TEACHER ACTIONS IN EARLY LITERATURE DISCUSSIONS: Through the Lens of Reader Response Scholarship

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During morning free-play time in a Head Start class-room, three children sit with books on a large square of carpet. One girl with a bin of books under her chair, "just like Miss Colleen," mimics her teacher's read-aloud behavior by holding up the book to allow her classmates to view the pictures as she shares a story she appears to construct on the spot.

In Whitney's classroom, a whole-group read-aloud is a flurry of activity. As the teacher motions with her feet to show pedaling in the story, the children mimic her actions and the group quickly turns into a blur of whirling feet in the air. The children hold up their fingers to count the repeated text at the teacher's en-couragement. Later, a boy wearing hearing aids blows a kiss as the teacher describes it in the book.

As their teacher, Nicole, encourages them to discuss the animals on one page of *The Mixed-Up Chameleon*, the children wiggle closer and closer to her chair. As each child takes a turn, they struggle to stay seated, their arms gesturing toward the illustrations as they talk. One child apparently can't help herself and darts quickly to touch the elephant when she mentions it.

AS THESE STORIES ILLUSTRATE, classroom talk focused on literature, especially talk that encourages ac-tive student involvement, creates numerous possibilities to advance students' literacy and literary understandings. As read-alouds are among the most recommended practices to support emerging literacy skills (e.g., National Early Literacy Panel, 2008), classroom reading events hold significant promise for early literacy learning. Literary scholars have similarly extolled the benefits of literature study on students' learning. Langer (2011), for example, described the importance of literature exploration on the development of thinking. She stated,

> All literature—the stories we read as well as those we tell—provides us with a way to imagine human potential. In its best sense, literature is both intellectually provocative and humanizing, allowing us to use various points of view to examine thoughts, beliefs, and actions. (p. 5)

Sipe (2008) agreed, urging the inclusion of literary studies with young children that moves far beyond "indoctrinating them into the world of school-based literacy" (p. 6). He explained that providing opportunities for children to actively engage with picture storybooks contributes "to their literacy learning, high-level cognitive abilities, and engagement with the imaginary world of stories so they may develop more nuanced perspectives on real life, as well as a critical stance toward the status quo" (p. 7).

Despite the theoretical support for and empirical evidence of benefits from literature conversations, such literary

interactions are sometimes lacking in early childhood (EC) classrooms or are enacted without purposeful consideration of the components that benefit young students (Teale, 2003). While there are many recommendations regarding the use of read-alouds with early learners, there remains a need for stronger examination of how preschoolers engage in literature discussions, what understandings they demonstrate, and how teachers can best utilize literature discussions to support text-level understandings and meaning-making capabilities essential for their student populations. Reader response scholarship may unlock possibilities for literature discussions to support early learners. For example, might literary theories provide a reasonable base from which to examine literature discussions in EC classrooms? How do teachers' book interactions with young learners link to this theoretical base? Can the rich tradition of reader response theories play a role in helping teachers support young children's relationships with books?

To examine these possibilities, I explored how preschoolers and their teachers constructed knowledge through participation in literature conversations. In this article, I focus attention on findings that address the following research question: How do preschool teachers enable their students' literary understandings and participation in classroom literature discussions? I will expound on these findings through the work of three literary scholars, Louise Rosenblatt, Judith Langer, and Lawrence Sipe, to better understand the possibilities of their conclusions for literature discussions with children in early learning settings. Viewed through the lens of reader response theorists, these findings will contribute to understanding the roles these teachers played in supporting their students' read-aloud interactions and consider the potential for preschool literature interactions to support literary growth in early childhood classrooms.

Preschool Literature Discussions

Research has linked classroom text interactions to growth in numerous areas of early literacy learning. Dickinson (2001) found measurable benefits to children's language resulting from teacher–child book interactions. Other studies have demonstrated support for concepts such as print awareness (Justice et al., 2008) and vocabulary development (Blewitt et al., 2009), as well as support for growth with story elements and story comprehension (Wiseman, 2011) and for higher-level literacy learning and literary conversations (Vasquez, 2010).

