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## The Art of Literary Interpretation: Preservice Teachers Learning About the Arts in Language Arts

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Picture this. After reading a chapter of *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) to her case study child, a preservice teacher writes:

When E. B. White describes the rope swing in the barn, I really felt like I was swinging with the intonation of my words. I would read faster when the ride on the swing was closest to the floor of the barn and then slow my speed and raise my intonation when the swing was at the hayloft, pausing like the swing itself does after gravity pulls it back towards the earth. I caught [the child]'s head moving up and down as if she was watching Fern and Avery ride the swing (RLS, 10/25/93, age 10).

Learning to catch the rhythm of story and carry it forward into the dramatic or visual arts to engage children in literature is not an easy ride. There can be false starts, jolts in the process, and clumsy conclusions. Yet with a willingness to take risks in literary expression through story reading, dramatic enactment, and visual representation, both preservice teachers' and children's literary interactions have the potential to move into smooth flight.

As a part of a larger study on preservice teachers learning to lead literary response (Wolf, Carey, & Mieras, 1996; Wolf, Mieras, & Carey, in press), the first author asked preservice teachers in her children's literature classes to conduct a "reader response case study" with a young child. The preservice teachers, including the two coauthors of this article, read weekly with individually selected children, carefully documenting each session with fieldnotes that described the date and time spent, books read, questions asked, comments made, and activities connected with the reading of the text. The preservice teachers submitted their field notebooks twice during the semester for the first author's commentary and used both notes and commentary in a final paper on their child's response to literature or on their own growth as teachers of children's literature.

The assignment emphasized the need for teachers to expand their artistic "tool kits" for literary interpretation, underscoring the idea that engagement in literature can be enhanced if children are offered a wide "array of mediational means" for responding to literature (Wertsch, 1991, p. 94). When the preservice teachers began the study, they made few connections between literature and the arts. They read in a monotone and rarely asked their case study children to enact or visually represent text. Yet, over time, as the preservice teachers learned from children, read relevant research, and participated in class activities that often centered on the arts, their perceptions of their own as well as their case-study children's capacity for artistic response broadened. For ex-

artistic mediational tools for literary response are generally undervalued in typical instructional settings (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995).

The purpose of this article is to show what happens when preservice teachers were given opportunities not only to learn about theoretical aspects of artistic interpretation but to enact it in their own practice. Whereas the university class served to expand the teachers' "tool kits" for literary interpretation, particularly through an emphasis on artful story reading as well as dramatic and visual representations of response, the case-study assignment served to bring the ideas to life. Thus the delivery of text through dramatic story reading as well as the enactment of text through play and drama served to bring preservice teachers and their children together with text, with each other, and with other ways of making meaning in the world.

### METHODS AND SOURCES OF DATA

The subjects for this study are 43 elementary preservice teachers who were enrolled in the first author's Children's Literature class in 1993. The case-study children were selected by the preservice teachers and ranged from 2 to 12 years of age. In the case-study assignment, the first author asked preservice teachers to read with an individual child over the course of a semester and keep careful fieldnotes on their child's literary response. This included the questions, comments, and activities of each session as well as the preservice teachers' reflections on their own learning. The first author's evaluative commentary counseled students to connect their findings to relevant research as they looked across the patterns in their fieldnotes and wrote a final paper on a selected theme.

Data for this study were collected at the end of each semester and included students' fieldnotes and final papers as well as artistic renderings from their case-study children. The data segments used here were taken verbatim from the preservice teachers' fieldnotes or final papers. Words in quotation marks within these segments indicate direct speech or passages the preservice teachers read from trade book texts. Words in parentheses are comments the preservice teachers wrote as asides to their main text. Words in brackets are our own, and they serve to provide reference information or to add clarification. Each data segment is marked by the preservice teacher's code name, the date or session number of the passage, and the age of the case-study child.

