for me I just though it was good. Nothing more. (Kathy, grade 6)

In this response the elements were integrated in what would be characteristic of what Rosenblatt (1978) has described as *transactive criticism*. In such responses the reader/critic keeps in mind that the object of analysis is the aesthetic evocation, the personal experience which occurred between the reader and the text. This type of critique was only evident in a small number of responses written by subjects at the sixth- and eighth-grade levels.

Aesthetic response clusters. Responses coded as primarily aesthetic were sorted into five clusters: focusing on favorite parts, associations made, making judgments, interpretation, or responses which integrated a number of such elements. The primary qualitative differences between responses written by students at different grade levels occurred in three content clusters (see Table 3).

In responses clustering according to a focus on associations, students either connected characters or events with people or occurrences in their lives, or they put themselves in the character's shoes and related what they would have done in such a situation. These associations were

subdivided as to whether the association seemed pointless, or if there was any indication that the association added to or enhanced the students' experience of the story.

Table 3
Analysis of Aesthetic Responses
by Grade and Response Cluster

Content Cluster	Grade		
	4	6	8
Favorite parts	12 (27.3%)	6 (10.5%)	2 (4.2%)
Associative	6 (13.6%)	12 (21.1%)	5 (10.4%)
Pointless	(6)	(8)	(1)
Increased understanding	(0)	(4)	(4)
Judgments	8 (18.2%)	9 (15.8%)	6 (12.5%)
Characters	(5)	(1)	(0)
Events	(3)	(8)	(6)
Interpretative	4 (9.1%)	4 (7.0%)	11 (22.9%)
Integrative	14 (31.8%)	26 (45.6%)	24 (50.0%)
Rambling	(12)	(21)	(12)
Development of topic	(2)	(2)	(4)
World/literary knowledge into unified whole	(0)	(3)	(8)

When responding in such ways, fourth graders and sixth graders were more likely to make such associations without giving any indication the connection added to their understanding of the story. Either the association led to an elaborate retelling of an experience which was never connected back with the story itself or one associative comment after another was briefly noted. Such a response is exem-

plified in the following reaction by Bart, a fourth grader, "I wish I could have the \$35.00. I like the story because it was like a mystery... I wish I could have Secret as a slave and get him to tell me every secret he knows."

Responses such as Bart's are similar to what Smith (1992) describes as association-driven orientation. In association-driven reading, a reader brings a succession of personal experiences to mind while reading. These associations, however, do not seem to inform the reading of the text, nor is the reading of the text used to help the student reflect on these experiences. The associations are merely noted and then the reader moves on. In contrast, the associative responses written by the eighth graders tended to reveal an increased understanding as a result of the association made, indicative of what Rosenblatt (1978) calls *selective attention*. The associations brought to mind in response to the text are focused upon in order to create a more unified whole. The associations are "...woven into the relevant structure of idea, feeling, and attitude" (p. 43). In Amy's free response below, for instance, she puts herself in the story world of *The Secret of the Aztec Idol* as did Bart in the earlier response. Her response, on the other hand, reveals a deep understanding of the characters' feelings as she speaks from her perception of the character's point of view.

"Curses," said Secrets.

"Why do the good guys always win?"

"I'm a pretty good guy once you get to know me."

"Go on" said the officer, "get in the van."

"We're taking you to the county jail."

"It was my first experience with crime, and I had solved it myself!" thought Charlie.

"The next day an article was printed in the paper, saying I was a hero.

*It felt good. Very good.
But it scared me, people like "Secrets" and
that "lipless" man scared me.
I could never go into crime-fighting.
Even with the satisfaction it gave me,
I could never be a part of a world like that."
(Amy, Grade 8)*

Subcategorizing the responses focusing on judgments also revealed qualitative differences which seemed to be related to subjects' grade level. The fourth-grade responses tended to be brief, superficial statements judging characters as mean, greedy, nice, etc. In contrast the sixth- and eighth-grade subjects' responses tended to be more representative of elaborative judgments, with students giving their opinions concerning specific story incidents.

