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Reading Literature in Elementary Classrooms

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Literature in elementary classrooms can be viewed as no more than filler that buys some free time or as a tool that sits alongside a skills worksheet. National policy trends lean heavily toward such limited visions of reading, and yet, as Kathy Short argues, it is possible to create practices of literary reading that support children's interest in reading processes, enjoyment in personal reading, and engagement in critical inquiry about the representations and themes literature presents. If literature opens an inquiry into life, then teaching must follow the curiosity and compassion that students are capable of bringing to reading. In this exploration of literature's place in reading education, Short recognizes the political forces that reduce reading to test scores, but provides a clear outline for framing literary reading in classrooms as vital to personal, communal, and intercultural understanding.

As a child, reading literature in the elementary classroom meant pulling a book surreptitiously from my desk when the teacher wasn't watching. My second-grade teacher once caught me sliding out a book between spelling words on the weekly test and reprimanded me for not paying attention. I *was* paying attention—to what was compelling for me. My life as a reader was fed by the school library, not by reading books in the classroom. In fact, I don't have memories of reading literature in school; my memories are of reading basal textbooks in round robin reading groups and completing comprehension cards to see who could get to the next color level first.

As a beginning classroom teacher, I struggled with the textbook programs and basal readers that were the heart of reading instruction. The significant role that literature played in my life outside of school was a constant reminder

that I needed to somehow integrate literature into the life of the classroom. So while my first-grade students met in ability-leveled reading groups and read from inane stories in basal readers, I made time to read aloud from picture books and novels several times a day, created a classroom library, borrowed books from the school library, and set aside daily time for independent reading of self-selected books.

When I found myself falling asleep in the basal reading groups, I knew that it was time to rethink the curriculum. I was clearly the most active thinker in these groups and knew that my boredom was indicative of students' experiences. I noticed that the students who struggled most as readers never finished their worksheets and so rarely got to read. I became increasingly suspicious that the worksheets filling the majority of their time served only to keep them

busy. In fact, I often felt that children were learning to read in spite of me.

Another tension occurred when my students and I gathered each afternoon to reflect on what they saw as significant learning for that day. They always talked about the afternoon experiences with our thematic units and never the morning instruction with the reading program. In the afternoons, we read literature for meaningful purposes, while in the morning we read stories designed to teach them to read. Children were clearly signaling which of those experiences were significant. The tension that finally caused me to take action was realizing that students rarely chose reading when we had “free choice” time on Fridays. Books had become “schoolwork” for them and not life work.

These tensions led me to engage students in books based on my goal that they view reading literature as integral to understanding themselves and the world. I immersed them in continuous experiences with literature through reading-aloud, independent reading, shared reading, book extension projects, and thematic units. These extensive experiences of reading many books encouraged children to enjoy books and to become proficient readers. I also observed, however, that while my students loved books, they did not necessarily think deeply or critically about what they read.

This observation led me to introduce literature circles where small groups of students met to share their responses to literature. Although they loved chanting the repeated language patterns in *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin, 1968), this book did not invite the thoughtful sharing of feelings and experiences as did books such as *Stevie* (Stephoe, 1969). *Stevie* led them beyond chanting to discussions of quarrels and their complicated feelings of resentment and connection with siblings or cousins. Their sharing led to dialogue as students critically explored their understandings with each other. I also realized that students need support in developing their strategies as readers and in explicitly thinking about how literature and language function. I introduced metacognitive strategy instruction and individual conferences around the books students were reading. Instead of teaching isolated phonics skills through drills and worksheets, we talked about the books they were reading and looked at parts of the text where they were struggling to determine strategies they could use to figure out unknown words. These cognitive and social processes included making predictions based on context and letter/sound relationships, reading on to get more information, breaking a word into parts, examining the pictures for meaning cues, and thinking about a word that would make sense within the world of that story.

Over time, reading literature in my classroom reflected a balance of invitations to experience literature that included reading widely for enjoyment and personal inquiry along with in-depth dialogue about a few books, inquiries on content themes and topics, and discussions of reading strategies and literary elements. My changes as a teacher

reflect similar shifts in the broader educational context as well. Schools in the United States have made major swings in how reading literature is viewed within elementary classrooms. For many years, reading literature was seen as supplementary, as something to do “when your work is done”—a time filler but not essential to learning about reading or literature. The 1980s and early 90s brought a major shift in reading instruction as many schools adopted literature-based curricular approaches that immersed children in reading literature across the classroom day for many different purposes (Huck, 1996). Literature was seen as a way to teach reading and to facilitate the learning of content across subject areas.

More recently, the pendulum has swung again; literature has been pushed to the margins within many elementary classrooms as politicized policies impose a return to teaching isolated skills through hierarchal, sequential reading programs and as stories are limited to excerpts in anthologies and controlled-vocabulary stories for reading schemes. Reading literature throughout the school day is not considered to be an “evidence-based practice for literacy instruction” with a stamp of approval from experimental research (Shanahan, 2003) and so has been relegated again to “free time” when other work is finished or assigned only to readers who have reached a level of fluent proficiency. This shift in reading literature is challenged by educators who are committed to deepening children’s reading comprehension and engagement with literary forms (Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Lehman 2007) and by those who advocate for literature study that shows children how to locate, explore, and critique their own cultural identities and views of the world as the basis for social understanding and change (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008).

My point in starting with a personal story is to illustrate that literature and its role in reading education in elementary classrooms are subject to changing political policies. The opportunities that children have to read literature, the literature that is available, and the types of experiences children have with that literature shift along with the sociopolitical context. The specific changes vary by country, but often those shifts in reading literature have less to do with educational theory and research than with political expediency and economic factors. For example, I was invited to Taiwan in 2001 to present several research seminars on the teaching of reading, particularly focusing on reading literature as a way to encourage critical thinking. Reading and discussing literature were seen as the key to shifting away from the General Method, which focuses on rote learning of Chinese characters and a centralized government textbook. The shift in reading pedagogy and philosophy was initiated, in large part, by a change in the Taiwan’s economic development base from assembly-line mass production of trinkets to sophisticated electronic and technology industries that require workers who can think critically and creatively. Publishers created sets of books for use in schools including picture books and novels by

Taiwanese authors and illustrators that competed with the many translated books from other countries that had dominated Taiwanese markets. Ironically, the drive for more critical and creative education has recently been constrained by a conservative political shift seeking a return to a centralized textbook-based approach to reading.

