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Literary and personal criticism for preservice teachers: A pedagogical imperative

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a theoretical framework for designing a children's literature course that requires preservice teachers to critically analyze literature in ways that are personally meaningful. In addition, specific suggestions for challenging preservice teachers in children's literature courses to read intensively rather than only extensively are outlined.

The shift away from exclusively using traditional basals to literature-based instruction in reading and language arts (Harris, 1996; Hoffman, 1996; Huck, 1996; Strickland, 1994-95), as well as the shift to supplementing content areas like math, social studies, and science with trade books or literature in our elementary schools continues to grow (Alleman and Brophy, 1994; Lake, 1993; Tunnel and Ammon, 1993; Van Middendorp and Lee, 1994). These changes heighten the need for inservice and preservice teachers to possess a strong background in children's literature.

While only eight states list a children's or adolescent literature course as a specific requirement for state certification of elementary education teachers, (Boydston, 1996; Mastain, 1991), some teacher education programs, on their own, enforce a requirement through the general education requirements or through some content core requirements to take a children's literature course. In instances where the requirement is not formal, academic advisors for preservice teachers often reinforce the worth of coursework in children's literature by strongly encouraging students to use electives to take such a course. Frey and Griffith (1979) provide the only study available of children's literature within English departments in the United States. They found that 40 of the 115 (37%) responding institutions offered a children's literature course. Eighteen of the 115 (16%) referred the researchers to the Colleges of Education or of Library Science. One other study, provided by Pugh (1972), found that children's literature was not a widespread requirement for preservice teachers in Great Britain. Certainly, one is quick to notice that the very nature of the

way the course is taught may be linked to the college (English, Education, Child Development, or Library Science) in which it is taught. However, a critical issue persists which has yet to be explored in the literature concerning the curricular design of such coursework; that is, the breadth of coverage.

The intent of this paper is two fold: (a) to make a strong rationale for designing a children's literature course that requires students to read and critically analyze a limited number of books using Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature (1978), and (b) to make specific suggestions for challenging preservice teachers to focus on the depth of children's literature, rather than breadth.

No doubt, the time constraints of a single semester and the trade-off between depth and breadth of coverage influenced my decision to limit the course reading requirements to about eight chaptered novels, rather than the 50 or more books they must read in many of my colleagues' classes. In so doing, I am able to help students to evaluate literature critically and to perceive literature as an experience that aides them personally in the universal struggle for meaning in their lives.

My concern, as the instructor of a literature for young children and adolescents course, is that the children's literature course should take responsibility for providing future teachers with skills related to process rather than overload on content. Preservice teachers need long-term evaluative skills rather than the broad survey or large numbers of children's books. In short, from my vantage point, the course should function more as a literary criticism course and less as a traditional survey course. Furthermore, teacher educators must take responsibility for modeling the powerful notion that critically analyzing literature aids in the personal search for meaning. Many of my preservice teachers sadly enough have yet to discover that literature is not just words printed across a page. Literature, like any art form, has the potential to speak to us about the meaning of life. When this discovery is made, preservice teachers' enthusiasm for discussion and for reading is difficult to quench.

TEACHING LITERATURE IS TEACHING CRITICISM OF LITERATURE

Often, courses in children's literature which target education majors are typically organized as survey courses with the ultimate goal to expose students to as many books as possible, hence the 50 books. In many cases, this focus on breadth of coverage severely limits the degree to which students may explore the depths of great literature. For as Northrup Frye (1964) concluded:

In literature, we have both a theory and a practice. The practice is the production of literature... The theory is what I mean by criticism, the activity of uniting literature with society, and with the different contexts that literature

itself has... The great bulk of criticism is teaching, at all levels from the kindergarten to graduate schools (pp. 127-128).

Literature courses teach criticism of literature or analysis of literature or the "experience" of literature, not literature as a body of literature. The idea that one may not teach literature is of significance to teacher educators because of our shared concern for providing future teachers with the long-term skill necessary to select quality literature for our children, and in so doing we must be committed to modeling this notion that books are more than summaries, synopses, and book reports.

Some of my undergraduates enrolled in children's literature enter the course believing that literature exists for the sole purpose of torturing them with questions and reports as follow-ups. However, literature exists primarily because humans are intuitively involved in the struggle to make meaning out of the apparent chaos and arbitrariness of our lives.

HELPING PRESERVICE TEACHERS FIND PERSONAL MEANING THROUGH LITERATURE

In Bruno Bettelheim's *Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976), the basic premise is that much of a traditional literature remains alive because "...our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives (p. 3)." Further, Bettelheim acknowledges the demands for literature based upon our human need:

...it must stimulate his imagination, help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions, be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems that perturb him (p. 5).