Data also included the first author's evaluative commentary to students as well as class lecture notes and handouts. Following qualitative methods, we established analytic categories and coded the data to confirm key assertions warranted by multiple-evidence sources as well as search for discrepant cases (Erickson, 1986). The categories align to the course content which included modeling, lectures, and activities on story reading (e.g., preservice teachers planning for sessions or using intonation, dialect, or gesture), drama (e.g., children imitating, interacting with, or extending text through dramatic play), and art in literary response (e.g., children interpreting trade book illustrations or illustrating their own responses). After coding the data, we divided the preservice teachers' fieldnotes into beginning, middle, and final sessions to study the kinds of codes that were typically associated with these sessions. We then assembled represen-

With regard to story reading, each class began by reading a tale or short passage to demonstrate the possibilities of tone, accent, and use of small props. From the reading of Hamilton's (1985) *The People Could Fly* on the first day of class and through every class thereafter, the first author tried to emphasize how "language comes alive when heard" (Livo, 1987, p. xii). As an experienced story reader, she also stressed the preparation necessary to an effective reading and advised the students to practice reading aloud at home.

In terms of drama, the first author spent a class on children's informal enactments of text through sociodramatic play as well as more formal approaches to classroom drama. After a mini lecture on readers theater, the class performed an evocative scene from Taylor's (1976) *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* in which the young protagonist discovers the reality of racism. Working in small groups, the preservice teachers took the roles of Cassie and her mother to capture the tone of a child faced with incomprehensible issues as well as that of her mother's wiser, but no less accepting, comments on the injustice around them.

Furthermore, in the first author's response to their case fieldnotes, she asked preservice teachers to recognize and validate young children's often active response to literature. For example, one preservice teacher working with a very young child was initially taken aback by her child's need to activate text. The child waved and talked to the story characters, developed numerous sounds to accompany the text, and once even sat on top of a book to ride the pony on the page. Over time, however, the preservice teacher learned to substantiate and even solicit his very dramatic response, a choice that the first author highly encouraged:

I'm glad you're going to pursue the idea of [your child's] very physical interaction with books (feeding the characters, waving to them). How I loved the image of [him] sitting on the book pony and shouting "Gi-op!" And it's not just with books that invite physicalization. He enacts them all. You are also an excellent facilitator in this process—following his lead, encouraging him, and providing him with new ideas as well. You might want to focus on his tendency to activate the books, both in the moment of reading and beyond (GBD, 4/1/93, age 2).

The first author's comments reflect an overarching theme in the class to carefully observe and follow the child's lead in response. What first appeared to the preservice teacher as a distraction developed into a key insight into the child's preferences for response—one that allowed him to express understanding that may have been more difficult if he had been restricted to verbal expression.

With regard to the visual arts, the first author emphasized both the professional art of illustration and children's art as an expression of literary understanding (Nodelman, 1988). In a class devoted to professional picture books, she discussed three key understandings: (a) illustration is information not decoration, (b) illustration is interpretation not translation, and (c) there is often a match or an ironic mismatch between the author's and the illustrator's tone, mood, or stylistic choices. As a complementary activity, she asked the students to bring books by famous illustrators. In class, they worked in groups devoted to one illustrator and analyzed the key features of their artist's work. Using a variety of art materials she provided, they collaboratively illustrated these features in a poster for the class. One group who studied Chris Van Allsburg created a

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When one is a spectator in an artistic event, there is a tendency to move between admiration and criticism—to shift between awe at the seeming ease of the display and critical assessment about how to improve the performance. But until one becomes an insider in the artistic experience, the opportunities for understanding the creative craft and necessary criticism are limited. Ninety-five percent of the preservice teachers in this study wrote about their growth as story readers, suggesting that reading stories to children challenged them to move from outsider to insider roles and to carefully consider the skill involved. Many initially thought that such reading would be simple, but the combination of models offered in the university class and the sometimes obvious disgruntlement of children as they yawned, begged for breaks, or entertained themselves with small toys spurred the preservice teachers to consider what it would take for an engaging interpretation. As one preservice teacher noted:

Prior to commencing this study, I had always considered myself to be a proficient reader of children's picture books. . . . I was aware of what I was doing when I was telling a story, but I was not totally committed to taking the necessary steps to make the story come to life. Fortunately, during this case-study period I was exposed to other story tellers who were more capable than myself. Through this exposure and having the opportunity to practice my technique, I was able to evaluate my ability and to improve upon my art of telling stories (DPS, 11/24/93, age 4).

