



Children's Books, Disability and Reader's Response: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the importance of students responding to children's books for diversity and disabilities. The main claim of the paper is that we need to explore new ways of engaging children to respond to diversity beyond the traditional model of Reader's Response Theory. Even though Reader's Response Theory is a very important framework to research the way a reader respond to a text, we need to take other important variables into account in order to have a richer and more systematic understanding of how meaning is constructed by the reader responding to children's books for diversity and disability. The paper proposes a model to begin this exploration to give teachers and professional educators the opportunity to investigate the rich literacy world of students who interact with high quality children's books for diversity and disability. The author of the article sees this model as paramount to develop a student-centered curriculum around rich literacy instruction using high quality children's book for diversity and disability. The more we know the complex processes of how students respond to children's books that present themes of diversity and disability, the better we can design, develop and refine rich literacy instruction in the classroom to prepare our students to live in communities where diversity is part of their social and cultural landscape.

INTRODUCTION

When we think about children's books, we think about a text containing narrative and illustrations that both children and adult enjoy reading (Jalongo, 2004). This is true only in part. Even though children's books are enjoyable texts where language and illustrations create meaning, children's books are more than that. Paul Hazard (1944) points out that children's books help children acquire and understand a sense of humanity, the ability to cross cultural and social boundaries and to imagine a world beyond their own. Children's books give children the opportunity to become empathetic with their peers and the community they live and interact with. Lepman (2002) also sees children's book as bridges to understand one another, to create a deep cultural, social, and personal connection in the world children inhabit.

Adomat (2014) argues "Students in elementary classrooms today reflect the ever-increasing diversity of culture, language, and abilities in our society; however, the diversity of students is not always addressed by instructional approaches or materials" (p.1). What Adomat (2014) claims here is that often teachers do not pay attention to quality texts in presenting diversity from a broader and more inclusive perspective. This is paramount, according to Adomat (2014) because of the opportunity to critically discuss children's books from a diversity standpoint where multicultural content allows children to see diversity in society from the kaleidoscope of race, gender, sexual preference, and disability. In addition, children can create

democratic community by creating an intimate connection with children's books addressing diversity (Galda, Sipe, and Liang & Cullinan, 2013) to connect children's books to their lives and direct or vicarious experiences.

Numerous studies have been published on how children respond to children's books, there is a gap on how students respond to children's books with characters with disabilities and how the reader's characteristics might influence the response to children's books with disabilities (Adomat, 2009). Studies carried out by Prater & Dyches (2003) and Saad (2004) are important for a systematic textual analysis of children's books with characters with disabilities but they do not address how children respond to the text where a character with disabilities is visually and linguistically represented. It is such a gap that should be methodologically addressed to give the teachers the opportunity to become aware and understand how children respond to children's books with characters with disabilities and what variables influence such a response (Sipe, 2008). This is core when teaching for diversity for two reasons. First, teachers have better qualitative data on students' response to diversity, they can formatively assess and guide students to become independent readers by finding the intrinsic motivation for reading for meaning. Second, students can begin that journey to diversity by developing an in-depth reader's identity in the classroom and beyond (Souto-Manning, 2009).

This paper proposes a model for reading children's books with characters with disabilities by expanding the reader's response theory framework (Rosenblatt, 1994) to infuse more complex and relevant reader's variables to support teachers' ability to guide students to delve into the complexity of disability via children's books. First, I will review the tenets of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the text (Rosenblatt, 1986) to present the core components of the original framework and then I will present and discuss a further development of Rosenblatt's framework to give teachers a comprehensive and practical framework to effectively assess students' response to children's books with disabilities and develop lifelong readers (Kendrick, 2004)).

READER'S RESPONSE THEORY AND ITS LIMITS

Reader-Response Theory as postulated by Louise Rosenblatt (1986) is essentially a phenomenological theory of reading where text and reader osmotically interact to construct meaning. Iser (1980) sees a response to a text as a reading act. What this means is that a text comes into its existence as a semiotic system of meaning when it is read and the reading process produces a response from the reader. This is a core aspect of Reader-Response Theory because it gives the reader his/her primary role in culturally and historically populating a text and looking at meaning as changing within different cultural, historical and social institutions in a society.

Reader-Response Theory claims that a text is not a neutral autonomous system of signs but as an incomplete without a reader and the act of reading (Habib, 2005). A text does not have only the meaning assigned by the author but also presents what can be defined as an indeterminate meaning to be completed by the reader. The text can be activated into meaning when the reader begins to semiotically decode the signs of the text within a sociohistorical and sociocultural system of meaning (Habib, 2005). It turns, Reader-Response Theory focuses on how readers draw on and use their knowledge of text conventions to respond to the author's implied meaning of the text (Eagleton, 1996).

