

REVIEW: "A Developmental Look At Children's Responses to Stories"

For the last ten years, research in the teaching of English/Language Arts has been dominated by an interest in writing. Recently, however, there has been some return to literature as a source of inquiry. A particularly noteworthy recent example of literature research is Arthur Applebee's The Child's Concept of Story (University of Chicago Press, 1978; available for order from the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801; price is \$5.50) where he examines the ways in which children (ages 2-17) respond to literature. Applebee's work contains important developmental implications for curriculum writers and teachers. It is also relatively brief (135 pages, plus 50 pages of appendix) and very readable. My purpose here is to summarize some of his key findings.

Applebee and the other researchers he cites finds that the ability of children to respond to literature roughly follows Piaget's stages of intellectual development. Using the Piaget stages as a framework, he investigates developmental patterns in several different categories of response.

The first category of response is the general overall response to a story or the kind of response triggered by a question such as "What was the story about?". At the pre-operational level (ages 2-6), responses to this question generally result in retelling, a type of response which is characterized by long detailed story descriptions. In most cases, children at this level make little or no attempt to summarize; every detail is included, titles are given and formal beginning and ending storylines are used. For six year olds interviewed, 50% describe stories in this manner while another 27% refuse to answer because they do not think they can remember the story well enough. On the other hand, the concrete operational state (ages 7-11), features the ability to classify and organize. Rather than complete retellings, children at

this age tend to provide a type of response which is best described as a summary. These "summaries" are much shorter and much less detailed than the retellings of younger children. An example of one child's written summary:

I think that the Famous Five stori's are quite good. In the storis there is a lot of adventure and a lot of things happen. They get bad luke at the beginning and thing all kam out alright in the end. (Page 94)

Richard O., 9 yr 3 mo

Summary becomes a dominant form of response by age nine.

While the concrete stage displays an ability to break out broad categories, the formal operational stage (stage 1, ages 12-15; stage 2, age 16-adult) demonstrates an increasing ability to see subsets within larger categories and to envision many additional categories, some of which might never occur. Unlike younger children, adolescents are concerned with more than just the immediate. "What is?" begins to be replaced by "what might be?"

Consequently, story responses of retelling and summarizing are replaced by an interest in analysis and generalization. Readers at this age are interested in analyzing parts and generalizing the meaning of the work. Following is an example of simple analysis:

I don't know who wrote Rebecca, but I loved her style of writing...Always I wanted to see what else would happen--perhaps it was because she used small details... (page 109)

Jill V., 13 yrs 8 mos

Analysis and generalization occur late. In one sample of 13 year olds, these types of responses were found in only 7% of the essays. By age 17, however, 60% of the respondents were able to generalize meaning.

In addition to overall responses to stories, Applebee also investigated the ability of children to evaluate. Preoperational

attempts to evaluate were generally brief and were often linked to a single striking incident in the story:

You said you liked the story 'Hansel and Gretel'. Why did you like it?--they got the money and the gold--You said you did not like the story 'Little Red Riding Hood'. Why didn't you like it?-- He eats the gramma. (page 99)

Jon M., 6 yrs 2 mos

The most typical response of preoperational children was: "I liked it because it was good."

It is at the concrete stage that evaluation first becomes systematic. It is also at this stage where a clear separation between objective and subjective responses begins to occur. Responses, however, are still quite general and very brief. Examples of subjective responses (comments on how the story made the reader feel) are: "interesting," "dreary" or "just plain funny." At the objective level, readers at this age begin to identify broad story types like stories about "cowboys", "families" or "trains."

Readers at the formal stage are able to provide more precise responses based on identified literary categories such as style, structure, and development. Rather than just "exciting" or "dull," reasons begin to emerge: "the tension rises" or "it lets you down in the end." Instead of saying "I don't like it because it rhymes," the older child will say "I don't like it because it rhymes in the wrong places." (page 112)

Applebee goes on to evaluate several other categories of response. For purposes of this research summary, I will stop here. Please keep in mind that while research into the developmental characteristics of children provides much useful information for educators, findings are still tentative enough to require ample use of qualifiers such as "seems" and "generally."

Mark Youngstrom, Program Specialist
Communications
Minnesota Department of Education