Participation in today's society demands critical, interpretive literacy involvement (Coiro et al., 2008) that extends beyond a focus on surface-level abilities. Hoffman (2011) defined "higher level literacy practices as those focused on actively constructing meaning through analysis, interpretation, and critical thinking, resulting in interpretations of text, rather than comprehension of literal-level content explicitly in text" (p. 184). Research (e.g., Pantaleo, 2004; Sipe, 2008) demonstrates that classroom literature talk, especially in a format that encourages active student involvement, holds possibilities for advancing not only text-based skills but also students' literary participation and higher-level literacy understandings. For example, Pantaleo (2007) demonstrated how exploratory talk during interactive read-alouds prompted first graders to think collectively as they reflected on their own and others' ideas. Pantaleo stated that "the social and discursive practices established during the small group read-aloud sessions contributed to the students' language and literacy development" (p. 445).

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Despite considerable evidence of benefits from interactive literature conversations, such purposeful interactions are sometimes lacking in EC classrooms (Dickinson, 2001; Teale, 2003). Martinez et al. (2003) pointed out that much literacy instruction focuses on children's "acquisition and understanding of the alphabetic nature of English" (p. 222) rather than on children's meaning-making from text. Galda et al. (2000) agreed, asserting that even in classrooms claiming to be literature-based, "there was little evidence that children's literature was being used for literary as well as literacy instruction" (p. 374).

Children's literacy growth requires that classroom literature discussions be planned for and sensitive to the student populations with whom they are conducted (Silverman & Crandall, 2010). While much evidence points to the value of the social environment to prompt student learning during literature discussions, many of these studies were conducted in Grade K–12 classrooms; there is a lack of

research focused on preschoolers' literature conversations, especially preschoolers in economically and culturally disenfranchised populations. There are many recommendations for read-alouds with preschoolers, but the need remains for a stronger examination of how early learners engage in literature discussions and how teachers can best utilize literature discussions to support both their text-level understandings and meaning-making capabilities.

Reader Response Scholarship

A branch of literary scholarship known as reader response theory views readers' understanding of stories as an integration between what is embedded in the text and what the reader brings to the experience. Theorists within this group reject the possibility of achieving a single, objective meaning from a text, since every reader brings different backgrounds, perspectives, and previous literacy and literary understandings. Rather, reader response scholars acknowledge the dual influence of information provided by the text and the power of the reader's cognition, psyche, and affect to prompt story understanding.

For this exploration, I rely on the perspectives of three reader response theorists, Louise Rosenblatt, Judith Langer, and Lawrence Sipe, because their work spans multiple decades and has contributed a broad range of understandings about the various ways that readers and texts interact in the process of making meaning. In addition, each of their bodies of work is particularly salient for exploring pedagogical possibilities for literary instruction. In the sections below, I provide a necessarily brief summary of their most noteworthy contributions, some of which overlap with the other scholars' ideas and some of which provide unique contributions to reader response theory. Later, I discuss how the actions of preschool teachers in this study align with specific theoretical tenets of the three scholars to examine possibilities for advantaging reader response theories in supporting the literary understanding of early learners.

Louise Rosenblatt

Rosenblatt, with work spanning the 20th century, has been cited as the most closely centrist of the reader response scholars (Sipe, 2008), balancing the influence of text and reader in the reading process. She readily acknowledged the significance of the text in guiding a reader's understanding, explaining that the text acts as a "stimulus that focuses the reader's attention" and "helps to regulate what shall be held in the forefront of the reader's attention" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11). She granted equal value to the role of the reader in the meaning-making process, explaining that

> the reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystalizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience. (p. 12)

Rosenblatt applied the term "transaction" to the process of meaning-making that occurs with the interface of textual information and reader perspective, explaining that a reader only becomes so "by virtue of his activity in relationship to a text, which he organizes as a set of verbal symbols" and that a text only holds meaning "by virtue of its relationship with a reader who can thus interpret it and reach through it to the world of the work" (pp. 18–19). As Rosenblatt (1982) explained, it is the transactional quality of the reading experience that mandates that adults value what children make of text. She cautions us to not "brush this aside in our eagerness to do justice to the total text or to put that part into its proper perspective in the story. It is more important that we reinforce the child's discovery that texts can make possible such intense personal experience" (p. 272).

