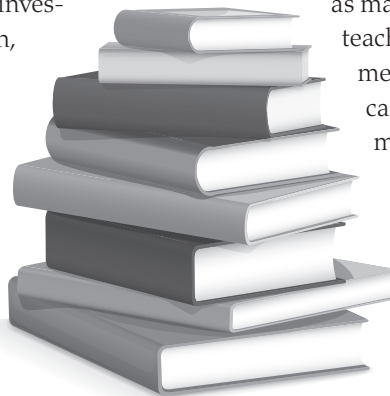


# CREATING SPACE FOR CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

*Frank Serafini*

From approximately 1980 to 2000, children's literature experienced a revival of sorts, emerging as an essential instructional resource in the elementary reading curriculum (Morrow & Gambrell, 2000). During this period, teachers began conducting literature study groups (Peterson & Eeds, 1990), investigating reader response theories (Sloan, 2002), using children's literature across the curriculum (Moss, 2003), implementing reading workshops (Serafini, 2001), and establishing daily read-alouds and literary discussions in their classrooms (Serafini & Giorgis, 2003; Trelease, 1989). Children's publishers expanded their catalog offerings, and literacy conferences were replete with sessions on incorporating literature into the reading curriculum and across the content disciplines.

Before the end of the 20th century, many classroom teachers began working to ensure that their reading instructional practices were balanced (Freppon & Dahl, 1998; Weaver, 1998). Teachers' focus was on configuring the appropriate blend of phonics instruction, authentic children's literature, basal anthologies, writing instruction, and literary discussions to optimize the instructional experiences that readers received in the elementary grades. Each component was considered a necessary ingredient for effective reading instruction, although insufficient by itself.



At the dawn of the new millennium, with the release of the report of the National Reading Panel, changes in literacy instruction in many elementary classrooms were mandated through federal and state legislation. The focus on balancing one's reading program gave way to prescribed curricula, as many school districts began requiring teachers to use state-sanctioned commercial reading programs, in some cases, heavily scripted instructional materials (Allington, 2002; Coles, 2000). Many classroom teachers struggled to incorporate authentic literature into their reading programs, often filled with commercial anthologies, scripted lessons, and narrowly conceived assessment materials. Whether authentic children's literature will ever return to the prominence it had in the reading curriculum at the turn of the century remains to be seen.

Because of the limitations in the amount of time available in the school day, teachers are required to make choices about what to teach, how much time to spend in each curricular area, and the instructional experiences they provide their students. These

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choices are always value laden. In other words, teachers give time to what they themselves value, what is mandated through district and state standards and curricular documents, and what is expected by the local communities. To create time and space for children's literature, teachers must begin by finding value in the reading and discussing of these texts. If teachers do not value children's literature, and the possible roles that it may play in the reading curriculum, then they will not find time for reading and discussing children's literature.

As teachers struggle to maintain their power to make decisions regarding how reading is taught in their classrooms, one must wonder, how do we create space for children's literature in today's classrooms? In what follows, I offer 10 practical recommendations for incorporating children's literature in the reading instructional framework and across the curriculum. Each recommendation is intended to help teachers envision the role of children's literature and help children's literature move out of the shadows of the reading curriculum to once again assume prominence in today's reading programs.

### Limit Response Activities

Probably the most productive way to create space for literature in the classroom is to limit the amount of activities associated with reading instruction. Dioramas, book reports, character mobiles, crossword puzzles, and other enrichment activities should become relics of our instructional past. Until we, as readers ourselves, curl up near the fireplace with a worksheet or take a computer quiz for each book we read, we need to reconsider what we are

asking our students to do after they are finished reading.

In too many classrooms, the amount of time spent doing things *after* a book has been read is far greater than the amount of time spent reading and discussing *what* has been read. When lifelong readers finish a book, they share ideas with other readers, make recommendations to their friends, read another book connected in some way to the one they read, or simply move on to something else. I believe most teachers would say that they are trying to create lifelong readers in their classrooms. If this is the case, then shouldn't we give our students the same rights that we demand for ourselves outside the classroom? Limiting what happens after a book has been read creates time and space for more productive uses of children's literature. Because lifelong readers read real books throughout their lives, we certainly want to ensure that

students are invited and allowed to read as many real books in school as possible.

### Build an Extensive Classroom Library

Readers do not become readers in a vacuum. They need access to books and other reading materials, support from a community of readers, including a knowledgeable teacher who is passionate about reading and literature, a somewhat comfortable place to read, and someone to talk with about what they have read. To do this, we need to establish extensive classroom libraries in all classrooms (see Figure 1). When it is time to read, readers need access to things to read and should not be asked to travel far to find books that interest them.

I think classroom libraries should emulate what the best bookstores have been doing for years: providing books in a relaxing setting, offering assistance

Figure 1 A Well-Stocked Classroom Library



when necessary but never being intimidating, displaying books for easy access, promoting new selections to draw readers' attention, and making appropriate recommendations that are personalized for each reader who enters (Serafini, 2006). Readers need opportunities to read, and opportunity is created by time and access: time to read, and access to quality reading materials. Reading also extends to digital texts, and classroom libraries need to provide access to online resources, e-books, and other digital content. Classroom libraries should reflect and support the types of 21st-century readers we have in today's classrooms.

### Keep the Core Program in Its Place

Too often, I read or hear suggestions on ways to supplement the core program with children's literature rather than ways to supplement children's literature with commercial resources. To create space for children's literature, we need to view both trade books and commercial anthologies as resources that work in concert to provide texts to support readers. Not every lesson provided in a core program is effective for our students, and to simply follow the demands of a commercial scope and sequence is to give up our responsibility as teachers and as advocates for our students. The lessons contained in commercial reading programs, like the ones contained in the professional development books I have written (Serafini, 2004; Serafini & Youngs, 2008), are to be used as resources by

knowledgeable classroom teachers, not blindly followed in a predetermined sequence.

