2. Perspectives on the Use of Children's Literature in Reading Instruction

Mary Jo Skillings
California State University, San Bernardino

In order to understand the current movement for using children’s literature in the reading program, it is helpful to review what our predecessors used as materials and methods of reading instruction and to examine the current driving influences for change from a basal to literature-based curriculum.

Historical Background

The following account briefly outlines the history of literature-based teachings, some major thrusts in textbook change, and the professionals who caused these changes.

During our country’s colonial period (1600–1776), children were taught by stern schoolmasters whose primary concern was to ensure students’ salvation. The New England Primer, described as being “bare of beauty ... rough and stern” (N. B. Smith, 1963, p. 4) was published without controlled vocabulary or the systematic introduction of new words.

The period of building a new nation (1776-1840) and developing an informed citizenry brought about texts that were replete with patriotism and historically informative selections to help build a united nation from many diverse groups.

Instruction during the mid to late 1800s was geared toward a broader reading content of science, history, and art, as well as morals, and the use of the sight-word method (N. B. Smith, 1963). McGuffey’s graded series of readers, published around 1836, consisted of stories about the rewards of good behavior and everyday life, but the books also contained some literature, such as poetry by William Wordsworth. These readers were used well into the 1900s and "literally comprised the elementary curriculum" (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993; Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1991).
Folktales and excerpts from the classics appeared in the basic readers of the first decade of the 1900s and were designed to develop literature appreciation. Supplemental texts were introduced, and children were given a separate class period for memorizing phonic families. By 1925, publishers of basal reading programs began adding new features—for example, preprimers and workbooks to accompany the textbook (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1991). Reading selections contained informative and realistic texts.

Literary readers were developed for basic reading along with standardized tests, phonic charts and cards, and word lists. Following World War I, new methods of silent reading and an interest in accommodating individual differences by ability grouping as indicated through the use of standardized testing came about. Reading selections contained informative as well as realistic material. Silent reading seatwork and a variety of workbook—type activities were used (N. B. Smith, 1963).

By 1940, many components of what we now call literature-based reading instruction were used in many classrooms. Concepts about "reading readiness" were discussed, and as a result teachers often postponed beginning reading for some children. Teachers became interested in composing experience charts and other cooperatively composed texts. Reading teachers used both silent and oral reading, and teaching through units became popular.

The armed forces, during and following World War II, charged that American young people could not read or follow directions. As a result, remedial reading clinics were instituted with highly organized skill-development programs. Teachers still used basic readers and workbook pages, but outside personal interest reading was encouraged (N. B. Smith, 1963).

The idea that instruction must be taught in a set sequence or arrangement of skills to ensure "continuity of skill development" (N. B. Smith, 1963) sprang from the 1948 Ginn Basic Reader lists of objectives (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1991). Reading programs were arranged according to grade levels and included teacher's editions and diagnostic tests. Ability grouping was popular, and teachers listened to children read in round-robin fashion. This management system was prevalent into the 1970s.

The predominately white middle-class "Dick and Jane" characters from the 1940s to the 1960s gave way to more ethnically diverse characters in the 1970s. Following the demands of social change, stronger roles for girls and women as problem solvers and leaders began to appear in reading texts by 1976 (Farr & Roser, 1979). Controlled vocabulary with stilted language and story excerpts still prevailed. However, textbook publishers added new components in the area of assessment measures, such as preskill and postskill tests, pupil placement tests, and end-of-the-book tests.
Teachers were given inservice instruction to ascertain causes of reading failure and the influences of listening, semantics, and linguistics as related to reading. Individualized instruction in reading was discussed, as was teaching, particularly remedial instruction, with the use of machines.

Concerns over accountability and competency-based education have been the impetus over the past decade in reading instruction and assessment tools. The Education Commission of the States (1983) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 1990) have used standardized tests as a measure of educational effectiveness. This alignment with standardized testing contributes to the fact that 80 to 90 percent of American elementary classrooms are reported to use published reading programs (Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989; Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1991).

Reading instruction in the 1980s and into the 1990s has been a reflection of major movements: to use basals or to use "real books," or to supplement basal programs with literature. Publishing companies have responded to the momentum and enthusiasm of whole language advocates who cite the large body of research in the areas of emergent literacy (Holdaway, 1979; Wells, 1986) and whole language and literature-based reading instruction (K. S. Goodman, 1986; Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989). These studies indicate the need for stories and meaningful language experiences for children in order to foster literacy and the lifelong love of reading. Many basal texts now include literature by award-winning writers and illustrators with the original language intact as well. Some use literature as supplemental trade reading.