An international perspective on reading literature in elementary classrooms must therefore address the politicized nature of reading across the world as well as the ways in which literature has been viewed in elementary contexts. Unlike secondary schools in which literature is a field of study, children's literature in elementary schools has primarily been viewed as a reading material that is used to teach something else, typically either skills or facts, or as a "free time" activity. This chapter begins with the argument that children's literature as a field of study can be opened up through a focus on literature as inquiry into life and that critical inquiry is central to dialogue and literary understandings. The practices of critical inquiry are made more complex when connected with issues of cultural relevance, identity, and authenticity and with a broad range of types of texts and ways of responding. Although critical inquiry is often constrained by political agendas, teachers can and do create conditions for critical literary study through strategic reading, personal reading and transformative reading.

Literature as Inquiry into Life

Inquiry as a stance toward reading literature can serve as a bridge between views of literature as an artistic, humanizing force and literature as an instrumentalist tool for learning to read. As a stance of uncertainty and invitation, inquiry supports a willingness to wonder and question as well as to seek to understand and think with others (Lindfors, 1999). Rather than settle for readymade answers, inquiry urges learners to reach beyond information and experience to seek an explanation, to ask why, and to consider what if. Learners, however, need to remain anchored in their own life experiences in order to generatively reach beyond themselves to create a productive tension between current understandings and new experiences. Tension and the state of being off balance during inquiry are the driving forces that compel learners to move forward, particularly when supported by a collaborative community (Dewey, 1938). Inquiry is thus a collaborative process of connecting to and reaching beyond current understandings to explore tensions significant to the learner (Short, 2009b).

Children need to have a voice in both identifying and pursuing the tensions and questions that matter to them within a literary study. In most cases, inquiry is conceived as problem-solving and guiding students through a process of research, with a predetermined outcome. This process of research usually begins with a form and focus for students' questions that has been predetermined by the teacher and curriculum. Freire (1972) argues, however, that the

person who poses the problem is the one who remains in control of learning; therefore, learners need to question the questions, not just answer questions. Students can learn to determine which issues are significant and worth investigating and which tensions are compelling and offer the potential for transformation and new understanding. Reading and responding to literature as problem-posing, as well as problem-solving, provides a critical frame through which multiple voices and perspectives can contribute to inquiry about oneself and the world. Inquiry through literature means understanding the particular contributions that literature makes to ways of thinking and knowing.

Literature as a Way of Knowing

In elementary classrooms, literature is rarely seen as a way of knowing the world that differs, for example, from ways of understanding science or history. Peterson and Eeds (1990) argue that educators have been so focused on using literature for purposes such as conveying information or teaching reading that they have lost sight of literature as valuable in itself. Peterson and Eeds believe that literature illuminates what it means to be human and that the aesthetic nature of literature makes accessible the most fundamental experiences of life—love, hope, loneliness, despair, fear, and belonging. If literature is the imaginative shaping of experience and thought into the forms and structures of language; children are the readers who reshape experience and use literary language to name and transform life. Living inside the world of a story may enable them to engage in inquiry that transforms their thinking about their lives and world (Rosenblatt, 1938). Huck (1982) argues that literature, whether in the form of fiction or nonfiction, creates the playing field of imagination and encourages readers to go beyond "what is" to "what might be." Literature expands children's life spaces through inquiries that take them outside the boundaries of their lives to other places, times, and ways of living. Hope and imagination make it possible for children to rise above their experiences in order to challenge inequity and envision social change. Transformation occurs as children carry their experiences and inquiries through literature back into their worlds and lives.

The Limits of Knowing Through Literature

Hunt (1994) argues that this view of children's literature as exploratory and mind-expanding is contradicted by adults' focus on the educational, psychological, and cultural influences of literature on children's development. Since adults are the ones who write and share literature with children, he argues, "children's books very often contain what adults think children can understand and what they should be allowed to understand" (p. 5). A particular culture's view of childhood is reflected in the books created for children. Because children are seen as being in

the process of becoming, this literature can be viewed as manipulative—as adult writers create circumstances and characters that influence children’s perspectives and actions. In this sense, adults are *problem-posers* who limit children’s roles to problem-solving. Hunt’s view, however, ignores the strategies that children have used through the ages to subvert adult control of their lives; neither does it acknowledge the stated intentions of many authors to invite children into inquiry, not determine their perspective and focus. On the other hand, many forms of media and literature do position readers as people who identify with stereotypic or passive perspectives. Children and teachers do not have to remain indifferent or unaware of such portrayals; rather, they can pursue questions about how they are positioned by texts in ways that make them feel less able than or even superior to others. Through such questioning, children develop an ability to critically analyze the ways things are in the world around them as they also view their world, their reading, and learning as part of a process of transformation and becoming.

Experiencing Literature as Democratic Life

Although teachers of literature in secondary schools and universities view literature as a field of study or content area, their focus has often been on teaching the formal art of words and structures and inducting students into a literary heritage, rather than on experiencing literature as life. Literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1938) posits reading as a transactional process through which each reader brings personal and cultural experiences, beliefs, and values to the reading of a text so that both the reader and the text are transformed. Although a text has particular potential meanings based on shared cultural codes, readers construct their individual interpretations as they engage in “lived through experiences” with that text. During and after reading, people construct understandings in light of their experiences and rethink their experiences in light of the text, thus bringing meaning to and taking meaning from a text through a process of inquiry. Further, as readers share their responses with others through dialogue, they are pressed to critique and take responsibility for these responses (Bleich, 1981).