Another significant component of Rosenblatt's perspective is the idea of the reader's stance, or how a reader chooses to approach and engage with a text. The reader may adopt an efferent stance, choosing to read a book for what information can be taken away from it, which Rosenblatt (1982) stated requires children to "learn to focus on extracting the public meaning of the text" (p. 271). Alternately, an aesthetic stance prompts the reader to rely on "the personal, qualitative, kinesthetic, sensuous inner resonances of the words" (p. 272) to shape a story that is an integration of the author's intention and the reader's inner self. Rosenblatt lamented schools' primary concentration on an efferent stance in reading events since she believed that the aesthetic stance was more closely aligned with children's inherent internally focused tendencies. She expressed her conviction that both stances should be taught in our literature work with children, but as teachers, "our primary responsibility is to encourage, not get in the way of, the aesthetic stance" (p. 275).

Judith Langer

Langer's research over the last several decades has enriched understandings regarding the ways readers respond to literature and the implications for literary instruction. As with other reader response theorists, Langer attributed importance to both text and reader in the act of meaning-making, explaining that readers' orientations toward meaning are influenced by cultural and group affiliations, history, personal identities, and purposes for reading. She advocated for the use of literature not only for curricular learning but also to expand thinking capabilities outside the classroom.

Langer (2011) is known for her use of the term "envisionment" "to refer to the world of understanding a particular person has at a given point in time" (p. 10). In the context of literature, envisionment "refers to the understanding a student (or teacher) has about a text—whether it is being read, written, discussed, or tested" (p. 11). She explained that envisionment building is "an activity in sense-making, where meanings change and shift and grow as a mind creates its understandings of a work" (p. 15). Langer described five stances readers take as they build meaning in the act of reading, explained in Table 1. She observed that the concept of envisionment building is a particularly helpful way to understand students' developing text understandings and how to support them.

Lawrence Sipe

Sipe's work with children's responses to literature, from the end of the 20th century and into the 21st, impacted understanding about the literary capacities of young children and conditions that can support their active involvement. Throughout his work, Sipe (2008) demonstrated the value he placed on children's literary understanding, which he defined as "engaging in literary meaning-making, of passionately interpreting stories with increasing sophistication, cognitive power, and delight" (p. 3). Based on his observations of primary-age children during classroom picturebook read-alouds (2008), he formed a grounded theory that described five categories of young learners' literature responses, outlined in Table 2. Sipe pointed out that the literary understanding children expressed through these facets was socially and culturally situated in the context of classroom-based literature discussions with peers and adults.

Sipe was especially cognizant of the need for classroom environments that prompted young readers' rich involve-ment with literature. Thus, his findings also yielded five categories of adult talk, described in Table 3, that exemplified teacher interactions that supported children's literary understanding and appreciation during picturebook read-alouds. A long-range contribution of Sipe's work was his commitment to the pedagogical implications of literature experiences for early learners; he argued for "a particular kind of reading aloud that is interactive and involves both active teachers and active students…in the process of literary meaning making" (pp. 5–6).

Study Context

The current study relies on a social constructivist perspective that presumes the inherent value of social interaction for learning (McRobbie & Tobin, 1997). One powerful opportunity for social learning for EC students is the use of read-alouds to engage them in meaningful conversations about texts. Interactive classroom literature discussions have specifically demonstrated numerous possibilities to advance students' emergent literacy and literary understandings (e.g., Pantaleo, 2004; Sipe, 2008).

This IRB-approved study occurred across four months in four midwestern U.S. classrooms of 16 or 17 preschoolers each, chosen for their proximity and the teacher's willingness to participate. Nicole (all names are pseudonyms) worked in a rural public school, had been teaching preschool for five years, and was enrolled in a master's program. Each of the other teachers had been teaching for 15 years. Whitney taught in a university lab school, had a master's degree, and had previously taken classes in a doctoral program. Colleen and Aaida had bachelor's degrees and taught in Head Start classrooms.

In early meetings with each participant, I shared my background as a former early childhood educator and discussed my current work as a teacher educator at a local university; our common experiences allowed rapport to be established quickly with each participant. I explained that I wanted to know more about how they and their children engaged in classroom literature discussions, and throughout the study I focused on valuing their work with their students. I merely noted and did not alter their classroom decisions and book choices since my goal was to learn more about how literature discussions occurred in their classrooms. I requested that each teacher audio record one literature discussion per week and upload it to a Dropbox site. I had the recordings transcribed and returned to the teachers for their review. I

observed each classroom once per month for several hours, noting specifically the general classroom atmosphere, literacy learning opportunities, and read-aloud activities.