Though this saga of reading instruction has focused on general methods and materials that have dominated American classrooms, historically there have been insightful, innovative teachers and researchers who challenged the traditional skill-based, text-driven, mechanical approaches. They took original, less traveled paths. It is their voices that provide the foundation or first glimmerings of literature-based reading instruction.

**First Awakenings**

The use of literature as rich sources for reading instruction found its bearings in the progressive education and nursery school movements. Early in the 1920s, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, principal of the Bank Street School, put into practice many of the ideas practiced in present-day literature-based classrooms, implementing a wide variety of meaningful experiences for young children in written and oral language. The classes Mitchell conducted on writing for children greatly influenced author Margaret Wise Brown, whose works for young children are still popular today.
In 1943, Doris Lee and Lillian Lamoreaux published *Learning to Read through Experience*, in which they emphasized real experiences and "experience charts" (really the beginnings of shared reading), a component of literature-based instruction. This book was later updated by Lee and Roach Van Allen in 1963.

Research conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly as it related to meeting the individual needs of the reader and the use of the language-experience approach, pointed the way to literature based reading instruction of today. The work of Jeanette Veatch (1958) emphasized children selecting and reading real books at their own pace, child-teacher conferences, individual diagnosis, and flexible grouping. This program focused on the power of motivating children by listening to entertaining stories, helping them to read these books, and devoting time to discussion with children about their reading (Farr & Roser, 1979).

The courses of study in most teacher education institutions have regularly contained courses on children’s literature, oral interpretation, or storytelling. The emphasis in these courses has been on determining children’s preferences for particular books and finding "the right book for the right child." In 1925, Emelyn Gardner and Eloise Ramsey wrote *A Handbook for Children’s Literature*, which was used in many of these courses. It helped prospective teachers determine what were the best books to use with children.

Charlotte Huck and Doris Young prepared a text in 1961, *Children’s Literature in the Elementary School*, with three chapters devoted to the development of a reading program based on literature. The emphasis in this text was on the use of literature throughout the curriculum in teaching reading, social studies, science, and other subjects. This text predated the development of the whole language movement.

*Whole Language*

"The secret of it all lies in the parents’ reading to and with the child" (Huey, 1968, p. 332). Literature-based and whole language movements have their theoretical framework in the early writings of John Dewey (1933) and Edmond Huey (1968); similarly, these movements believe in a holistic explanation of how reading ability develops. Both movements are grounded in the belief that students must be engaged in meaningful contexts and functional experiences with print, together with heavy exposure to children’s literature. Like Dewey (1933), they challenge as "mechanical" and "passive" those practices with exercises that are isolated and broken down into a discrete hierarchy of skills.

The developmental theories of cognitive psychologists Jean Piaget (1970) and Lev Vygotsky (1986) have greatly influenced this shift in focus.
Their beliefs that children are active participants in their own learning and that they co-construct meaning as they interpret and give meaning to the language events they experience provide the bedrock for the whole language and literature-based instruction of today. Linguists Noam Chomsky and Michael Halliday, among others, contributed much to our views that children learn language in social contexts.

International Beginnings

Men make some things to serve a purpose, other things simply to please themselves. Literature is a construct of the latter kind, and the proper response to it is therefore (in D. W. Harding’s words) to “share in the author’s satisfaction that it was as it was and not otherwise.” (Britton, 1978, p. 106)

In 1966 a group of British educators and their American counterparts held a conference at Dartmouth to investigate the perspective and practices of teaching English and to participate in an international exchange of new ideas. Recommendations that pertained specifically to the use of literature in the classroom are identified below.

- Teachers need to select books that exemplify diverse visions of life and provide opportunities for discussion and exploration with students.
- Teachers need to provide rich literary experiences and examine selections for grade level appropriateness.
- Teachers need to eliminate superficial examination patterns related to literature.
- Teachers need to be informed about research theory and practice and to guide their use of literature accordingly.
- Teachers at all levels need to have preservice in the uses of literature in the classroom. (Cianciolo, 1988, p. 13)

The philosophical stance of James Britton, a primary mover at the conference, can be identified in the position statements that came from the conference. Attendees acknowledged the importance of the affective responses to literature through a variety of means and noted that sharing personal responses “should lead back to the particular work rather than focus on and stop with the students and their subjective associations in response to the work” (Cianciolo, 1988, p. 14). The influence of the Dartmouth Conference was significant to teachers in the late 1960s in the following ways: (1) documents were published from the proceedings that affected teacher education courses in the teaching of language arts; (2) the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) was formed for the express purpose of facilitating collaboration and exchange of ideas with scholars from different countries and regions; and (3) the Dartmouth
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Conference provided the direction which eventually led to research in the study of literature use in the elementary school (Cianciolo, 1988).

