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Literacy Through Literature: The Role of Comparison

John D. Beach

The adequacy of elementary teachers' preparation to work with literature and literature-based literacy programs has recently been called into question (Beach, 1992; Walmsley, 1992; Walmsley and Walp, 1990; Zarillo, 1989). When visiting elementary classrooms categorized as literature-based one may well recognize a number of teachers who are doing an excellent job. However, one is perhaps more likely to encounter whole classes reading the same novel followed by worksheets that address only literal level questions, literature units focused on inane themes such as "Stuffed Animals That Come Alive" (Zarillo, 1989, p. 26), or self-selected and self-paced reading followed by activities which are fun but that lack any learning focus, such as writing fan mail to the author and making crayon portraits of favorite characters.

In far too many classrooms, it is rare to encounter a true consideration of an author's or illustrator's art in portraying character or setting, or an in-depth analysis of the theme or point of view of a literacy work. As a result, children often lack true appreciation of books and the most basic understandings about how literature creates its effects. The potential which literature holds for developing comprehension, composition, and critical thinking abilities is squandered because so many teachers lack the experience with literature and the training to address these possibilities

effectively. Recently, a senior elementary education major confided to me that my children's literature course requirement to read two children's novels a week was a great challenge to her, because she had not read an entire novel until two years ago, when she was a college sophomore. Experience has taught me that there may be many more students than we usually suppose with this same background. This article presents some specific teaching ideas that I hope will serve three functions. First, the suggested activities provide a model for better literature-based instruction through comparison of well-chosen books that foster curiosity, which will lead to significant thought and conclusions about literature. Second, the activities offer classroom literature experiences that will foster both enjoyment and learning for children. Third, implementing these ideas in the classroom will assist teachers to learn by doing — to improve their own notions about and facility with literature in the classroom.

Scope of the problem

Recently, elementary teachers in New York were interviewed by researchers who concluded that they "did not have either an instructional philosophy for the teaching of literature or a well-developed practical scheme for integrating it within the elementary curriculum" (Walmsley, 1992, p. 510). Another researcher visited 23 literature-based classrooms in California and found that teachers were using the same label to describe at least three distinctly different versions of this program concept (Zarillo, 1989). While the teachers in this study had all moved to programs "where the literature supplanted, not supplemented, the basal reading program" (Zarillo, 1989, p. 23), a third of the classrooms were not considered successful. This is especially significant when one considers that only a small minority of American classrooms have eliminated basal readers

entirely. It appears to be the case that, at least in some parts of the country, teachers' preparation for engaging in literature-based teaching lags far behind the demand to offer such programs.

Despite the recommendations for courses in children's literature by the International Reading Association (1986, p. 5) and the National Council of Teachers of English (1986, p. 9), there are still many teacher education programs where such a course is not required. Even in those programs where a children's literature course is mandated, a single course may not offer enough time and space to cover what future teachers must learn by today's standards. In addition, most elementary education majors frequently take no other courses in literature that would help to deepen their understanding of how authors communicate their art and how readers might legitimately interpret it.

As a case in point, I recently worked with an exceptional elementary teacher in my graduate level children's literature course. This experienced and successful teacher submitted a paper in which her main thesis hinged on the notion that a male author for children was remiss in not writing more books where females were the main characters. It was difficult for her to grasp the idea that authors write about what is close to them. It is simply not possible for a single book to carry all the themes and ideas with which we should be familiar. In conversation, she still had difficulty accepting that many other authors (both male and female) have written books with females as the protagonists, and that it was all right for things to be this way. She was apparently applying to single tradebooks the same standards we have developed to apply to series of textbooks. Gender balance is certainly desirable if one is buying a single set of textbooks for all grades in the school, but in the library we

expect that children will choose a variety of different books by different authors; gender balance is thus achieved through variety. In literature we have the opportunity to savor the different voices of individuals who write from personal experience and independent focus. What was apparent to me was that this teacher had had too little experience with literature herself, and her readiness to teach a literature-based program was debatable.

