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An Investigation of Preservice Teachers' Engagement in Reading a Novel in Verse

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An Investigation of Preservice Teachers' Engagement in Reading a Novel in Verse

Abstract

This qualitative investigation focused on preservice teachers' experiences reading a novel in verse. Initially few participants had read novels in verse and some were hesitant due to previous negative experiences reading poetry. Participants identified a variety of challenges, including the lack of narration, the need to make connections across the short verses, and the need to adjust reading pace. Some participants met the challenges by conducting rereadings and adjusting their pace. As participants moved through the story world, their written responses reflected engagement with the characters and their experiences. They also identified text features supporting this engagement, such as the diary-like quality of the book. Participants found opportunities to talk with peers to be particularly supportive. Participants also valued the close poetic read modeled by the instructor and indicated that this modeling pushed them to move beyond reading for plot to looking more deeply into elements of the story.

Telling stories in verse is not a new phenomenon. Campbell (2004) observed that long stories in verse are likely the prototype for all literature, though with the emergence of the prose novel, this form of storytelling largely faded away in the 18th century—until recent years. We have witnessed an explosion of novels in verse (also called verse novels), especially since the turn of the century (Abate, 2018; Cadden, 2011; Cullings, 2015). In recent years, novels in verse have received increasing critical acclaim. In the first 76 years of the Newbery Award, the only verse novel to be recognized by a committee was Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* in 1998. Since 2000, six verse novels have been recognized by Newbery committees. From 2000 to 2022, seven novels in verse have also been recognized by Printz committees. In addition to the critical acclaim, publishers are attending to readers' interest in the novel in verse by drastically increasing the publication of this engaging format.

The novel in verse is a distinct literary format in which the author presents a narrative in poetic form. Given the distinctive features of the format, reading verse novels may be inherently different from reading prose, and teachers should be prepared to support students' reading experiences with attention to elements such as poetic devices as well as the development of literary elements. As a result, teachers need to increase their own awareness of what is involved in reading this unique format. The purpose of this study was to explore preservice teachers' experiences in reading verse novels and learning how to support their future students' engagement.

Theoretical Frameworks

Both literary response theory and socioconstructivist theory undergird this study. In writing about literary response theory, Beach (1993) differentiates between experiential and textual theories of response. We drew on both types as we sought to understand preservice teachers' engagement reading a novel in verse, a format with distinctive textual features. Given the plethora of existing research on how social interactions influence reading experiences and the limited amount of research on text format, this study focused largely on the novel in verse format.

Experiential Response Theories

Experiential theories of response focus on the nature of readers' experience with a text. The particular theory on which this investigation draws is Langer's (2011) envisionment theory which differentiates various stances through which readers may move as they build envisionments. Langer defines an envisionment as a reader's understanding of a text at any given time, and she delineates five stances through which readers may move as they work to build envisionments: (1) being outside and stepping into an envisionment; (2) being inside and moving through an envisionment; (3) stepping out and rethinking what you know; (4) stepping out and objectifying the experience; and (5) leaving the envisionment and going beyond.

In Langer's first stance, being outside and stepping into an envisionment, readers try to gather enough ideas to gain a sense of what a work of literature will be about. In the second stance, being inside and moving through an envisionment, readers are immersed in the story world and move through as they ask questions and make connections related to "motives, feelings, causes, interrelationships, and implications" (Langer, 2011, p. 18). In the third stance, readers step out of the story world and rethink what they know; in effect, they use their developing understandings to add to their own knowledge and experiences. The reader's focus shifts from the story world to what ideas mean for their own lives. In the fourth stance, readers step out and objectify the experience distancing themselves and reflecting back on their envisionment. Perhaps they reflect on the crafting of the text or why the text holds significance for them. In the fifth stance, readers use their insight in new and sometimes unrelated ways.

Experiential theories of response focus on the nature of the reader's work as they draw on past experiences and memories in actively interpreting texts. Yet Rosenblatt (1964) reminds us, the text serves as a "blueprint" (p. 126) or guide for the reader, and the successful reading of blueprints may require specialized knowledge, in particular, knowledge about the text.