The significance of early engagement with books in facilitating literacy was richly documented (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Holdaway, 1979; Wells, 1986). Increased interest in the development of oral and written language and the importance of personal experiences in shaping children’s learning had a profound influence on the British primary schools and the move toward open education and informal education.

Implications of these movements can also be seen in the Bullock Report (1975), named after Sir Alan Bullock, who chaired the committee. This report was conducted by the English government, and many of the same English educators participated who had been involved in the Dartmouth Conference. Committee recommendations included suggestions for developing critical thinking skills when teaching reading with literature. Emphasis was placed on the early introduction of books in the preschool years to give young children pleasurable experiences with reading. Both the Dartmouth Conference and the Bullock Report advanced the beliefs that teachers needed to provide an active response-centered approach to the study and use of literature.

Research: Foundations for Curriculum Change

This large-scale network of international educators prepared the way for research endeavors pursuing many different avenues in the area of language and reading. The model for this progression toward a more natural literacy-learning environment in the classroom came from the way children master other developmental tasks, especially those involved in spoken language.

Much of the educational literature of the 1970s reflected a move toward the integration of the teaching of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This movement was preceded by the work of a number of scholars in New Zealand who were particularly interested in the influx of Polynesian people into inner-city schools (Holdaway, 1982). The work and writing of Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) detailed the uses of highly charged personal key words as the stimulus for reading and writing in language-experience events for the Maori children. Donald Holdaway (1979) was instrumental in popularizing a teaching strategy called the "shared book experience" using "big books." This involved the teacher creating an environment similar to the bedtime story where children could actively participate in the enjoyment of reading a story repeatedly. Through these repetitive experiences, young children begin to develop pleasurable associations and reading-like behaviors.
Marie Clay (1979), also in New Zealand, examined knowledge about print that children possess prior to formal instruction and how their understanding about print changes. She also developed the “running record” and Reading Recovery, early intervention strategies for children who were at risk of reading failure. About the same time, Ken Goodman (1973) developed a method for analyzing miscues in the United States. Now teachers had ways to evaluate children’s reading during the act of reading, ways of looking at how children approach unfamiliar texts. With these analysis systems, teachers had significant evidence about the cues that the reader used to analyze words and to gain meaning from print. The focus of these systems was directed toward the uniqueness and specific needs of the reader.

The issue of how children learn to read sparked much controversy during this time frame. Psycholinguist theorists, such as Ken Goodman (1973) and Frank Smith (1976, 1977, 1978, 1985) contributed to the literature-based instruction movement. As proponents of literature-based or holistic language explanations, they argued that reading cannot be separated into discrete skills such as those demonstrated in published reading programs. Rather, they “learn to read by reading” (Smith, 1976) real books, real stories.

The work of Carol Chomsky (1972) and Donald Graves (1983) supported the importance of connecting reading and writing with the development of beginning literacy. Similarly, later works by Lucy Calkins (1983) and by Rob Tierney and David Pearson (1983) assisted the movement by proposing that the processes of reading and writing are reciprocal—that is, learning about one process assists in the development and strengthening of the other.

The educational reform movement that emerged during the late 1950s was a response to Russia’s launching of Sputnik. The American public began questioning the effectiveness of the educational system, and as a result, Congress provided federal funding for educational reform in science, math, and foreign languages. After spokespeople for the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) testified before Congress about the need for research in the field of English, Congress authorized limited funds for the improvement of English instruction and the development of Project English. In 1962, six Curriculum Study Centers were established to study and improve English instruction. While the focus was oriented toward English, the centers did suggest a distinct place for literature in the elementary curriculum (Cianciolo, 1988).

Two professional organizations, the National Council
of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (IRA), had a major impact on the dissemination of current research on language and learning to educators. This outreach came in the form of cooperatively organizing Impact Conferences (Cullinan, 1989), which provided opportunities for educators to hear internationally recognized researchers in the field of reading and language who supported teachers’ efforts to implement literature-based instruction.