We need to begin by asking ourselves whether the core program that we are using is serving as an instructional script, a curricular framework, or a classroom resource. These three ways of conceptualizing the core program differ in the way we envision the role of the classroom teacher: as program operator or instructional decision maker. It is a sad state of affairs when teachers are asked to use a resource simply because a district paid so much for it rather than because it may be an effective resource. Teachers need to make decisions about what resources are used based on what they think is best for their students, not what comes next in the teacher's manual.

### Read Aloud and Discuss Literature on a Daily Basis

Reading aloud is the foundation of a successful reading program (Atwell, 2007; Galda & Cullinan, 2006; Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006) because it exposes readers to a wide range of

genres, topics, formats, stories, and information. Reading aloud serves as an advertisement into the world of books, inviting readers to sample and select for themselves that which is relevant and interesting. Reading aloud is also a highly enjoyable experience for our students.

In addition, reading aloud demonstrates fluent reading and provides opportunities to share and discuss students' responses to what has been read. The read-aloud experience builds a foundation for all other essential components of a successful reading framework. What is demonstrated during one's daily read-aloud sessions provides support for readers when they are reading independently and with others.

### Include Literature in the Content Areas

With all the pressures to follow prescribed commercial reading programs, many teachers have found it beneficial to employ children's literature across the curriculum. Incorporating picture books and novels in science, social studies, writing, and math instruction brings the topics under consideration to life and

demonstrates how literature is a way of knowing the world in which we live, as well as an avenue of escape into other worlds.

There are numerous resources available to help find resources for incorporating literature in the content areas (e.g., Harwayne, 1992; Moss, 2003; Ray, 1999; Whitin & Wilde, 1992). Using literature as mentor texts for young writers, as a way to explain the emotional



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aspects of historical events, and as a way to spark interest in science topics all create space for literature in our classrooms.

### **Require Students to Read Picture Books or Novels for Homework**

Given the fact that time is limited during school for reading and discussing literature, it seems important to require students to engage in reading outside the school day. Asking them to read for 30–60 minutes each evening, depending on their grade level, is an important component of an effective reading framework. Using Web-based interaction platforms like blogs or wikis, or print-based dialogue journals to allow students to share their responses to what has been read at home, provides readers with ways to share their ideas and learn from other readers what is available to read.

### **Incorporate Literature Study Groups**

Literature study groups (Peterson & Eeds, 1990), book clubs (Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2002), or literature circles (Daniels, 2002) are an important component in the reading instructional framework. Time to read picture books or novels and discuss them with other readers is an essential element in the reading workshop. Although I do not believe that novels should represent 90% of what is read in school, they provide readers with an extended experience unlike reading shorter texts. Supporting readers as they work through these more complex and longer texts is vital to their success with these texts.

Quality literature study discussions are filled with a variety of readers'

*“As reading teachers, we need to become more sophisticated readers if we are to become more sophisticated teachers of reading.”*

perspectives and opinions about the books being read, where readers are invested in the meanings they construct and those that are offered by other readers. It is the diversity of the ideas presented in literature discussions, rather than the group's ability to reach consensus and agreement, that is essential for quality discussions. Literature study discussions should become literary exchanges in which emotionally engaged readers passionately share and negotiate their understandings and interpretations concerning a piece of literature.

### **Establish Reading Buddies**

For many years in my classroom, I paired up with a primary-grade teacher to collaborate on a reading buddy program. My intermediate-grade students would meet and interview younger readers to find out their interests, go to the school or our classroom library to find books that would interest their reading buddies, and then once a week, meet to read with them and share their selections. Each week, my students looked forward to seeing their reading buddies and were very particular about selecting appropriate stories to share. For many of my students, it was an important time to demonstrate their reading abilities, and for others, it was the only time they saw themselves as accomplished readers. These opportunities were important for both my students and their younger buddies.

### **Organize Units of Study Around Literature Rather Than Reading Strategies**

In the past decade, cognitive reading strategy has assumed prominence in many reading instructional frameworks (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Mehigan, 2005; Miller, 2002). These resources often organize the reading curriculum around a series of reading strategies, such as predicting, summarizing, visualizing, or asking questions. At times, this may force trade books to serve as instructional prompts rather than works of literature and art. Organizing units of study based on genres, the works of particular authors or illustrators, content topics, or themes provides a curricular anchor for the various comprehension lessons that we offer to affix themselves. Teaching readers to visualize in a unit on poetry, or helping them understand how prediction is used in reading a mystery, makes more sense than just focusing on the strategies in isolation. These literature-based units of study provide a foundation for our instructional experiences to thrive.

### **Become More Sophisticated Readers Ourselves**

As reading teachers, we need to become more sophisticated readers if we are to become more sophisticated teachers of reading. To facilitate literature discussions, we need to be able to analyze and comprehend what is being read in

complex and sophisticated ways. To do so may require taking a refresher course in children's literature, joining a book club to discuss books, revisiting some professional development resources, and certainly reading more children's literature on our own. We bring to our teaching what we know and value for ourselves.

One of our primary responsibilities as reading teachers is to create space for literature in our classrooms and support readers' interactions with what is provided. We do not want our instructional framework to force literature and readers underground. We want to expose students to the highest quality, most interesting, and most exciting literature that we can make available. We want to ensure that the resources we provide are relevant and purposeful for the students in our classrooms. Most important, we want to expose our students to the same resources and opportunities to which lifelong readers have access.

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