Rosenblatt (1938) argues that reading literature encourages readers to put themselves in the place of others, to use imagination to consider the consequences of their decisions and actions. Imagination and the balance of reason and emotion are further developed when readers move from personal response to dialogue where they wrestle with their interpretations of literature with other readers. These discussions, therefore, are not just a better way to learn, but essential to democracy. Rosenblatt’s vision of democracy is equitable social relationships in which people choose to live together by valuing individual voices within recognition of responsibility to the group. She believes that people need to have conviction and

enthusiasm about their own cultural perspectives, while remaining open to alternative views and other’s needs. Dialogue about literature provides a vital context through which students learn to live with the tension of recognizing and respecting the perspectives of others without betraying their own beliefs (Pradl, 1996). Through dialogue, students develop faith in their own judgments while continuing to inquire and remaining open to questioning their beliefs.

Literature as Inquiry into Life: *When My Name Was Keoko*

Reading literature to experience and inquire about life is not in opposition to literature as a way to learn and inquire about particular content. Literature can encourage interest in specific topics, develop conceptual understandings of issues, and provide insights into written language—all within the context of literature as a way of knowing and critiquing the world. Rosenblatt (1938), however, argues that readers need to first experience literature as life before examining that literature for other purposes.

A focus on literature as inquiry into life permeated the responses of fourth-grade students as they read *When My Name Was Keoko* (Park, 2002), a novel about the experiences of Sun-hee and her brother in Korea during the Japanese occupation and suppression of Korean culture in WWII. The teacher, Kathryn Tompkins (2007), read the book aloud to her students to support their overarching inquiry on culture. This classroom work was the focus of teachers’ school-wide *action research* on intercultural understanding (Short, 2009a); a form of research that documents students’ and teachers’ perceptions of learning as well as analyzes and makes changes in the context for teaching and learning to challenge students’ (and teachers’) thinking. In Tompkins’ classroom, issues of culture, identity, gender, war, freedom, courage, resistance, hope, and family relationships wove through students’ talk, writing, and artistic responses as they engaged in critical inquiry around Park’s novel. They particularly identified with Sun-hee’s frustration at her lack of freedom. They connected her experiences with their own feelings of resentment toward adults who tell kids what to do and when to do it, but realized that her lack of freedom was based in fear and oppression of her culture and identity that went far beyond anything they had experienced. Their discussions naturally led them to insights into Korean culture, language, and history, and they pursued their tensions through inquiries using informational materials and web sites. Later, students returned to this book in a writing workshop study on the strategies that authors use to develop characterizations.

Literature and Critical Social Inquiry

Much of the research and classroom work around reading literature has focused on talk and writing as a means of

responding to literature. Freire (1972) argues that dialogue is a tool for transformation and social change and his work has influenced educators to invite children into talk in which they think *with* each other and engage in collaborative inquiry and critique around critical social issues. Through practices of critical literacy, which encourage analyses and questioning of oppression and all forms of domination, readers are challenged to critique and question “what is” and “who benefits” as well as to hope and consider “what if.” Through critical literacy, children learn to problem-pose and question the everyday world, to interrogate relationships between language and power, to analyze the images and messages conveyed through popular culture and media, to understand how and why power relationships are socially constructed and maintained, and to consider actions that promote social justice (Edelsky, 1999; Lewison, Flint, & Sluys, 2002).

Critical inquiry can grow out of a focused study such as described in relation to *When My Name Was Keoko* or children reading together may suddenly encounter a question that they know they must address. DeNicolo and Fránquiz (2006) describe such questioning as “critical encounters” and define them as a realization that can emerge when “a word, concept, or event in a story surprises, shocks, or frightens readers to such a degree that they seek to inquire further” and so sustain their dialogue and scrutiny of the text (p. 157). In their study, such a critical encounter occurred in reading *Felita* (Mohr, 1979) when students read about the main character’s experience of a pejorative racial slur called out to her by another group of teens who rejected the presence of her Puerto Rican family in the predominately white community. The girls agreed, “You have to stand up for yourself,” but disagreed on how they would respond to a racial slur. Several indicated they would “get all my friends and beat them up,” while others argued that “fighting with them would make the problem worse” and would lead to being “scared of these kids” and that wouldn’t solve anything (DeNicolo & Fránquiz, p. 165). Collaborating to make sense of the racism in this book led to a transformation of their relationships with each other as well as their understandings about racial issues. The group member who usually dominated discussions began to listen and consider alternative viewpoints; and a more careful, shy member spoke clearly and forcefully about the importance of questioning racism. Literature discussion provided a space for disagreement as it also supported the members in developing a critical lens to examine “values, beliefs, and events in personal and collective lives, and the recognition of literacy as an empowering rather than silencing force in classrooms” (p. 168). This space was influenced by the choice of literature that encouraged students to use their life experiences as linguistic and cultural tools as well as challenged them to deepen their understanding of social issues.

In another example, Martínez-Roldán (2005) documents the significance of an inquiry approach to dialogue

for a group of bilingual children as they read *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (de Paola, 1979). They engaged in acts of inquiry in which “a speaker attempts to elicit another’s help in going beyond his or her present understanding” (Martínez-Roldán, p. 23). For example, Amaury wondered, “What was so girly about playing dress-up?” to which Steve replied, “Probably he likes to play girls’ games.” Amaury explored another interpretation, noting that Oliver “says that he was pretending to be a star” and returned to his question about why dress-up is considered a girls’ game. Steve later argued that “his dad wants him to play a boys’ game instead of a girl game ‘cause maybe his dad doesn’t think he gets exercise,” to which Ada replied, “I think he dresses up because boys dress up too.” Their inquiry continued when Amaury commented that “Steve played dress-up before,” and Steve immediately replied, “I know. I’m not a girl.” (p. 26).

This authentic discourse did not resolve students’ inquiries—Steve still wondered about boy/girl issues and Ada was not sure what to think—but their talk remained open and focused on the process itself. Martínez-Roldán (2005) notes that these students were able to engage in dialogue about gender because their focus was on their processes of thinking, not a final answer. She argues that an overemphasis on guidelines and procedures when talking about stories can instead force students to focus on product and performance.

