Young readers respond to international children's literature

Catherine Cash Buck, University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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Colleen P. Gilrane

Committee Members
Clara Lee Brown, Charles H. Hargis, Jinx Stapleton Watson

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine readers' responses to international children's literature through the lens of reader response theory to examine how they created meaning. Seven ten-year old readers participated in this study. Data derived from transcripts of videotapes of the twelve book club sessions and individual interviews, postit notes participants made in their books, and journal entries chronicled their interaction with story events outside the realm of their cultural experience.

The transcript data indicated the readers used their experiences, their world knowledge world, and a variety of other texts to create meaning. They constructed synthetic scenarios to interpret of story motives and events or to solve conflicts in the story. The readers wondered about the narrative setting, evaluated characters' motives and actions, showed empathy for characters, and expressed their motivation to engage in further reading about the characters or culture. The readers acknowledged ways they wrestled with narrative styles, language, and unfamiliar cultural practices or events.

This study shows the potential of international children's literature for engaging students in reading good literature and developing their awareness of other cultures. Some implications for teachers are: select appropriate global texts by considering the reading level, the narrative style and the cultural load; encourage wide reading and writing experiences to strengthen readers' interpretive base; promote literate behaviors through authentic reading experiences and safe havens for reading where students can respond in multiple ways to a text. The study points to the need for teachers to develop responsive, classrooms where different views are tolerated, the importance of valuing the inquiry process, and social construction of knowledge.

Data showed that even with limited knowledge about the cultural background, the readers were able to derive a meaningful interpretation for the texts. More studies need to examine how young readers read and interpret these texts to use them effectively.

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Before you can understand children’s literature, you have to read some. That’s not necessarily as easy as it sounds. Whether baby books or young adult novels, what all the different kinds of texts described as children’s literature have in common is the gulf between their writers and their intended readers. They are written by adults for people younger than they are. Knowing that these texts are intended for people assumed to be unlike themselves makes it difficult for adult readers to respond to them. How can adults develop the most useful understanding of these books, in order to make judgments about them that will best serve children? We’ll try to answer that question by describing an experience Perry Nodelman once had as a teacher.