

A Question of Fidelity

by Frank Serafini

IN MANY ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS, teachers are being directed to ensure the commercial programs adopted in their districts are being implemented with *fidelity*. In fact, the word *fidelity* has become one of the current buzzwords in reading education. Often associated with Response to Intervention models, “Fidelity to the Core Program” is described as a prescribed curriculum that provides teachers with greater certainty about what and how to teach, enforcing strict adherence to the texts, pacing guides, and scripts outlined by the authors and publishers of commercial reading programs (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). To others, it suggests a rigid, subservient adherence to demands of educators far removed from one’s classroom and a decrease in one’s professional autonomy (Shelton, 2010). In either case, many reading teachers are required to follow adopted core programs, and not to stray from the prescribed tasks associated with each lesson or instructional component.

Lately, I have begun asking the question, “What about ‘Fidelity to Children’s Literature?’” If we assume the same allegiance to *fidelity* concerning the children’s literature we use as an instructional resource as we are being asked to do with the commercial programs being adopted, what might become our new charge? How might the concept of *Fidelity to Children’s Literature* help us find ways to incorporate children’s literature into our current curriculum and instruction?

Fidelity to Children’s Literature would require an adherence to the intention of its creators, hopefully the same level of adherence given to the intentions of the creators of commercial programs. Unfortunately, authors and illustrators of children’s literature have much less influence over how their work is utilized than the creators of commercial reading programs. Once published, pieces of their work can be abridged and adapted into commercial anthologies, computer assessment programs or as part of reading instructional materials. These rights are often signed away with initial publishing contracts. Many authors and illustrators of children’s literature could have not possibly foreseen some of the ways their writing and artwork have been incorporated into various reading programs and curriculum.

As an author and illustrator of a series of non-fiction picturebooks, I did not intend my books to be simply used as an instructional device for teaching predicting, nor do I look forward to the day my books appear as part of some computer-based assessment program. My goal in writing my series of nature photography books was to invite children to explore the natural world around them, to share my books with family members and friends, to expand their curiosity, and to get children off the couch to explore the wonders of nature all around them. It would be a shame if these intentions were underscored by a rush to use my books as a prompt in an instructional sequence.

To begin, *Fidelity to Children’s Literature* would honor books as a work of art and literature. It would take into account readers’ initial transactions with the words, images and design in a book above its potential as an instructional resource. In other words, we need to be careful how quickly we turn a work of children’s literature into a resource for a comprehension strategy lesson. Books should be read, discussed and savored long before they become a prompt for teaching predicting or summarizing. Before being used as an anticipatory set for a thematic unit on spiders, *Charlotte’s Web* (White, 1952) should be simply read and enjoyed. And before we turn the book into diorama, we should allow readers the freedom to share their ideas and connections to this wonderful story in an open discussion. For teachers, this requires finding more time and space in the day for read alouds and discussion.

In addition, the art and images in picturebooks should be treated as a system of meaning, not simply as a prompt for decoding the written text during a picture-walk. Teachers and students will need to extend their knowledge of artistic styles and techniques, basic elements of visual design and visual grammar to better consider the visual and design elements of picturebooks. *Picture This* (Bang, 2000) and *A Book About Design* (Gonyea, 2005) are delightful books that help teachers and students begin to understand visual design elements and how they support comprehension.

A focus on the elements of book design and the visual

devices used to illustrate picturebooks, needs to assume a prominent position in our discussions and analyses of the books we read. Going forward, teachers will need as many instructional strategies for teaching students to "read the visual" (Serafini, 2009, 2010) as they do for teaching predicting, summarizing or inferring. *Fidelity to Children's Literature* would suggest acknowledging the role of the illustrator and the book designer with the same rigor as the words written by the author.

Fidelity to Children's Literature would suggest the concept of main idea be replaced with a more open agenda, one that considers multiple perspectives and interpretations. Authors are often reluctant to tell readers what they are supposed to "get" from reading their books, but commercial programs are replete with series of questions and answer keys that decreasingly allow for variance. In other words, *answers don't vary* in many teachers' manuals anymore. There is certainly more than one worthy idea in any work of children's literature. The questions we ask students need to move beyond literal recall to inquire into what students really think about a book.