Expanding Dialogue and Inquiry

Including Everyday Texts and Oral Narratives

Luke and Freebody (1997) argue that all texts represent cultural positions, ideologies and discourses and that all readers construct readings from particular epistemological stances. Critical literacy presses for an awareness of how, why, and in whose interests a particular text might work and an understanding of reading positions and practices for questioning and critiquing texts as well as oneself. In defining critical literacy, Luke and Freebody outline four key practices: (a) coding practices through which readers focus on developing their skills and resources as code breakers, (b) text-meaning practices that focus on developing meaning and participation in text production and interpretation, (c) pragmatic practices through which readers develop knowledge of how everyday texts (e.g., library card or cell phone contract) may work for and against their interests, and (d) critical practices that enable readers to question how a text shapes their point of view and challenges their assumptions. Their framework for reading that recognizes codes, meaning, pragmatic and critical practices is intended to initiate and guide a multi-voiced dialogue about texts in peoples’ lives. Such a dialogue would value and extend each reader’s right to be heard, critiqued, analyzed, and constructed in public forums. They argue that reading as a critical social practice could displace the cognitive emphasis on comprehension

strategies in reading education and, instead, foreground concerns about the ways we understand power and change across personal, cultural, and social histories.

Luke and Freebody's outline of critical reading implies that literature should be defined broadly to include oral and written forms. The values that elementary schools place on written text have created deficit views of children from communities where oral traditions are integral to the culture. Children from these communities enter school with a background in oral literature and storytelling, rather than in written literature. They may not have been read to on a regular basis, but they do know story and have rich oral literature experiences (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; see Campano & Ghiso, this volume). In addition, children from families living in poverty frequently have many experiences with everyday print including family letters, newspapers, magazines, contracts, and bills (Dorsey-Gaines & Taylor, 1988). Children's success in reading literature in school contexts depends on whether teachers build from children's strengths in oral stories and critical insights about the materials they encounter every day.

In many countries, including Asia, Africa, and Latin America the dominant books available are translations from English-speaking countries, especially the U.S. and U.K. (Freeman & Lehman, 2001). Children do not find their own lives and cultural experiences within these books and are, instead, immersed in a constant diet of books that reflect dominant Western worldviews. As described in Chapter 31 of this volume by Michael Daniel Ambatchew, educators, authors, and publishers within these countries struggle with encouraging the writing, publication and distribution of literature from their cultural perspectives. Their debates about reading literature are often less about engaging children with books than about creating a body of literature from within the culture. Market forces work against their efforts since large corporations can provide translated books for lower costs than the small presses who work with authors and distributors to produce local literature.

Furthermore, as I discovered while teaching internationally, my Western, culturally specific view that reading for enjoyment should be a primary goal when creating a literature program, is not shared by educators around the world. My assumptions were met with puzzlement when I argued that they should immerse children in a wide range of literary reading so that they grow to love books and see reading as enjoyment. They valued, instead, reading widely for utilitarian purposes, to accomplish a task or to learn something of importance in their lives. Although we held different assumptions about reading for pleasure, we agreed, along with Luke and Freebody (1997), on the value of centering reading in children's questions, and supporting literacy in order to encourage personal lifelong inquiry. This difference in cultural perspectives speaks, again, to the importance of defining literature broadly in ways that include the texts and stories readers value and use in their daily lives.

Literature Relevant to Children's Cultural Identities

Building a democratic dialogue that includes the voices, questions, and texts of all students requires attention to and knowledge of culturally relevant and culturally authentic literature that connect to the reader's own cultural identity as well as to multiple ways of thinking and being in the world (Gay, 2000; Harris, 1997). Dialogue about culturally relevant literature provides a means for readers to not merely "look in on others" lives, but more importantly, to critique and inquire into their own world views, cultural values and possible biases. Culturally relevant literature allows readers to "see themselves" within a book and provides opportunities for linking cultural knowledge and experiences to story worlds. In addition, reading books intended to represent the experiences and lives they know well can be the starting point for questioning how certain representations might offend, silence, or contradict their cultural knowledge and lived experiences (Brooks, 2006; Dutro, 2009).

Luke and Freebody (1997) suggest it is possible to create dialogues that develop insights into both literary forms and the issues implied within stories by foregrounding a social view of reading. However, discussions of social issues may be unfamiliar and, therefore, create a forum for resistance and confusion among many students. In discussions with fourth and fifth graders about picture books highlighting racism, Short with Thomas (in press) found that the students avoided difficult issues by simply evading the central premise that racism exists: "It doesn't matter what you look like on the outside, it's the inside that matters." They also believed that racism was only between Blacks and Whites in the U.S. and that racism ended when Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I have a dream" speech. We had to acknowledge that their perspectives were grounded in the discourses promoted by adults around them that emphasized racial harmony through events and experiences such as the school's celebration of Martin Luther King Day. To challenge these assumptions, we searched for picture books with a range of contemporary portrayals of racism and questioned children's narratives when they referred to clichéd explanations of their social life. We also spent time as teachers talking about how to discuss race with children and confronting our own hesitations and fears about openly addressing these issues.

Cultural authenticity is a critical issue for readers, both in identifying with and challenging the social worlds portrayed within literature (Fox & Short, 2003). Cultural authenticity goes beyond accuracy or the avoidance of stereotyping to include the cultural values and practices within a social group (Mo & Shen, 2003). Given the range of experiences within any cultural group and the unique transactions of each reader with a text, cultural authenticity is often interpreted through multiple, competing points of view. Reading literature from a critical perspective helps readers question the signs and structures embedded

within texts, so that a story's construction and sources of meanings can be identified and examined. Amy Edwards (2008), a fifth-grade teacher, found that providing brief information about the background of authors and illustrators before reading aloud raised children's awareness about the significance of a critical inquiry stance while interpreting literature. Students realized that they needed to know if an author was a cultural insider, had visited the country, or had engaged in research or some kind of experience related to the content of the book. They saw a need for contextual information so they could imagine an author's perspective and consider how and why authors write about a particular topic as well as position themselves as authorities on a story world. Yenika-Agbaw (1998) argues that readers have the social responsibility to negotiate personal and cultural meanings from literature that create the possibility for social change in both their immediate and global communities.

