

Talking back and taking over: Young children's expressive engagement during storybook read-alouds

This discussion of types of literary response makes a significant contribution to understanding the ways that children comprehend story.

A teacher is reading Steven Kellogg's (1985) wacky version of *Chicken Little* to her combined class of first and second graders. After the children discuss the front cover and the endpages, the teacher turns to the frontispiece, which shows a wanted poster for Foxy Loxy: "Wanted: Foxy Loxy, for stealing poultry and other unspeakable crimes. Foxy Loxy is shrewd, rude, mean, and dangerous. If you see him, call the police immediately" (n.p.). Immediately after the teacher reads this, Charles starts to sing the theme song of the U.S. television program *Cops*: "Bad boys, Bad boys, what ya gonna do when they come for you? Bad boys, bad boys!"

This is an example of a type of literary response that forms the subject of this article, which concerns a particular subset of oral responses young children make during interactive read-alouds (Barrentine, 1996) of picture storybooks. Drawing from the data in several of my studies involving kindergartners and first and second graders, I will describe this set of responses and do some theoretical speculation about how we might understand them. I'll also describe how knowledge of the various types of these responses could be put to practical use in classrooms.

Children respond to stories in various ways. They may seek to understand a story through analyzing its plot, setting, characters, or theme—the commonly called "narrative elements" of the story. To understand a story, they may also compare or contrast it to other stories they know; other cultural products like movies, TV programs, and commercials; or visual "texts" like paintings. They may compare and contrast the events in the story to their own lives, saying "That happened [or didn't happen] to me." Literary response may also include art, music, writing, sociodramatic play, and planned drama (Hickman 1981; Labbo, 1996; Leland & Harste, 1994; Smagorinsky & Coppack, 1994; Wolf, 1994). The types of oral response that are the subject of this article represent another way of responding to stories. They are evidence of what I call "expressive, performative engagement."

If we form a mental picture of children who are highly engaged in a storybook read-aloud, it may be of a group, faces intent and rapt, listening with wonder, surprise, or fascination to the story as it unfolds. At times, young children seem almost mesmerized by a story, and their receptive engagement at these times is anything but passive: We can almost hear the cognitive wheels turning inside their heads. However, engagement can also be expressive and

performative. Children demonstrate this type of engagement with words and physical actions. They become active participants in the story.

A typology of expressive engagement

There are several types of response within the category of expressive engagement. In this section, I present a typology of those responses in order to flesh out the idea of the category and to extend and refine our theory of young children's literary understanding. This typology is the result of an analysis of children's responses in four previous studies (Sipe, 2000a, 2000b, in press; Sipe & Bauer, 1999) of young children's literary understanding as constructed during storybook read-alouds. These studies represent read-aloud discussions in two kindergarten classrooms and two first- and second-grade combination classrooms. In reading the transcripts of the read-aloud discussions, I paid special attention to children's conversational turns that represented expressive engagement beyond the usual analysis and interpretation of plot, setting, characters, and theme (which was the major activity in which the children were engaged). In other words, the data on which this article is based form a subset (about 10%) of the data from my four previous studies. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I constructed a set of five conceptual categories in order to describe the conversational turns that indicated expressive engagement. The resulting typology has five parts: dramatizing, talking back, critiquing/controlling, inserting, and taking over.

1. Dramatizing. The first type of expressive engagement is dramatizing the story spontaneously—in nonverbal and verbal ways. Primary teachers have long known that young children's responses to stories are frequently physical (Hickman, 1981). For example, during a read-aloud of *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963), a first-grade teacher read that the Wild Things “roared their terrible roars and flashed their terrible teeth, and rolled their terrible eyes, and showed their terrible claws.” Joey (all children's names are pseudonyms) responded by curving his fingers and swiping his hand forward. As well, the children all acted out the wild rumpus scene by doing what Krissy called

“the Hoochie Koochie dance,” which amounted to standing up and shaking their bodies around with their hands in the air. This spontaneous dramatization demonstrates participation in the story by imitating and physically interpreting what is going on in it.

When teachers read stories to children, they translate, as it were, the visual illustrations and the written language to expressive spoken language. For example, teachers may read dialogue by changing the tone and volume of their voices to interpret those of the characters in the story. In other words, storybook read-alouds are interpretive performances by the reader of the story. By acting out the story, children extend this performance to include themselves—their actions, gestures, and expressive language.