Each teacher and I met monthly after school for about an hour. Before our meetings, I examined the month's discussion transcripts to identify segments of data that provided evidence of students' interactions and of teachers' support for students' participation. I applied process coding to identify teachers' language, questioning, and instructional strategies and to categorize students' modes of engagement. I always began the monthly meeting by asking the teacher participant what she noticed in the transcripts, to keep the initial focus on teacher perceptions, before I used my own noticings to raise additional topics of discussion. Our conversations acted to member check my coding process, as teachers confirmed or clarified my ideas. Following our meetings, I applied pattern coding to form conclusions about how the social environment of the classroom influenced individual and collective knowledge construction.

Findings

To explore how preschool teachers' read-aloud interactions coincide with the conclusions of some prominent literary scholars, I will discuss patterns that emerged as a result of examining teacher participant actions across the classrooms that appeared to both initiate and respond to children's participation in literature discussions. Initial process coding yielded a list of teacher actions I consolidated into broader categories of roles teachers assumed during classroom literature conversations. These roles, in order of most common to least common occurrences, are described below, with representative data examples.

Teacher as Catalyst for Action

Data revealed that teachers assumed the role of a catalyst for action far more than any other role. By more than double, teachers' communications in literature discussions were aimed at encouraging children to do something active during read-alouds, such as prompting students toward story recall, critique, or prediction; asking clarifying questions; or initiating a follow-up activity. The most common type of teacher communication was questioning, often to ask students simple informational questions or to recall story events. Some examples of these included "How many sides does a square have?," "What are they making again?," and

"What happened to the truck?" Sometimes these informational questions prompted children to move beyond simple recall, as in this exchange during a read-aloud of *Lady Bug Girl and the Bug Squad* (Davis, 2011):

> **Teacher**: What did Lulu want them to paint?
>
> **Boy**: Bugs.
>
> **Boy**: A ladybug.
>
> **Teacher**: They wanted, she wanted them to paint a bug squad picture, didn't she?
>
> **Girl**: She wanted to make, she wanted to make a…
>
> **Teacher**: Is that what they're doing though? Or are they doing what they want to do?
>
> **Girl**: No.
>
> **Boy**: Them going to do what them do.
>
> **Teacher**: Yep, they're going to do what they want to do.

In this instance, the teacher asked seemingly simple recall questions about the story, but the questions led one boy to better understand the motivations of the characters.

Other common teacher communications more directly encouraged the preschoolers to move beyond mere recall of story events, such as supporting students to make personal connections to the story, encouraging students to interpret story events and character states of mind, and prompting students to make predictions. In a reading of *Knuffle Bunny* (Willems, 2004), the teacher initiated the following exchange, directly activating the children's connection to the tantrum of the main character:

> **Teacher**: Does that ever happen to you? With your moms and dads?
>
> **Multiple children**: No.
>
> **Boy**: Yeah, cuz cuz my mom wouldn't let me have a toy.
>
> **Teacher**: Oh, so you threw a fit?
>
> **Boy**: Yeah.

Teachers' prompts for children to make predictions during a read-aloud included comments such as "Clothes in a basket, so where do you think they're going?" and "What will it be now? Make a prediction." The following example

is from a read-aloud of *If You Give a Pig a Pancake* (Numeroff, 1998):

> **Teacher**: So *If You Give a Pig a Pancake*; you're right, so there's at least a what in the story…
>
> **Boy**: Pancake!
>
> **Teacher**: A pig, and a…
>
> **Multiple children**: Pancake.

Other teacher prompts included encouragement to chime in by predicting the next word in the story or to participate in some sort of movement or auditory action. Across all four classrooms, it was evident that teachers encouraged children to play an active part in the read-aloud in a variety of ways rather than having them sit quietly as passive observers.

Teacher as Book Guide

In assuming a role as a book guide, teachers prompted students' attention to components of the book or story and its creators as sources of information for the discussion. Unsurprisingly, the most common component teachers referenced in picturebook read-alouds was illustrations, with comments that encouraged children to rely on the pictures for story understanding, such as, "Look at that little girl, what happened to the little girl?," "Look at the picture. Take a guess," and "What does she look, what is her face saying?"