Textual Response Theory

Textual theories of response provide focus on “how readers’ knowledge of language and text/genre conventions influence their response to text” (Beach, 1993, p. 17). Rabinowitz (1987) identified different textual conventions to which readers attend in making inferences about narratives (e.g., features such as titles or facets of text such as character motivation.) While Rabinowitz does not differentiate between textual conventions associated with prose and verse novels, scholars who write about novels in verse have identified distinctive features that differentiate this format. Readers with greater knowledge of the conventions of novels in verse may read the blueprint of the format more insightfully than those without such knowledge.

Socioconstructivist Theory

Socioconstructivism which views language and literacy learning as being constructed within social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) may help to understand preservice teachers’ experiences with novels in verse in a children’s literature course. It is through interaction and collaboration with others that meaningful learning can occur (Amineh & Asl, 2015). During dialogic discourse (Lennox, 2013), participants in literature discussion engage in conversational exchanges which can generate new perspectives and collaborative thinking about a text. From these perspectives the learning process can be viewed as multifaceted and may also involve a more knowledgeable other who can guide and support readers (Wenger, 2000). For this study we draw on both literary response and socioconstructivist lenses to help us gain deeper insights into the experience of reading verse novels.

Review of Scholarly Work

Scholars have written extensively about the format of the novel in verse. These discussions have largely focused on three facets of the verse novel: (1) the ways in which stories are told; (2) text conventions; and (3) poetic features.

Ways in Which Stories Are Told

The novel in verse is not a singular entity. Stories vary in genre with genres including realistic fiction, science fiction, historical fiction, and memoir. Further, stories may be narrated by multiple voices though most often they are told by a single voice (Campbell, 2004; Colquhoun, 2021). Regardless of voice, the focus is on character feelings and emotions. Campbell (2004) notes that often the action of the verse novel focuses on an emotional event and “the rest of the novel deals with the characters’ feelings before and after” (p. 614). This leads to a structure quite different than the typical narrative structure (i.e., rising action, climax, etc.) of prose novels. Missing from novels in verse are familiar narrative elements including “dialogue, exposition, and external narration” (Cadden, 2018, p. 135).

While character is a central element, characters may remain less fully developed due to the lack of narration (Cadden, 2011). Cadden reminds us that in the single speaker novel in verse, the view of the situation that is built is “seen through the eyes and heard from the voice of one, often-conflicted source” (p. 23).

These distinctive ways of telling stories in verse novels push readers to become actively engaged in meaning construction. As Cadden (2011) observes:

Verse novels invite imaginative speculation about the things that are left unsaid by either characters or absent narrators—the descriptions of characters, settings, movements, and background information provided in the traditional prose novel that here are gaps. The verse novel leaves all of this description to the reader’s imagination (p. 24).

Frequently Used Text Conventions

While the ways in which stories are developed in verse novels can place demands on readers, these works contain text conventions that support readers. For example, Alexander (2005) notes that verse novels contain short sections of one to two pages that often have a title that orients readers. Colquhon (2021) identifies still other text conventions such as headings, manipulations of font, and the use of stanzas that she believes support comprehension.

Cadden (2018) offers a particularly nuanced analysis of these text conventions. He writes about two types of conventions—peritextual features and within text supports. One peritextual feature is a label on the book cover that announces that the book tells a story—*novel* in verse. Still other peritextual features may include a listing of characters, a family tree, a table of contents, a map, etc. As examples of within-text supports, Cadden includes titles for verses, divisions and labels for story parts, and the inclusion of dates.

Poetic Features

Novels in verse tell stories, but as the name signals, they do so through verse. Coats (2018) believes this creates a special challenge for authors: “The individual poems in verse novels bear a special burden not only of fulfilling certain expectations readers have of poetry, but also of creating characters and plot that young readers can relate to or at least find compelling” (p. 146). Colquhon (2021) too recognizes this challenge of combining “the music and imagery of poetry with the character development and story structure of a novel” (p. 51).

The form of poetry used most frequently in verse novels is free verse (Alexander, 2005) though some authors do experiment with different poetic forms (Van Sickle, 2006). Of particular importance are the poetic devices, such as metaphor, imagery, assonance, and alliteration (Cullings, 2015). In writing about the verse novels of Virginia Euwer Wolff, Alexander (2005) discussed the contribution of such poetic elements to the stories being told. She explained that

“...line-length and line-breaks, pauses and repetition, shape the pace so that the rise and fall of the lines reflects the emotion and supports the meaning” (p. 274-275).