2. Talking back. The second type of expressive engagement is talking back to the story or characters. For example, during a read-aloud of *Little Red Riding Hood* (Hyman & Grimm, 1983) and at the point where Red Riding Hood meets the wolf, some second-grade children shouted, “You better watch out, Red Riding Hood! Don't be fooled!” Similarly, during a read-aloud of the Beatrix Potter (1991/1901) classic *Peter Rabbit*, an excited kindergartner yelled, “Run, Peter! Run for your life!” when Mr. McGregor began to pursue Peter. A third example is the reaction of some first graders to the arrogant attitude of the older daughter in John Steptoe's (1987) *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*. The daughter declares, “I will be queen, I will be queen.” Immediately, the children called out, “No, she won't!” Thus, talking back to the story and addressing characters directly begins to blur the distinction between the story world and the children's world. For a moment the two worlds become superimposed—one transparent over the other. For this reason, in previous research (Sipe, 1996, 2000a, 2000b), I have used the word *transparent* in naming these types of response. They are evidence of children's deep engagement in what Benton (1992), following both J.R.R. Tolkien and W.H. Auden, called the “secondary world” of the story: The world the author (and, in the case of picture books, the illustrator) has created with words and visual images.

3. Critiquing/controlling. In this third category of expressive engagement, children suggest alternatives in plots, characters, or settings. For example, in a read-aloud of Paul Galdone's (1979) *The Three Bears*, first and second graders

discussed how old Goldilocks might be, given that she had a missing front tooth in the illustration. After various children speculated, Gordon suggested, “Let’s *make* her our age.” Here, Gordon’s stance is that of controlling the story—molding it in order to fit his wishes. Other examples show children critiquing the choices an author or illustrator made, or suggesting alternatives—what might be called “I would” or “I wouldn’t” talk. The following discussion happened during a read-aloud of *Little Red Riding Hood* (Hyman & Grimm, 1983).

- Teacher: [reading] “And what have you got in your basket?”
[the wolf asked.] “A loaf of bread, some sweet butter, and a bottle of wine,” [Red Riding Hood replied.]
- Julie: I wouldn’t do that, I would say, “Oh nothing.” [looking up innocently and whistling jauntily]
- Trent: If I was Little Red Riding Hood, and, um, the wolf asked me where grandma’s was, I’d say, “She’s in New York and 100 miles away.”
- Sean: If I was Red, I wouldn’t care; I just go through the shortcut.

These responses by Julie, Trent, and Sean show that the children thought there was room in the stories for them—their personalities, their choices, and their capabilities. It was one way of personalizing the stories, of drawing the stories to themselves; more important, it allowed them to control and manage plots and characters. They thought of themselves as authors, with ideas as valid as those of the published author of the book they were discussing.

4. Inserting oneself (or friends) in the story is a fourth type of response that shows expressive engagement. The children assume the role of story characters, or shove their classmates into the story in some way. For example, during a read-aloud of *The Three Bears* (Galdone, 1979), Joey, a first grader, was very taken by the previously mentioned illustration of Goldilocks with a missing tooth: “Maybe right here she got punched! Maybe Kenny punched her!” This was quite sly, because Joey’s classmate Kenny was a tough little cookie who was more likely than anyone else to put up his dukes, either on the playground or in the classroom. Joey’s comment was immediately followed by a moment of car-

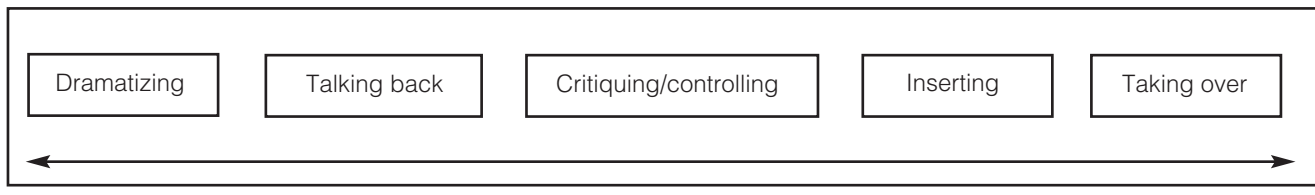
nival as several children got up and began throwing fake punches at each other.