The integrative aesthetic responses included elements which were found in isolation in the other aesthetic responses. These were further subdivided into three categories: rambling, development of topic, and world/literary knowledge into unified whole. The majority of the fourth- and sixth-grade responses tended to ramble from one topic to another. Some of the eighth-grade responses were also of this type, but eighth graders also focused on the development of a topic through the use of a number of elements. For instance, one student expressed her feelings towards a character by including her opinions of the character's actions (judgments), relating how she would have reacted to the character (associative), and commenting on the motives behind the character's behavior (interpretive).

Other responses in this cluster included integration of world knowledge. In these responses students synthesized their real life experiences and their story world experience

in a manner consistent with what Cochran-Smith (1984) describes as life-to-text connections.

...I didn't realize the secrets would be something like where an ancient idol was, if it would have been secrets about silly things or just dumb thing you can goof off with I would have bought one from the old man. But only if he was nice and sold secrets to the kid because he enjoyed seeing them get a thrill. If the man was as much as a jerk as the man in this story was and if the secrets were so dumb I wouldn't have bought one. That man was so conceited and concerned about himself that I hated him. You could tell from the beginning by the way he talked about welfare, it was the way he said it and what he said about it that made you know he was a jerk. A friendly old guy who enjoyed kids might have had a different approach for selling a secret. He would have been nicer and more interesting. Like an old man who loves to see kids steal peaches off his tree because he likes seeing the kids so joyful and then right when the kids get just one peach he runs out of his house and shouts, "You rotten little brats! I'll get you good for this" even though he really doesn't mean it, he just likes to give the kids a good time and make them feel important like. (Herbert, Grade 8 - The Aztec Idol)

Herbert integrates his personal knowledge of welfare and what people are like into his response to the story. He understands that some people in real life might act one way on the surface, simply to give kids a thrill, and yet he also realizes such people and their motives are very different from the person described in the story. These understandings are used as he formulates his response to the actual character. Such responses, where an integration of knowledge about the world was evident, were more prevalent at the eighth-grade level and did not occur at all at the fourth-grade level.

Summary and implications

This study indicated that students at different grade levels did not differ significantly in their choice of stance, whether efferent or aesthetic, when responding to three literary texts. However, close analysis revealed that differences did exist between the grade levels in terms of the content and complexity of the responses. While some variations across grade levels can be expected due to differences in students' abilities or willingness to express themselves in writing, the findings do shed light on the differences in sophistication which can exist within responses written from the same stance. Also, the grade-level tendencies give us a clearer indication of what might be expected from fourth-, sixth- and eighth-grade students when they freely respond to literature. Familiarity with the types of complexity which might exist within both efferent and aesthetic responses of students at different grade levels can provide educators with a sense of direction as they endeavor to implement approaches which develop students' ability to analyze literary works and which focus students' attention on the aesthetic evocation.

For instance, in light of the responses described in this study as efferent analyses based on aesthetic evocation, teachers might have students go beyond showcasing a knowledge of literary terminology by weaving into literary critiques evidence of a personal lived-through story experience. Such responses differ from the efferent responses which simply mention story content in that the reader/critic is not referring to the *text* but to the *experience* which that particular reader had with that particular text, on that particular occasion in time. This approach would allow students to work on and develop analytical skills, while not losing sight of the fact that literature is first meant to be experienced. Teachers could initially introduce a story and encourage

students to actively envision the story world and to reflect on their own reaction to it. Next, the students might reflect on specific artistic or literary elements which significantly affected their particular story experience. Thus, continual connections could be made from the technique or aspect being discussed and the corresponding effect on the individual reader's transaction with the text.

To focus on developing aesthetic responses, teachers could encourage students to use selective attention, and to continually bring the associations made, emotions evoked, and ideas which surface, back to bear on the story experience. In such an atmosphere, children are invited to use personal literary and life experiences, and their unique perceptions and reactions to what they are reading, to create a rich experience from each literary work. Such an aesthetic approach would not encourage an "any-thing goes" attitude toward response; instead, students would continually connect the emotions, associations, thoughts, and visualizations evoked back to the story world, enriching rather than distracting from the original story experience. By encouraging the development of mature and sophisticated responses, like the aesthetic responses which demonstrate the use of selective attention or the efferent responses based on aesthetic evocations, teachers could support and enrich students' growth as they interact with the secondary worlds they create from each text they experience.

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