Similarly, Joseph Campbell (1988) examined another form of traditional literature in *The Power of the Myth* as being rooted in the search for the experience of being alive. All of these philosophers were keenly aware of the link between the complex nature of literature (even seemingly "simple" literature) and its important contributions in our personal struggle for meaning.

Five areas of personal meaning have been identified by the Viennese psychologist Viktor Frankl. From his professional experiences as a psychologist and from his life experiences as a survivor of World War II death camps, Frankl (1984) developed logotherapy. Logotherapy is the idea of therapy through the ongoing, never-ending quest for meaning. The five areas of meaning that Frankl (Fabry, 1980, pp. xiv-xix) suggested are: (1) Situations in which we discover

a truth about ourselves (even vicarious experiences); (2) Situations in which we see choices, limited as they may be (learning from past experience); (3) Situations in which we experience our uniqueness (personal relationships and artistic activities); (4) Situations requiring responsibility; (5) Situations requiring self-transcendence.

If we accept a definition of reading as an active and creative process and one that uses our past experiences, the first, second, and third areas of meaning-making are especially important. Not surprising to teacher educators, Frankl felt education can play a major part in guiding the young to find meaning through literature. (No doubt, bibliotherapy could be considered a subset of logotherapy.) Once again, in unison with Northrup and others, literature is viewed not as content to be taught, but as an experience to be acted upon.

Throughout the following examples, literature at its best holds meaning for our everyday lives. Michael Steig's (1989) *Stories of Reading* contains a great account of Marian's very personal response to *Wuthering Heights* (p. 58) and Patrick Shannon's book (1995) *Text, Lies, and Videotape: Stories About Life, Literacy, and Learning* provides many authentic examples of teachers, students and teacher educators negotiating life's meaning in both their lives and in texts (p. xii). Likewise, preservice teachers quickly make the very lucid discovery that books intended for children such as *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) or *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) hold intense meanings for their lives today. When this serendipitously happens as we explore and critically evaluate themes, preservice teachers are ripe for accepting Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of response to literature which states, "This becomes part of the ongoing stream of his experience, to be reflected at any angle important to him as a human being (p. 12)." The transactional theory of literature accepts the experiencing of literature as a coming-together of readers and text where past experiences and present personality plus present interest and preoccupation impact the meaning derived by each individual.

"The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978, pp. 12-13)." As students themselves, preservice teachers are refreshed and relieved by Rosenblatt's statements which validate the meaning they take from the text. As readers negotiating meaning from the text, they are truly empowered by Rosenblatt because her theory allows their critical evaluations and personal interpretations to be legitimized. As the creators of their own meaning, preservice teachers are in a position to foster their own "intellectual autonomy" (Pappas, et.al., 1995, p. 35). As future teachers guiding the reading process, they see the potential for exploring diverse backgrounds, experiences, and ideas around a piece of literature in their classrooms.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING A CHILDREN'S LITERATURE COURSE

The content and the processes of a children's literature course can take many avenues depending on the course objectives. The following sections outline several considerations for providing opportunities for literary and personal criticism within a children's literature course for preservice teachers.

While my course curricula assume college students possess the technical vocabulary of story structure and stylistic devices, the course requirements include Rebecca Luken's (1990) *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* so that students may be aware of these literary elements particular to children's literature. Another excellent resource, Glenna Sloan's (1991) *The Child as Critic*, models that teaching literature is teaching criticism of literature, no matter what the age of the audience. Her book contains a useful listing of the kinds of literary understandings preschool, primary and middle grade students can develop. Once these strategies are shared, preservice teachers who have become classroom teachers have reported to me that the very kinds of tasks modeled and performed in the children's literature course can be successful with their elementary students.

With the intent of making these literary elements come alive for preservice teachers, I decided to limit the reading requirements for the whole group of about 30 students to five chaptered books (*Charlotte's Web*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *A Solitary Blue*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*). Additionally, as part of individual or small group projects throughout the semester, each student reads three more novels and the whole group is assigned to read many folktales, picture books and poetry selections. While the instructor of such courses could choose any combination of chaptered novels, these particular books were chosen by the instructor so that preservice teachers could experience outstanding examples of certain literary elements (tone/mood, use of symbolism, author's style, integral setting, characterization and theme) and so that clear comparisons and contrasts across the use of these elements could be made.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR CHALLENGING PRESERVICE TEACHERS TO ENGAGE IN LITERARY AND PERSONAL CRITICISM