Redefining the reader as an active constructor of meaning instead of as a passive discoverer of predetermined answers would be an important place to begin. We must acknowledge the aesthetic aspects of reading literature, as well as the efferent stances often privileged in schools (Rosenblatt, 2005). *Fidelity to Children's Literature* would require teachers to support readers as they immerse themselves in the lived through experience of a story before they ask them to carry specific meanings away from their readings.

We must also understand that readers, texts, and interpretations are constructed by social, historical, and political factors. In addition, we need to view texts as vested versions of reality and invite readers to examine the ways they respond to their readings. As we include more authentic literature in the classroom, we need to examine which texts and interpretations are privileged and why. In order to ensure *Fidelity to Children's Literature*, we need to examine the books contained in

our school and classroom libraries to ensure the voices of a diverse group of authors and illustrators have a place in our students' reading lives.

Fidelity to Children's Literature would suggest that points should not be awarded for reading books. Reading should not become a competition among those best able to identify surface level or literal understandings. Various assessment programs turn books into "reading trophies" children simply decode in order to score points (Serafini, 2002, 2004). *Fidelity to Children's Literature* would suggest reading great literature should be seen as a way to illuminate the human condition, not a classroom scoreboard. Spending less time on these inauthentic assessments allows more time for reading and discussing literature.

What is done after reading a book should not become more important than reading and talking about the book itself. Building dioramas, writing book reports, and creating mobiles from magazine pages should find their way into a "Museum of Reading Activities," not today's classrooms. *Fidelity to Children's Literature* would suggest the focus remain on the book being read and

readers' transactions with it, not the cute response activities that too many classrooms feature as part of their instructional repertoire (Roser, 2001). The amount of time spent in "seat work" or completing irrelevant response activities takes away from the time children can spend actually reading and thinking.

A focus on *Fidelity to Children's Literature* would help create a space in today's reading instructional framework for books to come alive, not to be pushed into the shadows of the reading curriculum. Rather than reading the abridged, fragmented versions of their favorite stories, children would be provided access to entire stories, complete with accompanying illustrations. Authors and illustrators want their books to be read, enjoyed, considered, shared, discussed and read again. I believe that we should consider these intentions before we devise ways to incorporate their works in our daily reading lessons.

Finally, *Fidelity to Children's Literature* would suggest

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that teachers need to become more sophisticated readers themselves if they are to become more sophisticated teachers of reading. Until we as readers ourselves curl up near the fireplace with a commercial anthology, or take phonics worksheets with us to the beach on vacation, we need to reconsider what we are asking our students to read, what we provide in our classroom libraries, and what we ask students to do after they are finished reading. When we give our students the same rights and freedoms we expect for ourselves as readers, we open up new spaces for our students to immerse themselves in literature.

It is my hope that children's literature will move out of the shadows, the periphery of the reading curriculum, and once again take center stage in today's classrooms. The concept I have proposed, *Fidelity to Children's Literature*, is offered as a guide for helping children's literature resume its rightful place alongside other instructional resources. If we treat a novel or picturebook first as a work of art and literature before we see it as an instructional device, we may be better positioned to create lifelong readers in our classrooms.

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ARA Calendar – January, 2012

COCHISE AREA READING COUNCIL

Cochise Community Read Project – Cochise College librarians, school personnel, and community volunteers will read in area classrooms. Contact: Tamara Birch
dietzfamily@cablone.net

OCOTILLO EAST VALLEY READING COUNCIL

Writing/Communication Workshop

For more information contact: Kimberly.allison@legacytraditional.org

YAVAPAI AREA READING COUNCIL

Vocabulary Strategies for Developing Language

Presenter: Barbara Schuderer

For more information contact monagillum@yahoo.com

January 5, 2012 – GREATER PARADISE VALLEY READING COUNCIL

Read Your Way to the Centennial – Barbara Gowan, facilitator
Discover how to use Arizona-themed books as stepping stone to celebrate our 100 years of statehood.

For more information contact Barbara Gowan bgowan54@cox.net

January 11, 2012 – GILA READING COUNCIL

More with Kay on the Daily Café

For more information contact Lynette Dyas Kittpeak@aol.com

January 11, 2012 – TUCSON AREA READING COUNCIL

Teachers as Readers – Young Adult Literature Group

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