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A Review of The Reader Response Notebook: Teaching toward Agency, Autonomy, and Accountability

Book Reviewed: Kesler, T. (2018). *The reader response notebook: Teaching toward agency, autonomy, and accountability*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

The Reader Response Notebook: Teaching toward Agency, Autonomy, and Accountability by Ted Kesler exemplifies how classroom inquiry can be used to improve and develop authentic learning activities. Filled with children's voices, learning, and engagement with literature, *The Reader Response Notebook* tells two overlapping narratives. The first narrative is the reflective professional journey of Ted Kesler, who began re-envisioning the possibilities of reader response notebooks while he was an elementary and middle school teacher in New York City Public Schools. In the introduction of *The Reader Response Notebook*, Kesler describes his early perceptions and uses of reader response notebooks, only to realize that he may not have been meeting the needs of his students. Kesler asked the critical question that would pave the way for rethinking his then-model of reader response notebooks, "What happened to students who were reluctant or resistant writers, or who did not represent their best thinking about texts they read in writing?" (p. xv).

Guided by this question, Kesler strategically walks the reader through the multiple and diverse journeys that he took to allow for more "introspective thinking using a broad range of responses" (p. xviii). Within that same narrative, Kesler describes how he, in his current role as a university professor, collaborated with classroom teachers in New York City Public Schools to question similar pedagogical assumptions around what readers should know and how teachers should teach and assess reading in their classrooms. The development of this narrative illustrates how teachers came to engage in inquiry around how students transact with literature in authentic

reading experiences through reader response notebooks within their own second to fifth grade classrooms.

The second co-existing narrative in *The Reader Response Notebook* is that of the students who used reader response notebooks in their classrooms. Here, Kesler uses an accessible writing style that integrates theory with classroom examples and application. The combination of accessibility and real-life examples makes this book ideal for pre- and in-service classroom teachers. Readers feel as though they are sitting in the classroom with the students while listening to their stories and participating in their learning.

The idea of reader response is not new; it has been a pillar of literary response since the 1980s. Integrating Rosenblatt's (1992) transactional theory, reader response notebooks focus on the transaction between reader and text so that reading comprehension is reflective of deep meanings, rather than a singular and superficial meaning often purported to belong to the author. As Rosenblatt reminds us, meaning is the transaction between reader and text, and both change in the construction of meaning. It is this notion that guides Kesler's implementation of reader response notebooks.

While reader response notebooks have long been part of elementary school classrooms, they have been standardized over the years. For instance, the idea of "response" has taken on the form of question and answer. As a result, the transaction has been lost and replaced by the goal of finding the "correct" answer. In Chapter 1, Kesler describes some of these (mis)conceptions about how reader response notebooks should be used. In subsequent chapters, Kesler reinvents the reader response notebook for readers. First, Kesler expands the theoretical underpinnings that can frame a reader's response to literature through the lens of semiotics and multimodality.

Second, threaded throughout the book, Kesler discusses the influence and inclusion of popular culture.

After providing a conceptual framework in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 introduces readers to a variety of common reading response strategies that can serve as the basis for more complex approaches to responding to literature. Presented through vibrant images and dialogue, Chapter 3 expands on some of these preliminary strategies through multimodal perspectives to propose more dynamic approaches, such as found poems and character web relationships. Chapter 4 discusses the application of reader response notebooks in classrooms. Kesler also addresses issues of accountability and how teachers can monitor and sustain the use of such notebooks. In Chapter 5, Kesler illustrates how reader response notebooks allow students to merge in- and out-of-school literacy practices. Finally, Chapter 6 presents the relationships between reader response notebooks and the development of literate identities.

In sum, *The Reader Response Notebook* is a comprehensive, practical book for teachers. *The Reader Response Notebook* exemplifies how inquiry lead to action to improve student learning through introspective and reflective thinking from classroom teachers and students. One of the strengths of *The Reader Response Notebook* is how Kesler describes this process as guided by contemporary and diverse theories that inform the definition of reading. While this is the case, Kesler spends less time on the process of moving from inquiry to action in re-envisioning reader response notebooks. Readers will not find answers to questions related to how Kesler engaged in classroom inquiry, or how he developed and maintain collaborative relationships with the teachers that resulted in the impressive amount of student work presented in *The Reader Response Notebook*. It, however, takes classroom inquiry and action research to the next level, which is innovative in its own right. Recognizing that the classroom inquiry does not end with

the publication of his book, Kesler encourages readers to share their ideas on and experiences with reader response notebooks on his blog and Twitter. This support network is an invaluable resource for teachers who may want to engage in classroom inquiry and action research to re-envision reader response notebooks in their classrooms.

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