Readers' responses to culturally relevant literature are not a simple matter of cultural identification because readers engage in continually negotiated cultural practices and have multiple cultural allegiances and subjectivities. For example, Brooks (2006) found that African American adolescents brought strong cultural connections to *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988), a novel about an African American teen struggling with gang membership, defending his need for a gun as a desire for respect and to keep others from "messing" with him. They rejected identification with *The House of Dies Drear* (Hamilton, 1968), a mystery involving an African American family living in a house inhabited by ghosts, stating "only white people would stay in a haunted house" (p. 388). Brooks argues that although the book is acclaimed as authentic culturally conscious African American literature, beliefs in the supernatural as a cultural practice was unfamiliar to this group of teens.

Enciso (1994) argues that students interpret literature based on their own cultural maps that "provide a framework for constructing the meaning of new events" and that include cultural resources and social allegiances drawn from popular culture (p. 527). She analyzes a discussion of *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990) by a small group of African American, Latino, and European American fourth and fifth graders. She particularly focuses on two boys (African American and European American) who were both thoughtful readers and transformers of culture but did not consider one another's interpretations because they drew from different cultural maps. Both enjoyed popular culture and were aware of heightened racial tension at the time, associated with the trial of white police officers accused of beating Rodney King, an unarmed Black citizen of Los Angeles. During their interpretations of the book (and related social life), Richard drew from his position as a "culturally conscious African American male," while Mark's allegiance was with "white liberal culture" (p. 530). Enciso argues that teachers and students need to examine who is included and excluded in interpretations

of literature and culture within these discussions. Furthermore, they need to develop knowledge and skills for mediating these discussions so that dominant perspectives that privilege White, middle-class interpretive resources are not assumed or taken for granted as the norm.

Learning to Read Interculturally

The increased availability of literature with settings in different cultures around the world has provided the opportunity for readers to immerse themselves as inquirers into story worlds that present unfamiliar ways of thinking and living. Teachers' and students' dialogue around these books make it possible to build intercultural understandings and global perspectives (Short, 2009a). Engaging children thoughtfully with this literature can be a struggle, however, because the books often focus on ways of living that seem far removed from children's immediate experiences. The danger exists that children will view this literature as exotic or strange, and thus, fail to connect in significant ways with the concerns and perspectives portrayed by the author and illustrator. Additional problems with reading cross-culturally will arise if teachers read past the culturally specific perspectives and details and instead focus only on the overarching themes (e.g., friendship, loyalty, loss) that are relevant, but become tangential, or even in opposition to intercultural understanding. On the other hand, too much attention paid to superficial features of cultural lifestyles can actually reinforce stereotypical perceptions (Case, 1991). Finally, a limited reading of culturally relevant literature could develop as teachers discuss the literature in terms of "we-they" dualisms that reinforce the normative assumption that "we" are inherently superior to those "others" who have not yet acquired a view of the world aligned with "my" view.

Iqbal (D'Adamo, 2001) is a fictionalized story of a boy who led an influential movement to protest child labor in Pakistani carpet factories. If read in isolation, with no continuous dialogue or reference to meaningful social change, this book could lead children to feel pity, rather than outrage and a sense of empowerment to change the world. A misinformed reading of the story might also lead to the misconception that all children in Pakistan are involved in child labor, chained to looms in carpet mills. If the book is instead read within a broader study of children's and human rights, and includes a collection of books representing Pakistan and Pakistani children's perspectives, as well as narratives from students' families and community members, children will have many more possible points of connection and opportunities to struggle over the voices and questions they raise through their inquiry.

Although researchers have provided many accounts of children's responses to multicultural literature, few studies focus on the use of international literature to build intercultural understanding—a major omission given our increasingly interconnected world. Children need to find their own lives in books, but if what they read only mirrors

their views of the world, they cannot envision other ways of thinking and living and are not challenged to critically confront global issues.

From Dialogue to the Art of Representation

More recently, research and theory related to dialogue has expanded to consider the potential of a wider range of sign systems, such as visual art and drama as tools for thinking and interpreting literature. Siegel (2006) describes the process of *transmediation* as way to recast understanding about literature and its meaning for one’s life. The concept of transmediation is taken from the work of the philosopher Peirce (1966), who argues that in moving an idea across sign or symbolic systems, such as from a written language to visual arts, we invariably discover new meanings and relationships between ideas, because the new sign system heightens attention to dimensions of a text that were otherwise difficult to isolate or describe. One form of transmediation is known as “Sketch to Stretch” and asks students to use the symbolic language of color, composition, and object relations to create a metaphor for a text’s themes or character relations (Short, Kahn, & Kauffman, 2000). For example, Dan, one of the nine-year-old children in a class who read *Iqbal* (D’Adamo, 2001), created a sketch of a broken chain to represent the boy’s literal escape from the looms, but he also recognized the image as a symbol of Iqbal’s freedom, inner strength, and intelligence. Along the top third of his sketch, he created an arch of deep red and black colors to represent Iqbal’s anger. Another student, Gabriela, responded to the same book with a sketch of the sky and a kite as symbols of freedom; the kite image was repeated in the bottom right and left corners of the page, with the added image of the

kites breaking through a fence representing oppression (Bolasky, 2008; see Figure 4.1).

Edmiston and Enciso (2003) believe that drama is a forum for text interpretation that can reveal and mediate children’s diverse cultural and social beliefs, through deliberate inclusion of multi-voiced, dialogic approaches that promote “an interplay of meaning among teachers and students across shifting social positions” within the drama (p. 868). They argue that these drama practices dialogize the discourses of literary texts to develop children’s insights about themselves and the world.