This type of response shows the children in the process of becoming one with the story, to the extent of assuming their stance as fellow characters with equal agency and presence in the story. In a similar way to “talking back,” this response represents a curious blurring of the distinction between the primary world of reality and the secondary world of the story, a melding of text and life.

5. Taking over. The last type of expressive engagement is taking over the text and manipulating it for one’s own purposes. In this type of response, anything goes because children abandon any attempt at interpretation or understanding and treat the story as a launching pad for the expression of their own creativity. These responses are almost always deeply humorous and subversive. One example is the earlier vignette where Charles subverted the text of *Chicken Little* by performing a song for us. In another example, several first and second graders were watching a video of J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (National Broadcasting Company, 1960). There is a point in the story where Tinkerbell, the fairy, is very ill and likely to die—we see her light growing dimmer and dimmer. At this point, Peter tells us that whenever someone says they don’t believe in fairies, a fairy dies. Then he appeals directly to viewers, in a famous example of breaking down the so-called fourth wall between the actors and the audience. “Clap your hands if you believe in fairies!” he cries passionately. Most of the children in our little audience dutifully began to clap their hands. All except Chris who shouted “No, No, No, No! I don’t believe in ’em and I just killed four.” Chris’s intention here, it seems, was to take the bit in his teeth and run—the point was to perform for us, leaving the story in the dust. The story became a platform for the expression of his own creativity.

A third example of taking over is a comment by Keyron, a kindergartner who responded to his teacher’s question “What do you think this story—*Red Riding Hood*—might be about?” Keyron, with the widest of grins, replied, “Probably she read and she write a lot, and she live in the ’hood!” To understand this response, it’s necessary to point out that Keyron was one of the most “story-wise” of the children in his class. He knew very well—and he knew that his

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teacher was aware that he knew—what *Red Riding Hood* is about. Rather than responding seriously to the teacher’s question, he decided to perform with an astonishingly clever series of puns. He deliberately misunderstood *Red* as the past tense of *read* and interpreted *Riding* as *writing*; as well, he gave a colloquial urban twist to *Hood*.

Understanding expressive engagement

What do these five types of response have in common? Children who make such responses seem to view stories as *invitations* to participate or perform. Stories are understood not as fixed and rigid but as changeable texts, and the reader’s role is not simply to understand but to actively control stories. We can change stories, resist them, critique them, even use them for our own purposes. These five types of response not only show children actively engaging with stories, they show children making stories *their own*.

As the Figure demonstrates, we can also understand these responses as lying along a continuum where the degree of active participation increases from left to right. In other words, in dramatizing, children are being closely guided by the text in their response; the text shapes their activity to a large degree. As we move to the right, children’s responses in the talking back, critiquing/controlling, and inserting categories increasingly dominate the text until, in taking over, they are in total control. At this point, to the far right of the continuum, stories function as merely incidental tools for children’s performances. Responses here are most likely to be interpreted by teachers as “off-task” or inappropriate.

There are several theories that help us understand these interesting responses. First, they are *deeply pleasurable* for children. This might seem simple-minded, and yet most theories of

literary understanding fail to mention the profound pleasure young children feel when reading (or listening to) stories. One exception is Barthes (1976), who talked about two types of literary enjoyment: pleasure and bliss. Pleasure comes from familiarity; the text reflects a world we expect. Bliss comes from delight in the new—new vistas of experience take us out of ourselves. I believe that the five types of child response highlighted in this article can be seen as expressions of bliss, the exuberant enjoyment of stories that takes children out of the world of the familiar and into the delightful world of the story.

A second theory that can help us understand these responses is Bakhtin’s (1984) idea of the “carnavalesque.” Bakhtin saw carnival as subversive, a time when power relations are up-ended and humor becomes outrageous. Carnival often centers around the body and bodily functions. Its creative expression is wild and out of control rather than calm and logical. As children move along the continuum of expressive engagement, I suggest that their responses become increasingly carnivalesque. Children come to dominate the text, and they wrest control from the teacher.

We may be tempted to see the five types of response as a disruption of the serious meaning making that is the principal activity of the children during storybook read-alouds. However, another way of seeing them is as sophisticated expressive acts of literary pleasure, in which the children treat the literary text as a playground. Instead of taking the text seriously, the children respond in a playful manner, a pretext for carnivalesque exuberance.

Turning to the classroom, what might encourage (or discourage) these kinds of responses from children? There seem to be at least four variables: the cultural context, individual reader characteristics, the characteristics of the text, and teacher (or classroom) characteristics (see Table).