Thus, over time and experience the preservice teachers learned that the art of reading stories had to be nurtured through practice and inventive risk-taking.

In terms of practice, children were quick to recognize lack of preparation. Many preservice teachers discussed sessions where they were unfamiliar with a story and suffered the consequences. For example, after a less than effective session, one preservice teacher wrote, "One change that I will definitely make is to read the story ahead of time. I found myself not getting the feeling of the story right . . . so next time I'll be prepared" (WBE, 2/3/93, age 11). A week later he practiced the story several times in advance and wrote: "It made a big difference. This way, I had a feel for each character and how to portray them. This is a lesson that I'm glad I learned early on" (2/10/93).

Yet, advance practice did not set interpretations in stone. One preservice teacher talked about the needed balance between planning and flexibility: "I believe a lot of the positive responses I received had to do with the way I [was] prepared and . . . ready to change my tactics when needed" (CRS, 4/21/93, age 3). In the moment of enactment, performers must take audience reaction into account. Even in the theater where lines are often "set," performance intensifies the experience (Wolf, 1994). This is particularly true when children are the audience, for they rarely hesitate to reveal their opinions either through their spoken comments or body positioning.

In response to these obvious reactions, the way preservice teachers read their books changed over time. One preservice teacher noted, "reading is a bit of a theater production" (GCD, 4/21/93, age 6). Some used eye gaze and body positioning to engage their children: "I began to notice [the child] looking away, [so] I tried to make more eye contact . . . and I shifted my body so I was facing her. . . . Once I did this she was more responsive" (AMI, 9/9/93, age 9). Others created their own gestures or imitated tech-

teacher's vocal interpretation with their own voices or imitating the gestures incorporated into the story reading. After reading Carle's (1990) *The Very Quiet Cricket* one preservice teacher wrote:

I rubbed two of my fingers together each time the cricket tried to rub his wings. Each time a new insect approached the cricket I changed my voice to show the difference in each of the characters. Whenever I read, "But nothing happened. Not a sound," I shook my head and looked sad. After doing these things a few times, [the child] began to rub two of his fingers together [when] we got to that part. . . . He began to shake his head and say with me, "But nothing happened. Not a sound." I was very excited about all this response (CRS, 2/21/93, age 3).

At other times the children would imitate a facial expression or gesture described or illustrated in the text. Erikka Mieras, both a preservice teacher in the study and a coauthor, worked with a child who was interested in the dramatic potential of fairy tales. For example, as an ugly step sister in Cinderella tried to shove her foot into the slipper, the child removed her shoe and put it on "so that her heel stuck out over the end" in order to imitate the futile action involved (2/20/93, age 6). Another child studied an illustration from Van Allsburg's (1984) *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* where a young girl stares at a caterpillar spelling "Good-bye" into her hand. The child asked her preservice teacher to write the word "good-bye" onto her hand and then "imitated the girl in the picture perfectly—periodically look[ing] at her hand" while the preservice teacher continued the story (CAQ, 10/19/93, age 6).

Children who were very young often made direct contact with the story on the page. They waved to characters, stroked them, and hit them in defiance of their actions. As one preservice teacher commented about her 4-year-old child, "He really likes to touch the books, tracing the roads with his fingers, or the movement lines of the characters" (SKE, 10/13/93, age 4). Touching the lives of the characters on the page not only upped the ante on children's engagement in text, but it allowed the children to distinguish between fantasy and their own powerful realities. As one preservice teacher wrote, "Dorothy was the main character of the book and her aunt would not let her touch the animals. Whenever the aunt told Dorothy not to touch, [the child] would pet the animals on the page and tell me, 'I can touch them'" (CRS, 3/14/93, age 3).