Another surge of educational reform of the late 1960s, which gained momentum by the 1980s, was the back-to-basics movement. This philosophy emphasized a content-filled curriculum and accountability of the schools to the public. Emanating from this movement, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was created with the express purpose of conducting national surveys of achievement and knowledge of American students in both elementary and secondary schools.

One document emerging from the NAEP commission, Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1984), was supportive of literature-based reading instruction. This report of the Commission on Reading suggested major reforms in the teaching of reading, such as the importance of children hearing stories read aloud as the foundation for learning to read, reducing the amount of time spent on unnecessary worksheet and workbook activities, and increasing time spent on actual reading and writing in the classroom.

The movement for accountability, promoted by boards of education and lawmakers for the purpose of creating more effective schools, and the literature-based, whole language advocates are at opposite ends of the assessment spectrum. Teachers who are forced to give these tests have tended to spend more time on subskill-type activities found in workbooks and on worksheets, similar to those found on multiple-choice tests. Whole language teachers have maintained that a variety of informal assessments during the act of reading are more accurate measures of what a child really can do with language and print.

In an attempt to alter the course of illiteracy in America and "mediocrity" in public schooling, individual states incorporated educational reform in the area of language arts; for example, in 1983, the California legislature authorized the California State Department of Education to prepare a document outlining the components of a literature-based curriculum, which resulted in what was called the California Reading Initiative. Two major publications, one focusing on appropriate books to use and the other on planning for a literature program, came out of that literature committee: Recommended Readings in Literature, Kindergarten through Grade Eight (California State Department of Education, 1986a) and the Handbook for Planning an Effective Literature Program, Kindergarten through Grade Twelve (California State Department of Education, 1987).
As a result of the California Reading Initiative, the National Reading Initiative (NRI) was formed for the purpose of creating public consciousness of the need for literature in the reading curriculum (Cullinan, 1989). The first order of business for the NRI was to identify successful literature programs, and at the IRA meeting in Toronto in May 1988, *Celebrating the National Reading Initiative* (California State Department of Education, 1988) was presented. This publication described more than sixty literature programs being implemented, with plans for featuring more at the next conference.

Cullinan (1989) conducted a survey to determine the extent to which literature-based programs were in place nationwide. Her findings indicated that these programs are taking hold and that "There are statewide literature/literacy initiatives in seven states and, in 16 others, programs in school curriculums that hinge upon the use of literature" (p. 27). The trend appears to be that while local districts are reluctant to mandate a literature-based program, they are moving in the direction of an integrated language arts program "with a strong literature strand" (p. 27).

**Looking Ahead: Problems and Promises**

Literature-based programs in the 1990s have many designs, reflected in the many forms that instruction has taken. The movement for literature-based reading has had monumental impact on reading instruction, and on the expanding children's literature market. While the movement has enthusiastic advocates, it is not without critics and some hurdles (Cullinan, 1989). One of the most problematic, particularly for the teachers who must implement a new program and the administrators who promote and oversee it, is in the area of evaluation measures. There is research that supports the success of literature-based programs, such as the "landmark" study by Cohen (1968) and other studies by Holdaway (1982) and Larrick (1987), but more documentation is necessary to present to a public rightfully concerned by statistics showing a growing illiteracy rate in America.

Teachers are urged to use individual folders or portfolios that include a variety of formal and informal measures of student growth. However, if success is gauged primarily by performance on traditional reading achievement instruments (i.e., standardized multiple-choice tests), then students in literature-based programs may fall short of their peers in programs stressing phonics skills.

Another problem to be addressed is the scarcity of support for staff development and supplies for appropriate literature-based instruction. To instill more confidence in teachers' professional decision making apart from a teacher's manual and workbook pages, teachers need staff development opportunities. Administrators at the state and local levels
must be convinced by corroborating evidence that children will read and write better with literature—sufficiently convinced to invest curriculum funds on trade books for classrooms and school libraries. Also, as part of their core curriculum, teacher education institutions will need to provide courses which introduce a variety of books and suggest creative ways to use literature in the classroom.

Certainly the word is out that reading to children is important in their early development of reading concepts. Political figures and other celebrities on television and in print advertise the need for books and stories in children’s lives as a source of nourishment and strength for character development. Publishers of reading textbooks have also gotten the message that real stories and books are important for getting children "hooked" on reading, as evidenced by the overwhelming number of reading programs being called literature-based and literary readers. Books are making their way into children’s lives, and they will work their own enchantment.

References