Poetic devices can be challenging for readers, a challenge Coats (2018) addresses in her discussion of metaphors. Yet, Coats argues that elements of *poetic form* (e.g., the use of all caps, the layout of lines, line breaks, space, font choice) work in tandem with poetic devices to “facilitate the reader’s understanding of characters and settings in a verse novel” (pp. 148-149).

Despite the considerable amount of scholarly discussion about verse novels, we have found only one study, a content analysis conducted by Cullings (2015), that focused on the format. Cullings’ purpose was to “determine to what extent, if any, the desirable qualities identified by experts in the field of Young Adult literature were present in a selection of contemporary Novels in Verse written for adolescents” (p. 3). Cullings described appealing features of novels in verse that young adult literature experts deem high quality, such as realistic and age-appropriate conversations among characters, fascinating openings to hook the reader, and noteworthy endings. She also found unique features, including the use of multiple narrators for specific purposes, such as telling stories from various points of view. She noted the specific attention given to word choice, imagery, and structure as a result of the poetic form enabling the author to create a unique and “memorable voice” (p. 86) of the protagonist.

We have been unable to find any research on readers engaged in reading novels in verse. This is a gap that we believe needs to be addressed given the unique features of the format, some of which may place special demands on readers while other features may offer special support to readers. Hence, this investigation addresses the following research question: What is the nature of preservice teachers’ experiences when reading a novel in verse?

Methodology

We sought to understand preservice teachers’ experiences when reading verse novels. Participants were 86 preservice teachers enrolled in three sections of a children’s literature course designed to explore different formats of children’s literature including the novel in verse. Two of the five researchers on this study served as course instructors. Per IRB guidelines, all data was deidentified and had not bearing on student grades. In the analysis phase, the other three researchers provided member checking to ensure the credibility of the data. The students were in the initial semester of their teacher certification program.

Students read the novel in verse, *Inside Out and Back Again* (2011), a Newbery honor book by Thanhha Lai. The story, organized into four parts, chronicles the experiences of a young Vietnamese girl and her family across a year. Part one entitled “Saigon,” is set in 1975 in the final months of the Vietnam War. The opening verse reveals the family celebrating Têt, as the Year of the Cat begins.

Ha, her mother, and her brothers are struggling to survive as the Viet Cong approach Saigon. As others leave the country, the family is conflicted hoping that their missing father will come home. Nonetheless, with the fall of South Vietnam inevitable, the family flees the country. Part two, “At Sea,” chronicles their painful and long journey which eventually takes them to Florida where a man from Alabama agrees to be their sponsor.

In part three entitled “Alabama,” the family faces the struggles of many refugees –learning a new language, understanding a new culture, and dealing with racism and bullying. They struggle to hold on to their own culture while simultaneously finding a place for themselves in their new country. Part four, “From Now On,” serves as a denouement in which the family learns about the father’s death and comes to accept this reality. Readers also learn about the pathways that family members hope to pursue. The concluding verse shows the family again celebrating Têt, the Year of the Dragon, with hope for the future in their new home.

Data Sources and Data Procedures

Students read the book over a three-week period with the book being divided into three sections—Part 1, Part 2, and Parts 3 and 4 with data collected around each section of the book. Data sources included pre and post surveys and written responses for each section of the book. The initial survey sought information about the students’ experiences reading challenging text including poetry, as well as prior experiences reading novels in verse. The final survey sought information about students’ experiences reading *Inside Out and Back Again*.

Week One Procedures

Prior to coming to class, students read the first section of the book and flagged their wonderings, noticings, and a-ha moments when reading. After reading, students wrote about what they flagged and responded to the following questions: (1) What did you notice/learn about the story? and (2) What did you notice/learn about how this novel in verse is structured?