Teachers, however, are not to be blamed for this state of affairs, since teacher education programs often spend too little time on cultivating appreciation and understanding of literature, and school leadership — especially as manifested in curriculum guides — is frequently remiss in its attention to literature goals and issues. Among many other factors that contribute to the problem are the quality of textbooks that tend to anthologize and decontextualize literary excerpts, hastily contrived commercial materials from teacher stores that focus on the surface characteristics of literature, and individuals such as those Bergeron (1990) and Sumara and Walker (1991) cite as confusing the real issues. The bottom line is that teachers need assistance with using literature in their classrooms until other factors succeed in making improvements to the general preparation of those responsible for overseeing children's first experiences with books and stories.

Understanding the elements of literature

Familiarity with the elements of literature (Lukens, 1990) and the ways in which authors manipulate them to achieve artistic and communicative effects is essential to success in the areas of understanding and interpreting literature, written composition, and critical thinking and discussion. Classroom programs that do not deal with these elements and their ramifications offer only inadequate literature experiences and learning to students.

Unfortunately, in many children's literature courses too little time is sometimes spent on helping future and in-service teachers understand the elements of fiction (conflict and plot, characterization, theme, the role of the setting, point of view, and style) and their impact in stories and books. In addition, the predominant spiral curriculum design in the public schools mediates against an extended focus on learning a major concept in favor of moving quickly from topic to topic and then returning next year to add more superficialities to those inadequately covered previously.

A variety of methods for addressing the elements of literature with children may be found in current textbooks (e.g., Cullinan, 1989; Huck, Hepler and Hickman, 1993; Norton, 1991; 1992). Comparison is an age-old teaching method (Alberti, 1966, first published in 1435) that enjoys the blessing of Piagetian scholars who emphasize the central role of disequilibrium in motivating learning (Richmond, 1970). Beach (1991) offers a comparison method originally developed for university children's literature students where paired children's picture books or novels are read in order to make discoveries about the elements of literature and their impact on readers. This method is easily adapted and can be equally successful in elementary, middle and secondary schools when books are chosen that meet these students' interests and abilities. For example, when elementary students compare versions of *The Three Little Pigs*, they discover that in some the wolf is cooked and eaten while in others he merely runs away. This discovery is a stimulus for discussion of which version is preferred and why, or for creating a third version with an even better ending. Middle school students can become involved in debating the pros and cons of first versus third person narration by comparing similar stories that exemplify each option.

An excellent place to begin exploring the possibilities of the elements of fiction is in comparing different versions of the same folk tale. Take for example the Walt Disney version of *Snow White* (Grimm, Grimm, and Werner, 1952) and the version produced by Randall Jarrell and Nancy Ekholm Burkert (Grimm and Grimm, 1972). After listening to both versions or reading them, children will be able to list the differences between the two versions immediately. A good place to start is with the illustrations: the Disney version flits back and forth in mood from light to dark while the Burkert illustrations maintain a uniformly somber and serious mood throughout. Children can be invited to debate which set of illustrations better fits the text. The events in the two versions are also slightly different. For example, the Disney version describes Snow White as rather helpless; she is pitied by the woodsman who is sent to kill her and told to flee into the forest without her needing to utter a word. In the Jarrell translation, however, Snow White actively pleads for her life and offers to run into the forest and never come home again. She offers the woodsman a way to ease his own guilt and please the queen at the same time. This is an important difference between the two versions and points to different ways authors portray characters. Listing the differences in the illustrations and the story versions provides a concrete starting place for an in-depth discussion of which version is preferred and why. Children can then debate the merits of the artistic styles chosen for each. This type of discussion is valuable in developing sensitivity to literature, understanding of the artistic choices an author or illustrator must make, and critical thinking. Many examples of competing versions of the standard folk tales provide ample opportunity for comparisons.