The second most common story component teachers guided students to attend to was story vocabulary, either encouraging the children to provide a definition or directly explaining what the word meant. This happened when the word was a bit unusual or unfamiliar to the children, with an apparent goal to support story understanding since the teachers usually linked the definitions to the storyline or story context. One example occurred in Whitney's reading of *The Perfect Square* (Hall, 2011), with a student-provided definition:

> **Teacher**: W., can you tell us, what did that word "shattered" mean?
>
> **Boy**: Um, somebody dropped the square.
>
> **Teacher**: Uh-huh. And what happened to it?
>
> **Boy**: It broke to pieces.
>
> **Teacher**: Why, it broke into lots of pieces.

Another example was in Colleen's reading of *If You Give a Pig a Pancake*, when she needed to bolster the students' understanding of the word "homesick":

> **Teacher**: Do you guys know what "homesick" means?
>
> **Multiple children**: No.
>
> **Boy**: That means somebody is sick?
>
> **Teacher**: No, it doesn't mean somebody's sick. Does anybody know what "homesick" means?
>
> **Multiple children**: No.
>
> **Teacher**: It means you're kind of sad because you miss your family, maybe you're somewhere else like your grandma's house or your friend's house…
>
> **Boy**: I have my grandma's house!
>
> **Teacher**: And you miss your mom and dad and then you'll be homesick.

Other instances of the teacher assuming the role of book guide included pointing out characters, settings, authors and illustrators, and titles. On rare occasions the teacher drew attention to the text of the story, as in the following example during Whitney's reading of The Sandwich That Max Made (Vaughan, 1989):

> **Teacher**: Oh, look at this word right here.
>
> **Multiple children**: Yum.
>
> **Teacher**: How do you guys know that word says "yum"?
>
> **Girl**: Because it has…
>
> **Girl**: Because it starts with a M and a…
>
> **Boy**: Because it starts with a Y, Y, Y…
>
> **Boy**: Because he's gonna eat…
>
> **Teacher**: Because it has a Y and a M? Oh, good thinking.

In these examples, the teachers drew directly on components of the book or story as a source of support for children's literature understanding.

Teacher as Reading Coach

Some teachers' actions during literature discussions indicated a tendency to respond to and support children as readers,

including summarizing and confirming student responses, clarifying student confusion, and naming reading behaviors students enacted during the read-aloud. One of the most common responses in this category was for teachers to verbally follow up on a child's comment, often by restating it in the child's exact words or sometimes by extending it with a bit more clarification, such as, "Oh my goodness, there's lots of bubbles in that tub, isn't there? You're right" and "So, some of you were saying water and it is water. It's a river."

Teacher participants also acted to support students as readers by explicitly naming the reading behaviors children were using, such as asking questions, turning pages, noting vocabulary, and making predictions. One example of a teacher assuming the role of reading coach by naming the children's reading behaviors occurred when Whitney acknowledged a student's questioning from the previous day's read-aloud:

> **Teacher**: So, we were talking about the word "shattered" because it says, "On Thursday the square was shattered." And W. asked that great question. He heard a word he didn't know or understand and so he asked, "What does that mean?" We need to know and understand what we are reading and if we don't know, we need to ask some questions.

Pointing out the reading behaviors students were using seemed aimed at drawing attention to, affirming, and extending such actions during literature discussions.

Teacher as Informational Resource

Another role teachers served in supporting their students' participation in book discussions was as a resource for information. They did this by offering story previews; summarizing, clarifying, and restating story information; providing relevant outside information; and defining story vocabulary in support of story understanding. This last type overlapped with their role as a book guide, as ensuring students' access to vocabulary was a source of information about a story component. The most common type of teacher statement in this area was made to simplify text or to explain illustrations. Several times throughout one read-aloud, Colleen made statements such as, "This is the picture they took of her. She put the couch on top of the chairs" and "Oh, she's balancing on the cord" to point out aspects of the illustrations that were pertinent to the story. In these instances, the teacher acted as a support to make the story line or pictures more accessible for children's meaning-making.

Other times, teachers acted as informational resources by providing students with background information that supported story understanding. For example, when reading *Tops and Bottoms* (Stevens, 1995), Nicole explained, "So the top of the corn had the tassel and the bottom had the root. And the corn is in the middle," to help students understand how the hare kept fooling the bear. Colleen noted, "You know, sunflowers grow really tall, taller than me. They're huge," in helping students understand an illustration in *Lady Bug Girl and the Bug Squad*.