In class, students participated in small group discussions focused on their written responses and then came together for a whole class discussion that was recorded. The instructor then modeled a close poetic read focusing on the initial two verses of section 2. Prior to the study, the two instructors collaboratively developed the close poetic read. In this poetic read, each instructor shared her thinking about how poetic language, poetic devices, and text layout impacted her reading of the story. Students then read the next two verses independently annotating particular elements (e.g., poetic language, poetic devices, and text layout) they found to be of note. They shared these annotations with a partner and

then participated in a whole class discussion focused on their insights about close poetic reads.

Week Two Procedures

The reading assignment for week two paralleled week one. Students again flagged and wrote about their wonderings, noticings, and a-ha moments, but provided written responses to a new set of questions: (1) What was challenging for you reading this section? (2) What poetic devices did you notice? (3) How did these devices affect your reading? (4) How does reading in this format influence your understanding of the story? In class, students again participated in small group discussions followed by a whole class discussion that was recorded.

Week Three Procedures

For the third week, while reading the remainder of the book, students followed the same procedure while reading and then reflected on the following questions: (1) Describe what you did when annotating, (2) Did your annotation process change throughout the novel? If so, how? and (3) Provide 3-5 specific examples of significant annotations that represent your thinking over the course of the novel. In class, students again participated in small group discussions followed by a whole class discussion that was recorded. Following the group discussion, students reflected on this experience by completing a final survey.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using a constant-comparative methodology (Straus & Corbin, 1994). Data analysis consisted of three phases.

Phase 1. Members of the research team read through the pre-reading survey responses individually before meeting together. Using NVivo software they created codes that emerged from the data. In this initial codebook we used language to represent such areas as strategy instruction and poetry analysis. For example, some of the terminology for strategy instruction was *schema maintenance*, *rereading*, *context clues*, and some poetry specific language was *figurative language*, *metaphors*, and *mood*. We next collapsed initial codes into broad categories, such as *poetry comprehension*, *interpretations*, etc. As we analyzed the data, we noted multiple iterations of similar ideas across participants leading to tentative findings.

Phase 2. In this phase, we analyzed the post survey data and further refined the codebook looking for similarities across participants and changes in participant responses. We used this revised codebook to revisit pre-survey data to ensure that the emerging findings represented consistency within the data sources.

We acknowledge that limitations do exist in the study. One potential limitation was that two of the researchers were instructors of record and part of the data collection and analysis process. Yet, steps were taken to ensure that the study

had no bearing on students' grades in the courses. Also, we focused mainly on how students moved through the novel in verse given the need for inquiry into this popular format.

Findings

We begin by presenting an overview of findings across participants. We initially present findings from the pre-reading survey followed by the presentation of findings that emerged from students' written responses and their responses to the final survey. We then present a more holistic view by taking an in-depth look at the responses of two participants.

Initial Understandings and Expectations about Novels in Verse

We recognized that students' past experiences with poetry and/or novels in verse might shape their engagement with *Inside Out and Back Again*. Hence, in the pre-reading survey, we initially sought information about these prior experiences.

Overwhelmingly, students reported difficulty comprehending and interpreting poetry. One participant stated, "I have a hard time interpreting meaning from poetry. I feel like it is so abstract and can be interpreted in so many ways." Still another stated quite bluntly, "I just simply don't like it." Some participants identified particular challenges that appeared to explain their negative feelings about poetry. One participant noted, "I have the habit of pausing at the end of each line like it is always the end of a thought." Still another found the language in poetry to be challenging. "Understanding the meaning of the text if big and difficult words are used. Trying to find hidden meaning if there's hidden meaning in the poem."

In the pre-reading survey, we also sought information concerning participants' initial expectations about verse novels. More than half reported knowing little or nothing about a novel in verse. A few said it was a story told through poetry. Participants also indicated they had no experience with this format.

Based upon the name of the format (i.e., novel in verse), participants shared superficial expectations regarding structure and style. Some expected the format would differ from a prose novel in terms of structure (chapters vs. verses) and length. Others indicated stylistic differences, such as conciseness of language, poetic devices, and smoother flow of language.

Some of their expectations may have been shaped by negative experiences with poetry. For example, one participant stated, "I think it will be harder for me to understand and I have a hard time comprehending how multiple poems can tell one single story but I am excited to find out." Still another said, "It might be more artistic and may be more difficult to interpret meaning." One participant compared reading a novel in verse to reading a chapter book: "I'll have to picture what's

happening in my head in less detail. Chapter books give a lot of information and detail but poetry is more about your own version of the poem.”