A question that must be discussed here is the following: "Who is the reader within Reader-Response Theory?" The questions have very important implications for educational purposes when teachers are confronted with diversity in a classroom setting. It is not enough to claim that the reader brings his/her background knowledge to the act of reading (Rosenblatt,

1986). Background knowledge or prior knowledge is too general and broad as a term to address the thorny issue of who the reader is in a very diverse classroom and the complexities of the reader as being immersed in different and oftentimes conflicting cultural, social and historical trajectories (Bradbury, 2002). Also, the question of who the reader is refers to what it means to expose readers in classrooms to a more complex concept of diversity where issues of disability in texts is becoming of central importance (Adomat, 2014). In turn, we need to look at other and more important variables that come into play in the act of reading for diversity and what this means for reading a specific genre as children's books with characters with disabilities.

READER'S RESPONSE THEORY CONSIDERING DIVERSITY AND DISABILITY IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Children's Books plays a paramount role in literacy development in children by helping student to critically analyze issues of diversity from different and enriching perspectives (Adomat, 2104). Reading children's books can be instrumental in changing readers' attitudes about stereotypes, it is important for educators that these changes be beneficial and positive for children (Louie, 2001). Jalongo (2004) maintains that "Engagement with picture books while we are young forms the basis for becoming a literate adult, one who not only decode words accurately but also enjoys reading and take the time to read" (p.1). Teacher who share quality children's books with students on diversity are supporting students in becoming aware and understand how the world they inhabit is a complex mosaic of cultures, race, gender, and diverse abilities.

Nodelman and Reiner (2003) points out that appreciating and expanding cultural awareness is one important prerogative of children's books that expose children to diversity in its broadest forms. In addition, Nodelman and Reiner (2003) claim that reflecting on connections between one's life and the content of the children's book to enrich a complex understanding of diversity. In turns, children's books that address diversity in its broadest form play a very positive and important role in the acquisition of literacy in a way that is developmentally effective in a complex society (Jalongo, 2003b).

One important aspect of this aspect on diversity in children's books that address diversity and disability in particular is that students should be given the opportunity to engage and respond to this specific genres to begin a path of intellectual growth by creating an intellectual resonance with the content and by creating a critical loop between the self and the content proposed by the author of the text (Choo, 2013). In other words, the conundrum here is to better understand how to refine the subjective understanding and response to a text student are exposed to. The issue is of paramount importance for educators because it is not enough to encourage students to respond to diversity in texts without an in-depth knowledge of who they are as readers. The question to ponder is: "What is the nature of the reader when responding to a text and children's books with disability in the specifics?" This core question lies at the center of what teachers need to do to infuse and develop reading curriculum for diversity in K-12 schools.

THE NATURE OF THE READER

The first core component of a reader is the reader as an intellectual in nuce. A reader responding to a text activates his/her thinking processes and begin to construct meaning (Costa, 2008). A reader always thinks during the act of reading. A reader must become aware and understand that reading and thinking are part of the same process of meaning making, they cannot be separated from the reading process (Keene, 2008). A reader is already equipped to

think critically; the teacher needs to find effective ways to activate, develop and refine this paramount aspect of a reader by looking at the reading process as the starting point of the reader's intellectual development. This leads to see the reader and the reading process as a core pedagogical principle where teachers must teach readers to think about their thinking during the reading process by supporting their curiosity and enjoyment of the text.

What this means is that teacher need to strengthen the literary bonds between children and books in classroom instruction. Teachers must develop a community of young readers eagerly engaged in analyzing, discussing and critically assessing children's books where diversity and disability stimulate and challenge their perception, knowledge and understanding of diversity in its different and enriching manifestations (Beers & Probst, 2017). Students and teachers should challenge the status quo of tacit knowledge in society and begin an honest and in depth conversation of what it means to live in a world where individuals who are diverse in language, culture and diverse abilities are part of a rich social and cultural tapestry in our lives and communities (Williams, 2008). The issue here is how to begin this journey to diversity. The path is twofold.

The first step is to scaffold students to make informed choices on children's books that address issues of diversity and disability. Teachers should help students to hold more responsibility on what to read and how to analyze children's books with diversity and disability by gradually releasing responsibility on independent reading time in the classroom (Burkins & Yaris, 2016). The literature suggests that teachers and students begin to explore topics of interest together to become aware and understand how to develop a classroom libraries where children's books on diversity become stimulating texts for critical and constructive conversations on what it means to grow up in a complex and interconnected world (Robinette, 2016). By supporting students' ability to make informed and independent choices on the children's books they want to read and respond to.