Medina used drama practices, such as tableau, acting-in-role, and hot seat, around the picture book, *Friends from the Other Side* (Anzaldúa, 1987), a complex story of immigration, safety, cultural identity, and community. Through her use of dramatized dialogue, Medina encouraged students to move from interpreting text as outsiders to the experience of living on the Mexican/Texas border, to developing an active dialogue *as* and *with* the characters. Students used dialogue to explore multiple perspectives and questions around social issues that went beyond the limits of the story to the larger society. For example, students took turns occupying the hot seat and asking one another questions that concerned the status of undocumented immigrants. One student took on the perspective of the main character, Prietita, and was asked whether Joaquin and his mother, who were undocumented immigrants, should be returned to Mexico. Earlier, several students, drawing on images and stereotypes from the media, stated that Mexicans should be sent back because they had come across the border to steal and bring drugs. Their responses on the hot seat reflected their consideration of the different circumstances framing multiple points of view. One student who took the role of the immigrant official stated, “They have to make a decision if to let them in so they

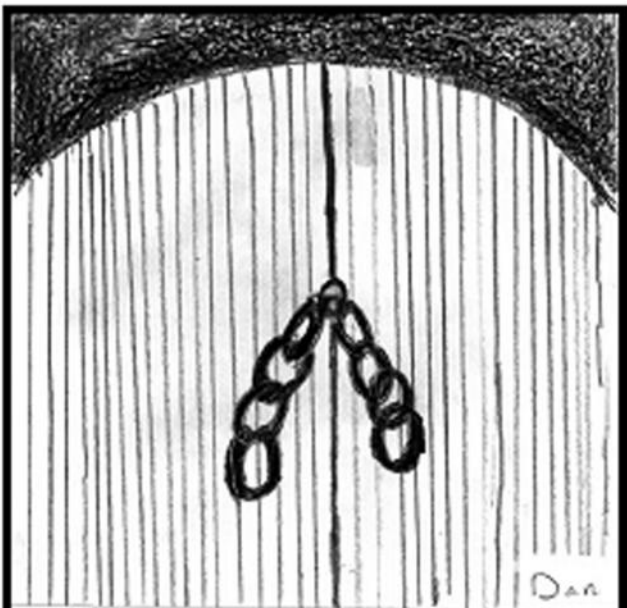


Figure 4.1 Third-graders’ Sketch to Stretch responses to *Iqbal* (D’Adamo, 2001).

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can get work and they can get help. They have a very hard decision and it is mostly in their hands—all these lives to let them in or not” (p. 280). Another student argued that a border patrol officer who was also Mexican, probably knowingly passed the house where Joaquin and his mother were hiding because he did not want to put them in jail.

Dialogue, Literature, and National Reading Policies

These descriptions of critical dialogues within literary reading suggest that discussions of literature may be isolated from reading education. However, policy initiatives on the teaching of reading have long evolved from “pressures, tensions, and crises embedded in national and regional political contexts” (Openshaw & Soler, 2007, p. xiv), leading to national governments’ involvement in specific decisions about reading instruction with the express aim of raising literacy standards. Perceptions of gaps in literacy achievement for particular cultural groups (i.e., Black and Latino youth in the U.S.) have further politicized these decisions and led to debates about whether these gaps reflect the need for more accommodation of cultural differences in instruction or for demanding adherence to national standards for all children, regardless of cultural differences.

Elementary reading programs, while accountable to national policies that restrict definitions of reading, can be organized so that children and teachers develop personal, social, and cognitive approaches to reading that will contribute to pathways for lifelong critical inquiry through literature. Teachers, working with librarians, can integrate wide reading for pleasure, reading for insights about oneself and the world, and reading to learn about literary forms, themes, and puzzles (e.g., metaphors, flashbacks, intertextual references). All of these ways of reading should be guided and motivated by inquiry—by investigations that, at times, are relevant to children’s personal interests, at other times relate to the conditions and concerns of others’ lives, and, still other times, focus on literary form, language, and interpretative possibilities. The following two sketches of reading across a day offer a sense of the integrative and interpretive work that can be developed for students in elementary classrooms.

Stepping Into an Upper-Grade Classroom. Nine-year-old Gabriela begins her day by finding her book, *To Dance: A Ballerina’s Graphic Novel* (Siegel, 2006), so she can pursue her personal inquiry about becoming a ballerina. After independent reading, the class moves into reading instruction and guided reading. The teacher works with Gabriela and a small group of peers in a guided inquiry that helps them analyze how an author uses dialogue for character development in *Frog and Toad Together* (Lobel, 1979). They web the differences and similarities in the viewpoints of Frog and Toad based on their talk

and interactions with each other. After lunch, as part of a whole-class collaborative inquiry on human rights, the teacher reads aloud from *Iqbal* (D’Adamo, 2001). Students discuss the anger and fear in Iqbal’s life and his willingness to take action for freedom for himself and others despite the risks. They talk about the ways in which he took action and their tensions about whether kids can really make a difference in a world controlled by adults.

Stepping into a Primary Classroom

In a classroom with younger students, Tim O’Keefe reads aloud a predictable book, *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain* (Aardema, 1981), which has a cumulative rhyme about rain coming to a drought-stricken area of Kenya. He first reading encourages students to enjoy the story and build a shared sense of the story’s meaning. After several shared readings, he and his students focus on the same book, with a discussion of letter pattern relationships, words that students recognize, and strategies that students are using to make, confirm, or revise their predictions about words and their meaning. The book then becomes part of the literature available for independent reading (Mills, O’Keefe, & Jennings, 2004).

In O’Keefe’s classroom, reading experiences move from a sense of the whole story to its specific use of language and structure and then back to its whole experience and meaning again. His organization of reading literature challenges the approaches imposed by national standards and strictly guided reading programs that begin with isolated phonics skills and delay the long-term goal of whole text comprehension until later grades. Even when these skill-based programs finally focus on comprehension, the assumption is that comprehension is a form of meaning-making bounded by a predetermined summary of a story’s purpose, theme, character relationships, and style. In contrast with O’Keefe’s approach to shared reading, Larson (2002) documents how a shared reading of a predictable book becomes displaced by teaching isolated literacy skills, and meaningful discussion and inquiry are undermined by time restrictions, peer pressure, and district mandates to raise test scores. Literary reading is reduced to using a story as the springboard for drills on basic skills with any questions arising from children about the story or any interest generated by the story’s themes relegated to learning outside of curricular timeframes and guidelines.

Locating Literature at the Heart of Reading Education

Roser (2001) argues that teachers like Tompkins and O’Keefe view texts as mediators of *both* literary reading and reading development. A literary text can become a touchstone for literary understandings, political contestation, content knowledge, and literacy strategies. Although this may be a lot of work for one book to carry, when teachers plan for a range of experiences with literature,

students can learn to *read strategically* to learn about thought and imaginative processes when interpreting literature, *read widely* for personal purposes, and *read deeply* to think about life.