Stepping into the Story World

Despite hesitancy about reading this new format, many participants, in their initial written responses, expressed positive reactions. For example, one noted, “I really enjoyed that despite it being poems (which I don't have great history with), it was super easy to understand and follow and even gave the book more emotion.” Another observed, “I enjoyed how easy it was to read. I was hesitant at first because some poetry I can't understand.” However, some participants also identified challenges as they responded to Part 1.

Challenges

One challenge participants noted was the lack of narration in verse novels. For example, one stated, “I could see that a challenge for novels in verse is that it might be hard if someone isn't used to poetry or isn't used to getting all of the details that traditional books provide. I feel like you have to make some inferences about the characters and setting that could be hard if readers haven't practiced with that yet.” Similarly, another commented, “Being comfortable with not having the extra information as far as describing places, movements, etc., was one of the things I found challenging as I am always trying to imagine the people in the books.”

Still others appeared to be challenged by the structure, in particular, the need for the reader to make connections across the many short verses. One participant explained, “It feels as if it was 100 short stories in one novel.” Another said, “I think a challenge for some would be to stay in the book, because the "chapters" are so short you could get off track.”

Finding an appropriate pace for reading a novel in verse was a challenge noted by some. For example, one participant said: “The only challenge I had when reading the novel was going too fast over the verse and not fully understanding the information I was reading. I was just reading to read, not reading to connect and understand.”

Meeting Challenges

Some participants shared how they sought to meet challenges as they stepped into the story world. Rereading was one strategy used to gain more insight into the text meaning. One participant explained, “I was a little nervous about reading the novel in verse at first but I kept reading and went back to reread it a couple of times. I finally got the hang of the book.” Still another commented, “I would say a challenge was getting the emotional and true meaning the first time around. I think it takes several reads to truly capture the meaning.”

Another strategy for meeting the challenge of reading a novel in verse was simply by slowing down the pace of reading. One participant shared: “Sometimes novels in verse feel like they don’t flow because the words make you stop after each line. I found this kind of helpful to make me slow down and process the words before moving on to the next page.”

Moving Through the Story World

We gained insights into participants’ experiences moving through the story world through their reflections written as they continued to read. Despite the challenges previously noted, most participants found themselves highly engaged. One participant shared: “I am being pulled into this book. I feel like I am actually living through what Hà is living through.” Another wrote: “I feel suspenseful about their upcoming experience. I have a feeling that they are going to go through some unnecessary hardships once they reach Alabama. I hope I’m wrong!” These participants, like others, were caught up in the experience of the characters and were curious about what would happen to them as they moved into a culture that was so radically different from the one they had left behind.

In their written responses, participants also talked about what helped them move through this new story format. Some talked about particular text features, others mentioned discussions with peers, and still others noted support from the instructor.

Supportive Text Features

One supportive text feature was the diary-like quality of the book. One participant explained, “I really enjoyed reading a novel in verse. It reminded me of the *Diary of Anne Frank* because we only saw the young girl’s perspective.” Similarly, another observed, “I discovered that reading novels in verse is quite enjoyable. I was able to get a more in depth insight into the character’s experience, as if I was reading from her diary.”

Earlier we noted that some participants were challenged by the book’s structure. However, others found the conciseness of the format to be a supportive feature. For example, one participant commented: “The novel in verse was much shorter but had the same amount of, if not more, content than regular stories. I think that the novel in verse was straight to the point rather than adding all of the extra words that other books do.” Another made a similar observation: “I enjoyed how the book was super powerful in such a short amount of words but it still contained a lot of raw emotion.”

Peer Support

As they read the book, participants regularly came together to talk about the book. In reflecting on their experience, many talked about how they valued these discussions. In some instances, discussions led to new insights about the story itself. In still other instances, participants became aware of text features they had not attended to on their own.

Some of the participants wrote about feeling affirmed in talking with peers because they discovered that their ideas about the story were shared by others. For example, one said, "It makes me feel really good that my peers are actually thinking the same thing as me." Another commented, "I love hearing everyone's perspectives since it's so similar to mine!"