Beginning with *Charlotte's Web* (which is often a book that college students have read as a child), preservice teachers are offered a unique experience to embrace transactional theory of literature because quite often the "preoccupations" (Rosenblatt, 1978) of the reader as an elementary student are not the "preoccupations" of the preservice teacher. Therefore, the strong themes that now surface often stand in stark contrast to the themes that were experienced by the child reading the same lines of black and white print years ago. In addition, preservice teachers begin plotting evidence of Wilbur's

character development as well as Fern's parallel development throughout the book. Through questioning and journalling, many students write about the fresh parallels with their own lives as they struggle with the independence of college life. In analyzing the development of these characters, preservice teachers are requested to create links between Wilbur's growth and development and the integral nature of the farm as the chosen setting. Later, they will create even more links to the related theme topics, such as the cycle of life or the importance of friendship, and what messages E.B. White offers them personally.

Many times in small groups, preservice teachers are required to create story maps (webs, models, and diagrams) which reflect the rising action as it is tied to the character development or to different themes found within the same book. Other times, preservice teachers are challenged to create T-grids contrasting the traits of main characters such as Jesse and Aaron in *Bridge to Terabithia* and to connect these opposing traits with someone in their own lives who would be considered very different from themselves, yet deeply valued.

As we move through to more complex novels such as Cynthia Voigt's *A Solitary Blue*, preservice teachers begin to analyze the author's craft of highlighting the main characters' traits through secondary characters who serve as character foils. Preservice teachers start this process by listing all the flat, secondary characters in the novel and then discussing with a partner why the author would choose to include this character in the book. Identifying to what purpose or purposes a secondary character serves allows preservice teachers to appreciate the intricacies of how authors develop theme. Often, these character foils are ranked by preference or by importance; Melody's boyfriend, Max, is generally selected as most important to the themes and characterization in *A Solitary Blue*, and not coincidentally, the most hated. Again, questioning techniques in small groups or in journalling opportunities allow preservice teachers to find links with particular "characters" in their own lives and how they serve as their personal "foils."

Other meaningful activities include asking preservice teachers to discover the many and diverse similes employed by Katherine Paterson in *Bridge to Terabithia* as well as in excerpts from *The Master Puppeteer* and to discover the common threads in all of these similes as they relate to setting, themes, and certainly author's style. Paterson's keen ability to create extended similes which are in perfect sync with the culture at hand, whether rural West Virginia or China, is readily detected by preservice teachers as a result of this activity.

By contrasting the similarly spunky female protagonists of Cassie in Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and Meg in L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, preservice teachers easily capture the intensity and significance that using different points of view can bring upon their reading. While both books present spirited and confident female protagonists, readers usually feel more intensely the hardships

that Cassie has to endure by virtue of having read the personal pronoun "I" over and over throughout the book. Preservice teachers, many of whom are women, often personally identify with the power of using "I" to communicate strong messages.

In like fashion, preservice teachers are requested to analyze the dialogue in Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* for important references that form a pattern related to a particular theme. For example, after reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, preservice teachers are asked to brainstorm what characters, places, incidents, and symbols exemplify the separate themes of independence, of injustice, of family relationships and of friendship (see grid below).

<u>Themes</u>	Characters	Places/Settings	Incidents	Symbols
Independence				
Injustice				
Family relations				
Friendship				
When to fight				

Using this grid to guide them, small groups begin the personal process of creating theme statements that could be derived from the book. Framing all of these activities in such a way that we push through and beyond purely literary criticism to personal connections allows the possibility for each person to learn more about him/herself, more about each other, and more about his/her perception of the world.

LESS IS MORE

Thus, with fewer books being required and more experiences for both literary and personal criticism, preservice teachers can analyze the many layers and shades of both universal and personal meaning inherent in good children's books. Alan Purves and Dianne Monson (1984) add this salient point:

Our experience, what we have done, what we have seen, what we have read, separate us. At the same time, the text brings us together and gives us a chance to explore how we resemble each other and how we differ from each other (p. 8).

Knowing that the role of children's literature is changing to be the basis of instruction and integration across the curriculum in meaningful ways (Alleman and Brophy, 1994; Harris, 1996; Hoffman,

1996; Huck, 1996; Lake, 1993; Strickland, 1994-95; Tunnel and Ammon, 1993; Van Middendorp and Lee, 1994), teacher educators must prepare preservice teachers to use literature in powerful ways. Rather than going through the stale motions of only reading extensively, literary and personal criticism allow the future teacher to read intensively with literature as a personal transaction. Purves and Monson's (1984) perspective of literature has the power not only to strengthen the intellectual and aesthetic autonomy of our preservice teachers, but to serve as the continuing model for future transactions between the literature our preservice teachers will offer their students in our public schools.

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