Reading Strategically to Learn about Literacy and Literature

Literary and literacy knowledge are distinct yet interdependent (Lehman, 2007) and can be taught together, throughout a school day. Literary knowledge relates to knowledge about literature as a narrative form (and way of knowing) and includes concepts such as sense of story, plot, themes, and language; while literacy focuses on reading and writing as processes and includes the related concepts of comprehension, sequence, main ideas, and vocabulary. Readers need both literary and literacy knowledge as they read in a range of genres so they are able to adjust their reading strategies based on their knowledge of the text structures for a particular genre. In addition, a critical perspective on both literary forms and literacy processes can be foregrounded in discussions and analyses of selected literature.

Strategic readers reflect on their reading processes and text knowledge; the strategies they use are general cognitive and social processes for constructing meaning during reading. For example readers need to make predictions based on context, read beyond a difficult word to get more information, break a word into parts, or reread a difficult passage. Other specific word-level skills, such as identifying letter-sound relationships or vowel rules, are taught as part of an overall approach to solving problems with words, rather than as isolated information to repeat and memorize. Teachers and children work together to explicitly identify and examine reading strategies and develop metacognitive awareness and control of the reading process through classroom routines, such as guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), guided comprehension (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007), and conferencing and mini-lessons (Calkins, 2001).

Through these approaches to strategic reading, teachers take over the role of problem-poser and guide children's reflections on their reading processes, teach lessons on strategies and text structures, and choose literature to highlight particular reading strategies or text structures based on their insights about children's confusion or new experiences with literature. The teacher determines the focus of instruction based on careful assessment of students' needs, while students act as problem-solvers engaged in actively reasoning through reading strategies and text structures to develop generalizations they can use when interpreting the words, style, and structures of their current reading selection. For example, Diane Snowball and Faye Bolton (1999) describe a guided inquiry where students gather examples of different letter combinations for the long e sound by reading aloud to each other from familiar books. Whenever they hear that sound, they put

the word on a large wall chart. After gathering examples for several weeks, students engage in problem-solving to organize the words into groups, each reflecting a specific letter combination, and create generalizations to explain that grouping.

These practices highlight instruction by adults who help children develop a repertoire of strategies to use when they encounter difficulty, as they figure out words, comprehend confusing plots or characterizations, or encounter new text structures and literary elements. Research by Gambrell (2000) indicates that if teachers and students depend entirely on a program of reading emphasizing the superficial skills of decoding and plot-based comprehension questions, they may know how to read but have little interest making reading a part of their lives. In the long run, teachers aim to develop students who know what it feels like to be engaged, knowledgeable, and strategic.

A Caveat about Strategic Reading. Instruction in comprehension strategies is based on the belief that cognitive processes, such as inference, connection, or visualization, need to be modeled and explicitly taught to readers who will then practice them whenever they read (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Moreillon, 2009). This focus on comprehension strategies is significant because it has expanded instruction beyond the basic skills of word recognition and identification of story elements and themes. But the promise of rigor in reading has sometimes led to a shift from deeply considering a range of meanings to learning the actual comprehension strategies. Atwell (2007) argues that this shift is problematic because readers are forced to approach literature from an efferent frame of mind, to read in order to acquire information, instead of to read to live within a literary world (Rosenblatt, 1978). Atwell believes that this emphasis teaches children to seek and carry away information about strategies when they read literature, rather than living through the stories and experiencing the journey. She found that directing her students to activate their comprehension strategies as they read interrupted their entry into a "reading zone." They were so focused on making connections, drawing conclusions, and identifying visual imagery as they read, that they lost comprehension. She argues that there may be occasional moments in a text when examining comprehension strategies is appropriate, but that "the story, the language, and the reader are all that matter" in other moments (p. 64). The issue is not whether or not comprehension strategies should be taught, but determining when they are appropriate and needed by the reader as well as their role within interpretation and response.

Relating Literary Form and Meaning. Often literary instruction in elementary contexts has taken the form of worksheets that require students to identify and list story elements, such as character, plot, and conflict, rather than a thoughtful consideration of how these elements influence

their constructions of meaning. More recently, there has been a strong emphasis on genre studies, some of which are formulaic. An inquiry approach to genre study can support students' insights into the relationships between form and meaning. Instead of viewing a genre as a prescriptive set of rules, genre can be a flexible tool that readers use to identify social and textual structures for understanding their worlds (Wolf, 2004).

Cruz and Pollock (2004) invited their students into inquiry about fantasy through a touchstone text, *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1988). Students then gathered many texts and sorted them into three piles—definitely fantasy, not fantasy, and maybe fantasy. This sifting process led students to develop a working definition of fantasy that they continued to explore through read alouds, independent reading, charting of elements, characters, and symbolism, and small group book clubs. Through this process, students identified six characteristics that cut across different kinds of fantasy and inquired into patterns, such as the relationship between the villain and the hero, the role magic plays in the fantasy world, the differing portrayals of dragons in stories from Western and Eastern cultures, and the changing roles of female characters. Ray (2006) argues that an inquiry approach to genre study repositions curriculum as the outcome of instruction rather than the starting point. The “noticings and questioning that students engage in and around texts determine what will become important content for the study, and depth rather than coverage is the driving force” (p. 238).

A guided inquiry approach to literary reading reflects a significant shift in the roles of students and teachers as they interact around literature. Although the teacher, as problem-poser, engages in explicit teaching around literary knowledge and reading strategies, this teaching is based on careful observation of students' needs and knowledge of literacy and literature, rather than a predetermined sequential curriculum. Within this focus, students as problem-solvers may explore their own inquiries about reading strategies and text knowledge as they read literature that engages them.

Reading Widely for Personal Purposes

Reading literature for personal purposes involves not only personal enjoyment of reading, but social opportunities to share and become interested in a wide range of genres, authors, styles, and themes. In personal reading development, the focus is on choice and extensive reading for purposes significant to the reader. Those purposes range from enjoyment and entertainment to personal inquiries on issues and topics that matter in a particular reader's life—often because friends are also interested in the topic and genre.