The second step is more complex since it asks teachers to be able to know their students' literacy levels and their sociocultural trajectories when developing a balanced approach to reading using children's books. This part of the journey is more complex since the sociocultural trajectories of students are not easy to assess for a teacher since a clear framework has not been proposed so far (Edward, 2013). Therefore, we need to explore this part of the journey in depth and attempt to propose a model for teachers to use when developing reading curriculum for diversity using children's books. The model proposed here aims to support teachers to collect qualitative data on students' sociocultural variables to better understand how to support the growth of independent readers for diversity via children's books (Edward, 2013).

A MODEL FOR RESPONSE TO DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The importance to understating students' response to literature and children's books addressing diversity is paramount in developing a culture-sensitive curriculum in the classroom. Teachers who can understand how students respond to children's books will be more effective in engaging students with deep meaning during the response process when engaged in reading children's books (Sipe, 1998). Thus, response to literature consist of a combination of the subtle use of background knowledge and the ability of the students to understand the specific knowledge presented by the author of the children's book.

The question is how to support and help students articulate their response to children's books that address diversity and disability. How do teachers scaffold students' ability to a deep connection with the text? What variables do teachers need to consider supporting students'

response to a text? How should teachers assess these variables to develop effective reading curriculum? What diversity factors must teachers need to consider within this framework? (Young & Serafini, 2013). I will propose a model to address these questions to give teachers the conceptual and practical tools to support reading for diversity with the use of children's books. Three areas need to be considered for the following model: (a) variables within the student; (b) the nature of the text; (c) the sociocultural conditions of the reading event (Favat, 1977; Galda, 1983; Monson, 1985). These three variables are continually intersecting and interacting in students and provide a rich and complex reading experience (Mendoza & Reese, 2001).

VARIABLES WITHIN THE STUDENT

Students present variables of age, gender, race and ethnicity that affect the response to a text. Teachers should be aware of how these variables influence how students respond to the content of a text and how their meaning-making process is deeply affected by the individual characteristics of the students. Students consciously or unconsciously activate these variables when responding to a text to construct meaning during the reading process (Graff, 2010a). As Iser points out, there is no meaning without this in-depth relationship between the reader and the text. In turn, the reader activates and constructs meaning by infusing its content with a work of the self.

Students' socioeconomic status, reading preferences, disposition toward books and reading and prior experience with children's books constitute another major factor in how students respond to a children's book that addresses diversity and disability in the specifics (Favat, 1977; Monson, 1985). Teachers who assess students considering these variables can provide students with children's books that not only are at the reading level of the students but also and more importantly to develop a rich reading experience in diversity.

The importance of having a systematic and in-depth understanding of who our students are as engaged readers is paramount to nurture love for reading via children's books that address diversity and disability. Students are the core of what children's books teachers will use to promote a rich reading experience, intellectual development and students sensitive towards diversity in all its forms and manifestations (Barnhouse & Vinton, 2012). Children's books are powerful reading tools and resources for students to engage with issues of diversity in the community they live in. Children's books can invite students to understand diversity directly or vicariously by nurturing students' curiosity, sense of self and other and ability to read for meaning via an empathetic process of understanding (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001).

VARIABLES WITHIN THE TEXT

Children's books as multimodal complex semiotic texts present variables that must be considered by the teacher when choosing readings for diversity. Content is the first variable that stands out when selecting children's books for diversity and characters with disabilities (Freeman & Lehman, 2001). Teachers must read and qualitatively assess a rich and growing body of literature on diversity and disability. Most of the children's books published today are high quality in representing diversity and disability in a positive light. However, teachers should use analytical tools that enable them to assess content of the children's book so that students are exposed to high quality children's literature and can critically and constructively begin a process of intellectual and socioemotional growth (Cai & Bishop, 1994).

Illustrations style, quality and characterization are paramount in an overall assessment of children's books for diversity and disability (Nodelman, 1988). According to Nodelman (1988)

picturebooks tells story by using a multimodal framework. What is interesting in Nodelman's (1988) analysis is that picturebooks narrate a story via a complex semiotic plane of meaning making. Illustrations and narrative work synergically to communicate the content the author presents in the children's book. This complex semiotic plane of meaning is what teachers need to consider when assessing the quality of children's books for diversity and disability. Students are simultaneously exposed to language and images that semiotically communicate a powerful message about diversity and disability and support students' critical thinking towards compelling issues in our society.