Stories often share a similar theme but provide different settings, characters and plots. Take for example the

Japanese tale *The Stonecutter* (McDermott, 1975), and the German story *The Fisherman and His Wife* (Grimm and Grimm, 1978). Both of these stories share the theme that greed does not pay, but present it in different ways. Even upper elementary and high school students can appreciate these picture books and the ways in which they play out the theme of greed. *The Stonecutter* tells of a lowly laborer chipping away at a mountain who dreams of being more powerful. His wish is granted by the spirit of the mountain, but he becomes greedy and progresses from prince, to sun, to storm cloud, to the mountain itself when he wishes to be more powerful than each past incarnation. The story ends with the laborer, transformed into the mighty mountain, trembling as a lowly stonecutter chips away at his foot. *The Fisherman and His Wife* is the famous story of a man who catches a magic fish that transforms his home into successively larger residences at his wife's insistence. Her greed, however, eventually lands them back in the same tiny hovel they began in. Comparing these stories on the same theme from different cultures offers a valuable stimulus to a discussion on the topic of greed. Children should be invited to discuss the styles of the storytellers and the plot development in each tale.

Strega Nona (dePaola, 1975) and *The Funny Little Woman* (Mosel, 1972) make an excellent pairing of books for children to consider since each deals with a particular culture's reverence for food, the staff of life, yet in quite different ways. In *Strega Nona*, a village witch with a magic pasta pot leaves her inexperienced and vain helper in charge one day and returns to discover that the entire town is covered in pasta. This is a version of the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" motif. In *The Funny Little Woman* a rice cake falls through a crack in a poor woman's hut and she follows it because it is so precious. Under the earth, the woman is

captured by goblins who give her a magic rice paddle and make her their cook. The woman eventually escapes with the magic rice paddle, opens a restaurant and becomes rich. These two stories contrast in characterization (the simpleton vs. the wily poor woman), setting (Italy vs. Japan), a plot (a single day vs. a year spent in the underworld), and theme (obeying orders vs. sticking up for oneself). Yet the two stories do have connections that would motivate a valuable discussion focused on literature, culture and lessons life offers us.

There are a wealth of books and stories to tell that offer worthwhile opportunities for comparison and learning for all age levels. Teachers should try pairing such books as *Jumanji* (Van Allsburg, 1981) and *Sam, Bangs and Moonshine* (Ness, 1966) for a discussion of the issues regarding reality vs. fantasy, or *Miss Rumphius* (Cooney, 1982) and *Mirette on the High Wire* (McCully, 1992) for an analysis of hopes, aspirations, and accomplishments in life. The more children of all ages read, listen, compare, discuss and respond, the better prepared they will be to attempt similar effects in their own compositions and interpretations, and their thinking will be broader and deeper as well.

Developing a philosophy of literature study

Developing a clear notion of the purpose and function of literature and literature study in the school curriculum will assist teachers to choose effectively those objectives, materials, and activities that will foster children's enjoyment and learning. A philosophy about literature will also assist the teacher in deciding whether literature is a cultural duty (Hirsch, 1987), entertainment, a vehicle for instruction, or something else. Purves (1990) identifies three major viewpoints on literature as a school subject. First, literature may be viewed as a body of knowledge which children must acquire (e.g., studying the classics for purposes of cultural

heritage). Second, it may be perceived as a vehicle for critical thinking and interpretation, or for social and moral development (e.g., studying books for the ethical questions they address and the process of intellectual debate about these questions). And third, in a viewpoint that is related to individualized reading programs and the educational philosophy of Rousseau (Walmsley, 1981), literature may be considered in terms of the student, as a self-selected and self-paced student choice or preference (e.g., reading for entertainment and personal reasons).

Teachers need to consider and debate these three major philosophies, at the very least, in terms of developing their own list of purposes and functions for dealing with literature in school. It is quite likely that a combination or balance among the three major viewpoints will prove to be the most satisfying philosophical stance of all (Purves, 1990; Zarillo, 1989). My personal vision is for an elementary classroom where children have some time to choose and read what they want, some time for exposure to classics and knowledge about literature, and some time for discussions about books that offer ideas and the sharing of aesthetic experiences. I hope that the teacher will be the prompter and facilitator of these activities through choosing pairs of books that stimulate thinking and the development of personal tastes in literature.

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