Influences on children's expressive engagement in stories

Cultural context	Individual reader characteristics	Textual characteristics	Teacher/classroom characteristics
The culturally constructed attitude and stance toward stories, both oral and written.	Previous experience with hypertext and other malleable formats. Previous experience with storybook variants as examples of the protean quality of texts, thereby inviting talking back and taking over.	Some texts may encourage this type of response more than others. The so-called postmodern picture book may tend to invite more of these responses than stories in a more traditional linear format.	The teacher's approval or disapproval of these types of response. The classroom's explicit and implicit rules for storybook read-alouds. What "counts" as response in a particular classroom interpretive community.

First, there may be a connection between children's *culture* and these types of response. For example, Ballenger (1999) reported Haitian children responding in a carnivalesque way—they were always calling out and commenting, even rising to punch out the monsters in the books. One child sat on a copy of "Jack and the Beanstalk," saying "I don't want no monsters to get out" (p. 60). The children were exhibiting what I would call dramatizing, talking back, inserting, and taking over. Ballenger called this "entering in" (p. 63). How does culture affect and shape response? To use Gates's (1988) term, are these responses a form of *signifying*, an important part of the repertoire of the literary response of children of African American heritage? If so, would a culturally sensitive classroom accept the free expression of these types of response and use them to promote a richer literary understanding? I don't mean to imply that African American children or Caribbean children are the only ones who may respond in this way, but that expressive and performative responses may be highly valued by the African American and Caribbean communities.

Are these types of response a characteristic of 21st-century child *readers*, experienced with television programming, video games, hypertext, the Web, and other interactive media, who see texts as changeable in a way that children in the past did not? Dresang (1999), in *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age*, argued that they do. Further, today's children may have exposure to multiple variants of the same

story (several versions of "Rapunzel," for example). Children tend to see their first experience with a story as the "official" version against which all others are judged, and they can be quite rigid in their resistance to new forms or variants. But as they experience many variants of the same story, they come to realize that stories are plastic, malleable, and can have infinite variations. This realization may increase children's tendency to respond to a story by "taking over." Once again, Barthes (1974) can help us understand this process. He suggested that readers tend either to reduce a text to a single meaning (which he termed "infolding") or to delight in a multitude of possible meanings ("unfolding"). In terms of Barthes's distinction, these five types of response can be seen as expressions of unfolding, and modern child readers may be particularly disposed toward unfolding.

Another factor may be the influence of postmodern *texts*, especially postmodern picture books such as David Macaulay's (1990) *Black and White* or Jon Scieszka's (1992) *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, which force readers to be active. Barthes called such books "writerly" texts because they encourage very active participation, in contrast to "readerly" texts that tend to lead the reader to a single meaning. In other words, certain texts may prompt responses of expressive engagement more than others. Was it, for example, partly the sheer postmodern irreverence of Steven Kellogg's *Chicken Little* variant that prompted

Charles's "Bad boys, bad boys" performance quoted at the beginning of this article?

Finally, what of the profound influence of *teachers* on expressive engagement? Teachers have a lot to say about what counts as response in their classroom interpretive communities (Fish, 1980) and whether children are allowed or encouraged to speak during read-alouds. Those teachers who encourage this type of response or exhibit it themselves are probably more likely to see it than those who consider such responses too out of control, too subversive, too transgressive, too viscerally pleasurable. These types of response may call into question our traditional distinctions between on-task and off-task behaviors. In a study of 9- to 11-year-olds talking about literary texts, researchers Yonge and Stables (1998) tried to "highlight the problems for the teacher of identifying what is off task talk in collaborative learning contexts," and found that "children may use a wide variety of speech styles while remaining involved in the task at hand" (p. 55). Are we willing to broaden our view of what constitutes literary response?

All of this suggests that a complete understanding of expressive engagement should include not only the five different types of response, but also the four considerations of culture, readers, texts, and teachers.