Nodelman (1988) writes "All visual images, even the most apparently representational ones, do imply a viewer, do require a knowledge of learned competencies and cultural assumptions before they can be rightly understood." (p. 17) Therefore, when assessing the quality of children's books for diversity and disability, teachers need to have an assessment tool that support their analysis on more than one plane of reading children's books (Appendix 1). The template presented here can help teachers to analyze children's books for diversity and disability by considering the semiotically complex nature of children's books. In doing so, quality text instruction is introduced and implemented in classroom instruction (Short, 2012). It is imperative that quality children's books are used in classroom where culturally and linguistically diverse students are the next generation of literate citizens (Short, 2012).

VARIABLES WITHIN THE ENVIRONMENT

The most important variable within the environment are families that support literacy in children using children books that address diversity and disabilities (Galda, 1983; Little 2009). The involvement of families in supporting literacy for diversity with children's books with disabilities is a significant factor in scaffolding children critical thinking on what it means to live in a diverse world. Children's home life is what lays out the blueprint of literacy growth and development in children. Scholarship in family literacy points out the paramount importance of family literacy and reading to and with children via children's books (Edwards, 2011; Epstein, 2011; Patrikakou, 2011). Literature in family literacy strongly support families in making informed choices on what to read at home with children. By making families aware of quality children's books for diversity and disability, parents can support children's awareness and ability to see disability as part of the sociocultural landscape in the US (Sanchez and Colon, 2005). It is paramount that families are involved in this process. Families who are aware of the importance of literacy and diversity and encourage children to delve into critical discussions on what it means to grow in a diverse and complex world.

The importance of social interaction during shared reading in homes has received attention among scholars (Wasik & Hendrickson, 2004). Language and social interaction using children's books is powerful cognitive and social tool to support the development of higher order thinking skills by sociolinguistic and emotional development (Wasik & Hendrickson, 2004). Children hearing stories and responding to these stories using oral and/or written language will develop an in-depth concept development of the narrative and the illustrations in the children's book. In turn, children that hear and respond to complex semiotic texts as children's books, they will be able to acquire a more in-depth ability to critically understand the complexity of meaning in the text.

This is crucial when reading for diversity at home since the intimate relationships between children and families give children the opportunity to build a community of readers at home (National Early Literacy Panel, 2009). Shared children's books that address diversity and

disability bonds reader and listener because of a common text they can enjoy and critically discuss and examine. Children's books conversations scaffold and nurture the child's curiosity about the characters in the text highlighting what resonates with the reader and what is different but intriguing at the same time for the reader's intellectual growth (National Early Literacy Panel, 2009). In doing so, families can become part of a literacy for diversity continuum supporting children to see literacy not as something they have to do for school and grade but a process of enjoyment and discovery of a diverse, rich and complex world (van Kleeck, 2004).

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the importance of children's books for diversity and disability and presented a model for supporting the literacy growth of children living in a diverse and complex world. The model wants to be an invitation to see children's books for diversity and disability as a paramount text in children's literacy development. It is a model that points out the relationship between the child, the text and the community where literacy is practiced and nurtured. These are beginning steps toward more systematic and more comprehensive model of literacy for diversity and disability where children's books play a significant role in the literacy process of children (van Kleeck, 2004). Text access and the ability to deeply interact with children's books for diversity and disability are means to better ensuring the most beneficial children-text interaction and response to high quality literature on diversity.

I pointed out going beyond Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory because of the limitations of the model that does not consider more significant variables when engaged with diversity in children's books for diversity and disability. I do not want to diminish the importance of Reader's Response Theory. However, I want teachers and educators to become aware and understand that children's literacy dimension is more complex than ever, and we need a new and more effective model to address the reading-literacy process in a diverse and complex world (McNair, 2013). Our responsibility is to find new path, the road not taken to explore new literacy possibilities in children who are constantly exposed to the complexity of literacy and diversity. It is imperative that we continue to explore. The model in this article is just the beginning and one among many possible others. The hope is that children's books for diversity and disability will become part of a student-centered instruction in classrooms and communities where literacy is valued and nurtured.

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Appendix 1
Template for Children's Book Analysis

Text:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the text organized in the book? • Is the text organized in a way that makes the comprehension of the narrative/story easy to access for the reader? • Are rhythm, alliteration, repetition, refrains, onomatopoeia, simile, personification, rhyme, and imagery used to linguistically represent the characters in the story?
Illustrations:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the style and representation of the characters in the story? • What visual elements are used to present and represent the characters in the story? • What is the primary medium (collage, drawings, photographs, etc.) used in the illustrations to give visibility and importance to the characters in the story?
Characterization:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the easily identifiable dominant trait of the story's main character? • What is the main problem that the main character faces in the book? • How is this problem similar or different to a problem that most children have faced before? • How did the character in the book turn to self-reliance to solve the main conflict of the story?