Differentiating between the life of the text and their own lives sometimes allowed children to extend the story, adding new dialogue, characters, or original scenes. Sometimes these re-creations were small animations that sprang from the story, but other times an incident in life would lead to an intertextual connection. One night when eating dinner a child offered her mother "a spear of broccoli. 'Take it, take it I say!' [she said] imitating the wicked witch in Sleeping Beauty, who says 'Touch [the spindle], touch it I say!'" (UAT, 6/22/93, age 5). Using story words in her own scene allowed her to play with language as well as see its powerful effect on avoiding unwelcome food.

At other times a story would spark a full production. One child dressed herself in an apron and played the Little Red Hen, picking grains from the wheat in her garden, and asking her mother for a ride to the mill—which prompted her mother to write: "Pretend play follows the grains of the imagination. Whatever precipitated her decision to 'become' the Little Red Hen followed her through the textual weave of literature into real life" (GCD, 4/21/93, age 6).

illustrative commentary relatively moot. Those who worked with picture books, however, found that illustrations often sparked intriguing conversations. A subsample of the case studies showed that a fourth of the initiating comments made by children in the first sessions concerned pictures. As one preservice teacher noted, "He seemed to comment on all of the pictures in one way or another; he was very un-word focused" (SJD, 10/6/93, age 5).

The focus on illustrations is not surprising considering the wealth of sophisticated picture books available today. Just as authors leave gaps for readers to fill with textual information (Nodelman, 1992), so illustrators create spaces for readers to imagine illustrative possibilities. Trites (1994) calls these spaces "visual manifold narratives" suggesting that "the multiple planes of signification" (p. 225) actually give much credit to the interpreter who can link meanings together and "insert herself or himself into the signifying chain of the text" (p. 236). For the case-study children, the influence of illustration was strongest when the illustration extended beyond or in contrast to the text. In such cases, one preservice teacher suggested that children seem to "believe the pictures they see rather than the words they read" (LLI, 4/21/93, age 7), especially when the preservice teachers gave them room to align their interpretations with personal experience. For example, Angela Carey, a preservice teacher and a coauthor of this piece, studied two cousins and wrote: "One of the most significant similarities between the two boys was their interest in illustrations. In a way, it was their chance to retell the stories as if they were wordless books" (4/21/93, ages 5 & 7).

Although the majority of the children discussed the potential meanings in illustration and inserted themselves into the interpretation, fewer children actually drew or colored their own illustrations in response to text. In fact, only 11 preservice teachers (26%) gave their children opportunities to illustrate their responses, and many of these only tried "sketch to stretch" (Siegel, 1995) possibilities after receiving explicit encouragement from me. Yet, when children were given opportunities to illustrate, the results were extremely positive. They were eager to draw, taking up their pencils and crayons with relish, and they were also adept at analyzing their own renderings. One preservice teacher wrote about her case-study child's prediction of the mood shift between two chapters in *Charlotte's Web* (1952):

In [her] picture she chose to use pink construction paper and included a sun, Charlotte and Fern. I asked why she included a sun. She mentioned that "this chapter would be about a sunny day." I asked her why. She said that, "Charlotte would brighten Wilbur and Fern's day. . . . This chapter wouldn't be gloomy like the last one" (JCI, #7, age 6).

After reading some of the theoretical literature on children's illustration (e.g., Hubbard, 1989), the preservice teacher wrote:

I realize now how she used her drawings to assimilate the information in *Charlotte's Web*. She used color, characters, and features such as the sun, storm clouds, and moon to depict a mood or make connections. She also used these symbols as metaphors for her own experiences which enabled her to close the gaps and experience the "wholeness" of literacy. Olsen (1992) suggests that these connections are common for children, "Through making connections graphically students can explore the relationships and interactions of literature and life" (p. 57).

girls have to "say" as they struggle to create images . . . on paper. "Look at them, looking," he once urged me as we watched some children draw—and then he added, "their eyes meeting the world." He wished that schools, especially, would take the child as artist more seriously: "A youngster drawing is a youngster thinking, a youngster telling you a hell of a lot. When will we know that?" (p. 1).

Yes, when *will* we know that? Certainly, for the participants in this study, knowing is not complete. But with the guided practice offered in their university class and the opportunity for situated learning from case study children who were quite willing to give them a push, the preservice teachers took the necessary and thrilling leap to learn about the arts in language arts.

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