In addition to affirmation, participants sometimes offered new perspectives and interpretations of *Inside and Back Again*. One, in particular, was so interested in what a classmate had to say that she commented, "I honestly think I might reread the first part again to see if I can catch more ideas that I might have missed."

During the discussions, other participants became attuned to stylistic features because of their classmates' observations. For example, one participant became aware of how the author was bringing the central character to life in the book by talking with her peers: "It was brought to my attention how the novel shows you without telling you Kim Hà's personality. It shows us through her actions how spunky she can be." Still another commented: "I had not thought about the fact that it sounds like a 10-year-old was writing."

In some instances peer discussions raised awareness of text features. Through a peer's observation, one participant became aware of the impact of the dates used in the book. She explained, "I noticed the dates while reading but one of my group members pointed out that on the entry where she's discussing her dad it says every day, showing that she feels that way for him every day. I didn't realize how profound that was but it's beautiful."

Instructor Support

After the initial class discussion, instructors modeled the close poetic read. Each shared her thinking about the use of poetic language and devices, as well as the text layout. In subsequent reflections many participants wrote about this modeling impacted their own reading.

Some wrote about how instructor modeling influenced their subsequent annotations. For example, one participant described this change: "I was thinking deeper in the annotations, trying to find more meaning behind them and understanding the poems in a deeper way. Today's class also helped put it into a better perspective." Still another participant explained how the modeling helped her move beyond just reading for plot: "Reading novels in verse can be challenging. I discovered you have to focus on the potential hidden messages and analyze the

poetic devices, rather than simply focusing on reading the novel solely to grasp the plot.”

Still others wrote about beginning to attend more closely to authors’ craft as a consequence of the instructor modeling which, in turn, led them to deeper meaning. One participant stated: “My annotations definitely changed, because now I pay attention to the smaller details such as the poetic devices. This has helped me understand the story better and pay more attention as well.” Another participant noted that by attending to figurative language she gained richer insights into “emotions and themes.”

The post survey responses provided further affirmation about instructor support. One question asked about strategies participants hoped to use as teachers. A number expressed appreciation for the instructor’s chunking of the book and providing opportunities to talk after each chunk. One noted: “I would teach the book how we did it in class. Read it in sections, go over what we read and what we can do better when reading the next part.”

It was also evident in the post survey that participants particularly valued small-group peer discussions as an instructional tool. “I like break out groups! Being able to speak about every section of the book is a great idea.” Another participant believed that through discussion groups her future students could discover that there isn’t a “right or wrong answer, but that they are truly allowed to make their own connections and think critically.”

A Closer Look

In this section, we present a more holistic view of how individual participants stepped into and moved through *Inside Out and Back Again* by highlighting the reading experiences of two participants. We selected these participants because their responses are indicative of the possibilities of deep engagement with novels in verse in a supportive context. We include excerpts and examples from both their annotations written while reading the book and their narrative responses completed after different sections of the book.

Annabelle

In her responses to the initial survey, Annabelle indicated that she was unaware of novels in verse. Further, it appears that she had limited past experience reading poetry, noting that “I have read poetry books before in third grade, and I liked them because they were different from what I was used to.” Her only expectation for reading novels in verse was that they would likely be “more poetic and metaphorical than a chapter book.”

Although Annabelle had mentioned the possibility of “poetic and metaphorical features,” her initial written responses reflected her involvement in the characters’ experiences:

It is very chilling to have the perspective of Kim Hà, a ten-year-old girl, living in the midst of the Vietnam War. She had to fall asleep listening to explosions, and watch as her Mother, "...measures rice grains left in the bin. (p.37)," just to ration out enough food for the family. Another part that really shocked me was when people piled on top of each other in the ship to flee war-ridden Saigon, that it was feared the ship may sink.