Teacher as Co-Reader

At times during literature discussions, the teachers assumed the role of co-reader, enacting, acknowledging, or describing their own reading behaviors during classroom read-alouds. Examples of these actions included teachers naming what they did to understand, making connections to the story, indicating curiosity, or offering a critique of the book. Some example statements included, "Right, so that's what my brain did too. My brain started thinking that same way: Hmm, I wonder if that person in the illustration now is Max?" and "Let's see. I am very curious about this." These actions appeared to offer the children opportunities to observe an experienced reader enacting common reading behaviors.

Teacher as Authority Figure

The least common role teachers assumed during read-alouds was that of authority figure, issuing evaluative comments, behavioral reminders, or morality lessons embedded in book discussions. For example, teachers would follow student declarations with evaluative statements such as, "So, now it is in seven pieces. That's a great observation." And they would provide behavioral oversight with comments such as, "I'm going to wait till all the eyes are on me" and "We're going to raise our hands so I can get—I can give everyone a chance, okay?" In spite of a perhaps common misperception, these preschool teachers were far less likely to assume the role of authority figure than they were to act in other capacities that supported students' literary involvement.

Discussion

Examining the roles these teachers assumed in classroom read-alouds provides a window into the ways their young students

were apprenticed into engagement with literature. It was obvious from the read-aloud interactions recorded in this study that the teachers valued their students' involvement and that the teachers enacted a variety of actions aimed at supporting their learners' engagement in literature conversations. These four teacher examples appear to fly in the face of previous scholarship (e.g., Dickinson, 2001; Teale, 2003) that found EC classrooms lacking interactive literature discussions. Of course, these teacher participants were aware that my study was purposely examining their "literature discussions," so the recorded read-alouds may not appropriately represent normal read-aloud events in these classrooms. Regardless, the data demonstrate that in the literature conversations that occurred, teachers acted in various roles that supported their students' active participation.

Sipe (2008) pointed out that the creative literary abilities of young learners are often undervalued and that many read-alouds in early learning environments don't support meaningful literary experiences. Sipe stated that "to get the substantive talk and thoughtful literary interpretation we desire, teachers have to be serious and knowledgeable about literature, and be able to foster the development of children's higher level literary interpretive skills" (p. 5). Viewing teachers' actions through the lens of prominent and widely respected literary scholarship, as I do below, provides an opportunity to consider how early read-alouds compare to some widely accepted beliefs about literature interactions. While these researchers may not have developed their theories with preschoolers in mind, such comparisons could provide insight into broader options for early literature discussions. Alternately, such comparisons might broaden our understanding of whether and how literary theories apply to younger groups of readers and what implications these theories hold for early literary instruction.

**Integration of Reader and Text
in the Preschool Classroom**

A belief shared across reader response scholarship is that literature understanding represents an integration of text information and reader perspective. As Rosenblatt (1994) explained, the understanding that readers construct "happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text" (p. 12). The link between text and reader is evident in Langer's stances, especially in the vantage points of "Being Outside and Stepping Into an Envisionment"

and "Being Inside and Moving Through an Envisionment," with a clear focus on integrating textual information and readers' backgrounds and perspectives in pursuit of deeper understanding. Sipe's categories of "Analytical" and "Personal," especially, demonstrate children's use of the text and themselves to create meaning.

This dual focus on the books and on the children's interactions with them was readily apparent across all the read-aloud experiences in this study, with teacher communications aimed at bringing children's perspectives into the story experience while clearly linking to the books' words and pictures. In their role as catalysts for action, teachers often prompted children to integrate personal connections to their meaning-making, and as co-readers, they sometimes modeled connections of their own. As book guides, the teachers ensured that children's attention was focused on narrative, dialogue, illustrations, peritextual elements, and other book elements that supported their story understanding.

Though data demonstrated teachers' inclination to encourage students' personal connections to the books they were reading, the conversations were most often conducted at a somewhat surface level. Teachers supported and praised evidence that the children were connecting their own lives to the stories but usually failed to name those behaviors or to explore with children how their experiences, cultures, and understandings could yield a deeper understanding about story events or characters, as might be expected by these literary theories. Supporting the deeper connections required by Langer's stance of "Being Inside and Moving Through an Envisionment," for example, was rarely pursued. Similarly, data showed teachers referencing as sources of information the parts of the books they read aloud, but this was relegated mainly to naming components like title and author or pointing to aspects of illustrations. There was limited indication of teachers drawing students deeply into book components in ways that expanded students' knowledge of literary concepts in support of meaning-making.

