

## Reconceptualizing Storytime: Expanding Students' Interpretive Repertoires

**Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom.** Lawrence R. Sipe. New York: Teachers College Press, 2008. 320 pp., \$76.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8077-4829-9; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8077-4828-2.

Reviewed by  
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In the past decade, Lawrence R. Sipe has emerged as a leading scholar in literacy education whose work has focused primarily on children's responses to literature, in particular classic (Sipe, 2000) and postmodern picturebooks (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008). In the book under review, *Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom*, Sipe offers the reader his most thorough explication of his theories on students' responses to literature. Sipe leads the reader through a semiotic framework for analyzing the elements of a picturebook, a review of various perspectives on reader response theories, his typology of children's responses to literature, and various pedagogical suggestions for extending discussions and literary understandings in elementary classrooms.

Sipe pays tribute to the educators and theorists who have come before him and at the same time offers new ideas and perspectives on students' responses to literature. Part 1 of the book focuses on the elements and design of picturebooks and various perspectives on reader response theories. Sipe reviews some of the classic work in picturebook theory set forth by Nodelman (1988), Moebius (1986), and Lewis (2001). In addition, he contextualizes other theoretical perspectives and their influences on picturebooks and literary discussions for the reader to consider, in

particular, art criticism (Gombrich, 1961), psychology-of-perception theories (Arnheim, 1986), literary theories (Tompkins, 1980), classroom discourse (Cazden, 1986), and visual semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). One of the strengths of this opening section is Sipe's ability to navigate the waters of these vast and complex theoretical perspectives and make them accessible for his intended audience, namely, classroom teachers, graduate students, and teacher educators. Sipe provides the reader with an extensive review of these theoretical perspectives and numerous references from which to extend one's understandings.

Sipe identifies his theoretical orientation toward reading and the construction of meaning as a "middle ground," aligning closely with the work of Rosenblatt (1978) and Iser (1978). In the closing chapter of Part 1, Sipe explains the various "between text and reader" perspectives he will use as the foundation for his own research and theories of response to literature to come. On page 69, Sipe admits to readers that we may weary of the extended discussion on theory up to this point and desire to simply read children's literature for enjoyment. However, Sipe justifies his extended foray into this theoretical terrain by suggesting throughout the book that pleasure is extended by analyzing picturebooks and expanding one's experiences with literature and knowledge of literary theories and concepts. The more we know about these various theoretical perspectives, the more pleasure we will derive from our experiences with literature.

In Part 2 of the book, Sipe offers a typology of students' responses to literature based on his research and extensive time spent observing and analyzing literary discussions in elementary classrooms. The data for this section

come primarily from two extended studies undertaken in urban elementary classrooms and from three additional studies focusing on young readers' responses to picturebook read alouds. Sipe's five types, or aspects, of literary understanding and response are as follows: (a) analytical responses, which focus on aspects of the text itself; (b) intertextual responses, which are directed across texts; (c) personal responses, which focus on readers' personal experiences; (d) transparent responses, which focus on children entering into the story world; and (e) performative responses, which focus on students' transformations of the story to fit their own purposes. Each typology is supported by data from the research studies Sipe has conducted on students' responses to storybook read alouds and literary discussions. During these classroom read alouds and discussions, Sipe conceptualizes the text as a "platform" for students' own creativity and understandings. Numerous examples of each category are then offered, and subsequent chapters provide detailed information about each type of literary understanding.

Throughout the text, Sipe is careful to offer the reader his procedures for gathering and analyzing data, sharing his transcription procedures, and explaining how to understand which illustration is being discussed. Certainly, including these illustrations in the book would have added to the impact on the reader and made it easier to understand the discussions being reported, but this is usually cost prohibitive for college presses.

Sipe blends theory and actual classroom discussions to explain his positions, and he provides evidence of his assertions. As a reader, I enjoyed the examples of classroom discussions, as they helped me understand what Sipe intended by his various types of response. Although there are many examples included, each one supports a

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particular point he makes, and as a reader I was drawn to delve into each example in more depth. Each category of response has sections and subsections delineating the variety of responses that the children in his studies offered. In the closing sections, Sipe offers suggestions for further research in the area of student response to literature, an appendix with information about the studies referenced in the book, and a glossary of picturebook terms used throughout the text.

Sipe has to balance the information that classroom teachers need to improve their literary discussions and literacy instruction with the information that researchers desire to confirm the results of his studies offered in the book. I believe Sipe's decision to share his assertions and data, and not offer a review or critique of every study he has ever published—most in top-tier, peer-reviewed literacy journals—was a good one. Readers are invited to extend their readings by reviewing the studies he has conducted; however, a detailed analysis of each is not necessary to support every assertion he makes.

Sipe has garnered numerous awards and other forms of recognition for his research and has established himself as a highly regarded and trusted literacy researcher. He draws on a grounded-theory, inductive approach to qualitative inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) throughout his research and uses his findings to support his assertions in this book. In *Storytime*, Sipe draws on his studies to offer the reader a synthesis of his theories on

children's responses to picturebooks and literary understandings.

In conclusion, Sipe has done literacy educators a great service with this publication. He has synthesized a great many theoretical perspectives and understandings, and he has blended them with his own classroom-based research to provide the reader with a multifaceted picture of children's literary understandings. Readers will find a fine-grained explication of Sipe's model of reading and comprehension, in addition to some pedagogical recommendations for classroom teachers to support students' development of their interpretive repertoires. There is nothing as practical as good theory, and Sipe blends the two together in this well-written monograph.

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