In response to the prompt about what she was noticing about this new format, she addressed text conventions, such as the titles and dates at the end of each verse rather than the "poetic and metaphorical" features she mentioned in the initial survey:

I noticed that this novel in verse is structured with a title above each page, highlighting what the following passage will be about. I like this way of organization because it gives the reader one event to focus on at a time. I also noticed the date is at the end of each verse, and it is as if you are living each moment with Kim Hà. The structure of the verses also allows for a slight pause as your eyes move below to find the next word or set of words, which allows for a more expressive flow I believe. It's as if it forces you to read at a steady pace instead of flying through it.

It was only after her instructor modeled the close poetic read that Annabelle moved beyond attending to textual conventions to honing in on poetic devices: "I noticed many cases of metaphors and imagery that allowed me to better understand the sensations that Hà was feeling throughout this journey. As Hà eats, she thinks, '... freshly cooked rice, plump and nutty, makes me imagine the taste of ripe papaya...'(p.78). This imagery makes me almost able to taste her rice, and her comparing it to her papaya tree at home gives me insight into her longing for home."

As a consequence of engaging in her own poetic close read, Annabelle noted the challenges of attending to poetic craft as well as the potential rewards, writing that "many understandings... went much deeper than surface level thinking." This deeper level of thinking was evident in her interpretation of the death of the chick brought onboard the ship by Hà's brother: "In the section titled, *Brother Khoi's Secret*, after much reflection I believe that the death of the chick was symbolic of the loss of innocence of the refugees. The chick shortly passed after boarding the ship to leave Saigon, and the children lost their innocence when they had to flee their home."

Annabelle also appeared to attend more closely to the significance of text layout:

I also understand the significance of certain parts better, such as when each word is broken down into a separate stanza, so you read more slowly, giving you more time to digest the material. An example of this could be when Hà is drinking soup after she is rescued, and narrates

“... I drink a gulp of the
most salty,
most bitter,
most fishy
tea
ever (pp.101-102).”

Annabelle explained this layout by observing, “The commas represent the break in stanzas, as they showcase how badly Hà has been deprived to enjoy a taste similar to home that much.” Annabelle continued to also attend to the author’s craft as she moved through the remainder of the book. When she read, “School! I wake up with dragonflies zipping through my gut. I eat nothing.” (p. 139), she wrote the following: “This gives me the intense perspective of Hà’s nervousness for her first day of school. I can only imagine the debilitating anxiety she must have, making this an important event for Hà.”

Annabelle’s annotations also reflected her continuing engagement with the characters. For example, after she read the following text, “No one would believe me but at times I would choose wartime in Saigon over peacetime in Alabama” (p. 195), she explained:

This provides a firsthand insight into how pitiful Hà is feeling. She would prefer the comfort of her country even if she had to endure war with it. The unacceptance of Alabama stings worse than the effects of war for young Hà.

When asked to reflect on the novel in verse experience, Annabelle said, “I discovered that I found reading novels in verse quite enjoyable, as I was able to get a more in-depth insight into the main character's experience. It was just as if I was reading from her diary, which I really enjoyed.” She also mentioned her appreciation for poetic devices: “I also looked for imagery or metaphors that would provide exceptional detail into the story. The author’s craft seemed to enhance the reader’s perspective about what the characters are enduring throughout the book.” However, she also recognized these devices can place demands on readers: “You have to make sense of some of the poetic devices. The author will use devices to

tell the story, but some have to be interpreted. Not everything is spelled out for you so some critical thinking is required.”

Salina

Like Annabelle, at the beginning of the study, Salina's responses to the initial survey revealed limited knowledge of novels in verse. She explained that “it seems like it would be like using poetry to tell a story that would normally be told in a traditional written format.”

In her first written response, Salina made a global observation about the author's intentionality of word choice, “Thanh Hà Lai is very deliberate with her word choice in each of her poems.” Instead, she wrote about the personal connections she made with the character:

One of the ones that really resonates with me is *Birthday Wishes* (p.30-31). In this poem, I found myself being able to relate to Hà and some of the wishes that she keeps to herself. For example, she says that she wishes she “had a sister to jump rope with and sew doll clothes and hug for warmth,” (Lai, p. 30). I definitely never went through anything like the experiences that Lai is communicating, but I remember being very young and wishing that I had an older sister to share some of the trauma that I experienced when I was a child.