Clearly, the reader response concept that "the finding of meaning involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 14) has been taken up by these teachers as relevant for their preschoolers' literature involvement. However, as noted below, it appears that enacting the concept more purposefully, seeking reader–text interactions that provide greater opportunities for engaging young learners' backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives in

more meaningful ways, was not evident in the teachers' actions. A follow-up question might be, Was the failure to more deeply engage these preschoolers a result of the children's age and ability levels or a consequence of the teachers' lack of proficiency regarding literary engagement?

Preschoolers' Literary Capacity

Young children are naturally inclined to draw on their background knowledge and experiences in their interactions with the world. Relying on these tendencies to support children's story understanding seems a natural extension, making reader response theory a potentially good fit for preschoolers' inherent self-focus (Rosenblatt, 1982). The modest attempts these children made to intersect with the read-alouds, drawing on surface features of their backgrounds and experiences, could very well be applauded as beginning efforts to interact with text in pursuit of meaning-making. In fact, Sipe (2008), in examining his own data from read-alouds with primary-age readers, pointed out that simple, surface-level connections might very well be a foundational step for these early learners, and that ongoing support could enable them to continue to develop more sophisticated abilities to engage with text. Researchers (e.g., Hoffman, 2011; Sipe, 2008) have demonstrated the capability of even the youngest readers to engage in symbolic and interpretive literature interactions, but these preschoolers rarely broadened their text connections beyond surface-level associations.

Teachers' Literary Support

In general, teachers in this study did not appear to take up the initial attempts by their students at "envisionment building" (Langer, 2011, p. 10) that would extend their early efforts to an "activity in sense-making, where meanings change and shift and grow as a mind creates its understandings of a work" (p. 15). One of Sipe's (2008) categories of adult talk, labeled "Extenders or Refiners" (p. 202), occurred as teachers used children's comments to further their thinking with "the many types of literary knowledge that the children could then utilize in their construction of meaning and interpretation" (p. 214). These teachers often encouraged students to draw connections between their lives and their stories, but it was often a singular event that did not prompt the children's initial connections to deeper considerations of meaning-making. They appeared very aware of the need to prompt students to utilize both the story contents and

their background knowledge in pursuit of meaning-making, in conjunction with a reader response perspective, but they generally were not inclined to extend this connection to the response theorists might envision for older readers.

Possibilities for Reader Response in EC Classrooms

As with most early education experiences, teachers' knowledge and abilities primarily determine the potential of reading interactions. Many findings reveal the considerable importance of the background and beliefs of teachers for the quality of classroom learning experiences (e.g., Teale et al., 2010). Kindle (2011) pointed out the significance of this impact in the literacy classroom, noting that "individual teachers' understandings of what constitutes best practice have a profound effect on how a child within a classroom experiences a literacy event such as a read-aloud" (p. 175). With strong findings relating classroom talk and text interactions to numerous opportunities for early learning, it is essential to explore what is happening in classroom read-aloud events and to consider possibilities for enhancing early educators' enactment of classroom literature discussions.

In my individual conversations with these teachers about their classroom read-alouds, none cited literary theorists in explaining how or why they engage in the actions they do. Somewhere in their educational backgrounds, it is likely that concepts of reader response theory were referenced, either directly or indirectly, in pedagogical learning experiences, as all evidenced regular attempts to establish connections between their young readers and the stories they read. Based on their obvious commitment to their preschoolers' active engagement with read-alouds, I suspect these teachers would put into practice any stronger understanding they gained of the potential for reader response concepts to support their students' meaning-making. Practical and scholarly implications of this study include enacting and studying ways that preschool teachers might be made better aware of reader response scholarship and how it could look with young learners. The potential for read-alouds to prompt transactions between reader and text, as proposed by Rosenblatt (1994), *envisionments*, as described by Langer (2011), or "young children's marvelous abilities as literary critics," as suggested by Sipe (2008, p. 10), is sufficient warrant to continue to pursue how early educators can become better informed and enabled to draw on literary scholarship for their EC classroom literature experiences. •

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