Encouraging expressive engagement in the classroom

How can teachers make practical use of these ideas? Most important, they can help children move along the continuum of expressive engagement by encouraging such responses and by relinquishing some control over the nature of the read-aloud experience. The first type of expressive engagement, dramatizing, can be encouraged through dramatic reenactment. In one kindergarten classroom, after a reading of *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963), the teacher had the children sit in a circle on the floor and selected one child to be the main character (in this case, because the child was female, her name was Maxine instead of Max). The teacher then led the children in acting out the story by retelling the text and giving them suggestions about what to do. It did not take long for the children to understand the procedure. Having enthusiastically dramatized the wild rumpus, when Maxine was

returning home in her little boat, one child orchestrated a rendition of the sea by encouraging others to wave their arms while softly saying "Shhhh, shhhh" in a wave-like way.

While the second category, talking back, is one that is initiated by students, teachers can encourage this level of engagement by modeling such engagement and by accepting and valuing such responses when they do occur. For example, while reading *The Adventures of Sparrowboy* (Pinkney, 1997) to her kindergarten class, the teacher read the words "Henry flew over the handlebars and soared to the sky." She then responded to her own reading by saying "Oh, my!" Further in the same read-aloud, the teacher read the words "I can fly! Henry shouted" and again responded to her own reading by saying "Oh, I wish I could fly—I'd have a grand old time." That this technique had engaged the children could be seen shortly thereafter, when the text described an encounter between the hero and a bully. The children responded to the text with "Ohhh!" and "Oh, no!" and when the text mentioned the bully's dog a child responded "Woof! Woof!"

The third category, critiquing/controlling, can be directly encouraged through teacher questions such as "What would you say?" or "What would you do now?" In a first- and second-grade combined classroom, a teacher was reading the Paul Zelinsky (Zelinsky & Grimm, 1997) version of *Rapunzel* to her students. At one point in the story, when the sorceress tells the husband he may take all the rapunzel leaves his pregnant wife craves if he promises to give her their baby when it is born, the teacher asked the children "What would you do?" This single question initiated a discussion consisting of 40 conversational turns by the children. They began with "I would" or "I wouldn't" answers but gradually began to develop elaborate plans for the husband so that he could save both his wife and his child.

The fourth category, inserting, is another one initiated by children when they are highly engaged in a story, a stance that teachers can encourage in a variety of ways. During a kindergarten read-aloud of *Yo! Yes?* (Raschka, 1993) for example, after a long discussion of what the children thought the book might be about from the cover illustration, the teacher read the second opening "Hey! Yes?" and the children responded spontaneously "Who, me?" "Yes, you!" "Couldn't be!" and "How 'bout wanna be?"

Taking over the text is engagement at a high level of creativity, when children feel at ease and empowered in the context of a classroom read-aloud. This creativity is evident in the following interchange during a reading of *The Stinky Cheese Man* (Scieszka, 1992) in a first- and second-grade combined classroom:

Teacher: [reading] "Where is that lazy narrator? Where is that lazy illustrator? Where is that lazy author?"

Sally: The illustrator and the author are probably making another stupid book.

In all of the examples cited, the classroom teachers, while never losing control of the situation, varied their reactions to children's responses in a way that encouraged active participation. For example, while encouraging the children to raise their hands so that they did not all speak at once, one teacher also acknowledged and accepted called responses if they did not override another child. The children therefore became confident in their responses and actively engaged with stories.

There are several reasons why encouraging and valuing children's talking back and taking over responses are important in classrooms. First, as mentioned earlier, they represent ways children make the story *their own*. Making stories our own may be a powerful way—or perhaps the only way—for stories to affect our lives and to transform us. If we believe in the power of literature to change our lives and the lives of children, or at least to serve as what Bishop (1997) called a *catalyst* for thinking about the problems and opportunities of life in new, creative ways, we encourage these responses as ways of forging strong links between stories and children's lives.

Second, we might consider how to extend and expand our theory of the literary understanding of young children to include these types of response. They may act as powerful entrées (for at least some children) to a more complete, more textured, and richer understanding of stories and how they work. Moreover, since literary understanding is one element of literacy development, we might further think about literary understanding as an entrée to other aspects of literacy, such as learning to read and write.

Finally, it is important to emphasize and rehabilitate the idea of literary pleasure and playfulness. This is especially crucial in light of the massive overemphasis on competencies and drills

that threatens to reduce the act of reading (and literature) to a dull and leaden experience that could not be more antithetical to the exuberance children display when they are really learning. Pleasure and engagement are so often forgotten in discussions about story reading and learning to read—as if these were bloodless skills rather than skillful ways of appreciating, loving, and being passionate about stories, ideas, and human experience. By talking back and taking over, children are demonstrating this passion.

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