By contrast, in her second written response that occurred after the instructor modeled a close read, Salina shifted her attention to the author's use of similes and metaphors:

In “Nuoc Nam,” Hà is sharing her elation from receiving fish sauce at the camp. When she is describing the food that they are trying to catch at the beach, she describes a sea creature as “puffy and watery like a cucumber,” (p. 100). I think that this is a good example of how similes can create images and make details more relatable. People might not be able to guess what the actual sea creature is, but they would know what a cucumber is like. In “Golden Fuzz,” Hà says that water is still everywhere, “but in the distance appears a black dot” (p. 94). This metaphor helps to paint the reality of the distance between the boat and land.

Salina also wrote about format features she had noted:

I also noticed the dates in the entries have changed in a few of the poems. For example, in “Life in Waiting,” instead of a specific date, Hà just notes that this took place from “June to early July,” (p. 99). I could feel the wait

and I could feel how much that would have dragged on for Hà, no matter how happy she was to not be at sea anymore.

After reading part two of the book, participants were asked to write about how reading this format influenced their understanding of the story. Salina explained,

I think that novels in verse help to make information succinct, while still remaining powerful...I feel much, much more knowledgeable about the events that took place in Vietnam. It felt like I knew exactly what I needed to know, nothing more or less. This really helped me to focus on the deeper meaning.

Salina's written responses to the last two parts of the book focused on both the story world as well as the deliberate text layout used by the author. In writing about "MiSSSiSS WaSShington's Response," Salina wrote:

I think that Mrs. Washington is such an important person in Hà's life. I appreciate the way that her name is spelled, as it emphasizes the struggle that Hà has with English. This verse made me actually cry. I can't imagine how a little girl must feel, knowing that the son of someone important to her, was killed in a place that she loves. The gravity in her question is very apparent and really makes the reader feel the emotions and tension that Hà is experiencing in her new home."

Reflecting back on the experience of reading *Inside Out and Back Again*, Salina wrote:

I really loved reading *Inside Out and Back Again*. I think that this format really helped me to be fully immersed in what was going on in the book and I feel like I learned much more about historical events. The verses kept me focused and I was still able to think critically about the events. I also feel that the words in the verses were very intentional and I feel like the intentionality really helped to communicate the message of the book.

In particular, Salina noted the impact of the close poetic read on her own reading process, "After the close poetic read, I paid close attention to the actual formation of the verses, as well as the titles and dates of each verse and tried to make connections between prior information and new information."

Discussion

As noted by *Publishers Weekly* (Broaddus, 2022) novels in verse have “garnered wide acclaim” (para. 1) and are widely embraced by readers of all ages. Further, we have witnessed a proliferation of the format in recent years. Yet, there has been no research of readers engaged in the format. While scholars have written widely about the features of the format, we sought to describe readers' actual engagement while reading a novel in verse.

As participants began to step into the story world of *Inside Out and Back Again*, this initial experience varied. Some seemed to step almost seamlessly into the story becoming deeply engaged with the characters and their experiences. They valued the diary-like entries and the conciseness of the storytelling. Yet, in contrast, others were clearly challenged by the use of short verses to tell the story. In addition to this challenge presented by the structure, some of the readers were troubled by the lack of exposition.

To address these challenges, some participants identified their own strategies, such as rereading and slowing the pace of their reading. More importantly, though, our findings point to the importance of social interaction that needs to occur around literature. In particular, our participants repeatedly noted the valuable support of peers and instructor. In some instances, the opportunity to talk with peers affirmed participants' own thinking about the story. In still other instances, participants found their peers helped them in meeting challenges by making them aware of how to use text features to support their reading, features that in a novel in verse that can serve as “signs of notice” (Rabinowitz, 1987).

While participants found peer support valuable in extending their understanding of the story, the instructor modeling appeared to reveal a whole new way to approach meaning making while reading a novel in verse. This modeling of a close poetic read opened the participants' eyes to the crafting of the book. In particular, the world of poetic language served as a vehicle to deepen their literary experience.

Scholars have written extensively about this format but have not focused on how readers move through novels in verse. We believe our investigation begins to address this notable gap in the research. While our participants were preservice teachers, we argue that our findings may provide important insights into the experience of reading a novel in verse for all readers and offers direction for future research.

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