Extensive reading promotes positive attitudes about reading, expands students' literary knowledge and, thus, develops students' confidence in comprehension and interpretation, and encourages the development of lifelong

reading habits. In addition, reading many materials with ease increases fluency as readers gain experience in effectively orchestrating a range of reading strategies within familiar texts (Morrow, 2003). As Galda (2001) points out, “children's books provide a reason to learn to read, as well as a reason to keep on reading” (p. 224), so that children become readers who not only *can* read, but who also will and do read across their lifetimes.

Children will have different purposes for their reading, and those interests and aims should be recognized and valued so everyone in a classroom can see that reading extends beyond the mandates of schooling. When developing a library for young readers, books and other materials (e.g., letters, class-produced books, annotated photo albums, postcards) should be accessible for independent reading. Among these books should be the stories that are read aloud in class, including patterned language books like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1968). Older children will be able to read and discuss different books in a series such as Lemony Snicket's “Unfortunate Events” series or the “Time Warp” series by Jon Sczeiska and Lane Smith. Many children prefer nonfiction literature and may resist an overemphasis on fiction; thus, books that address and extend children's interests in the natural world, world records, history, inventions, and sports should be available for reading and discussion with peers.

Reading widely develops through independent reading and read-alouds when adults provide a regularly scheduled time for these experiences, a variety of reading materials, and a place for reading alongside the child. While reading with children from a book of their choosing, the emphasis should be on meaning and interpretation of character relationships, plot, and connections with related stories and experiences. In this individualized time between the adult and child, it is possible to follow the child's questions and understandings about the story and about how text works. One to one conversations such as these inform a teacher's perspective on a child's reading development and can be recorded to supplement—if not supplant—standardized assessments of reading that discount the interests, questions, and contexts of children's reading.

The main focus of independent reading is immersion in reading, not writing reports or talking about this reading. These experiences with a wide range of self-selected texts help students explore personal purposes for reading within their lives. Research indicates that many adults stop engaging with books once they leave school and view reading as boring school work because of the lack of personal choice in reading materials in schools (Gambrell, 2000). Independent reading is supported by reading aloud to children and telling them oral stories to introduce concepts of print, book language, and story structures as well as open up new genres and encourage critical inquiry around literature (Galda & Cullinan, 2000). The recent political focus on evidenced-based reading practices has led to official discourse that questions the value of read-

ing aloud in elementary classrooms. Reading aloud and discussing books with children is often pushed to the side or has become rushed with little time for children to explore their thinking with each other about a book. Copenhagen (2001) argues that the result is the silencing or marginalizing of children's inquiries as efficiency and control take away the extended time some children need to wonder about and talk back to a book.

Reading Deeply to Transform Understanding

Reading literature to think about and transform understanding about oneself and the world involves reading to inquire into issues in children's lives and in the broader society. These experiences support children in becoming critical and knowledgeable readers and thinkers. Through discussions of well-selected literature, readers are encouraged to engage deeply with the story world and then step back to share their personal connections and to reflect critically with others about the text and their responses. They engage in shared thinking about ideas based on critical inquiries that matter in their lives and world. These critical inquiries involve the types of discussion described earlier in children's dialogue and responses to *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (de Paola, 1979), *Iqbal* (D'Adamo, 2001), *Friends from the Other Side* (Anzaldúa, 1987), and *Felita* (Mohr, 1979).

This focus on the intensive reading of a few books to think deeply and critically, balances the extensive reading of many books. The books chosen by a teacher for intensive reading have multiple layers of meaning, and challenge readers to linger longer over ideas, words, characterizations, setting descriptions, and relationships among literary forms and themes (Sumara, 2002). Books such as *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate* (Kelly, 2009) and *Fox* (Wild, 2001) invite social interaction and discussion as readers need others to think with as they struggle with interpretation and understanding. Because the focus is on children's thinking and dialogue, the literature may need to be read aloud to facilitate clarity and questioning during reading. Sipe (2008) found that the majority of young children's conversational turns occur *during* the reading of the book. He argues that expecting children to save their responses until the story is finished imposes an adult view of response that may not be productive for young children whose responses are often *of* the moment and *in* the moment.

Children may also engage with literature as part of a thematic study or inquiry within content areas, such as math, science, and social studies. They read critically to compare information and issues across these books and to learn facts about the topic as well as to consider conceptual issues. Literature becomes a tool for understanding the world and considering broader social and scientific issues as well as a means of facilitating children's interest in a topic. Sandy Kaser (2001) used fiction and nonfiction literature with fifth graders within a study of astronomy to

explore conceptual understandings of "space," to examine a range of cultural theories about stars, and to support student inquiries into scientific issues and questions, as well as to read and discuss science fiction in literature circles.

Reading deeply to transform understanding focuses on collaborative problem-posing as teachers and students struggle together to identify and explore the issues they find significant within a text. This collaborative problem-posing and problem-solving balances the guided inquiry of strategic reading where teachers are the problem-posers and the personal inquiry of independent reading where students take on the role of problem-poser. These engagements and purposes for reading are connected by the belief that the reading curriculum should not be delivered *to* students but constructed *with* students as they engage in wondering and seeking insights into their own literacy processes and literary experiences.

Reading Education as a Political Act

Reading education has been one of the most controversial and contested areas of international debate among both educators and politicians. McCulloch (2007) argues that disagreements about teaching reading "swirl around and between rival camps and interests" to establish political narratives and alliances that form the basis for the power that can "undermine and challenge public policy directions and even entire governments" (p. ix). The intense debate over literacy has led to the imposition of one-size-fits-all models of national literacy standards and high stakes testing through legislation and policy initiatives such as the National Literacy Strategy in England, No Child Left Behind and Reading First in the United States, and the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australia. These initiatives and public debates over reading standards have shaped the political environments that are now highly receptive to centralized and prescriptive approaches to reading education—especially in elementary and primary schools.

These public debates and government initiatives have positioned teachers as objects of policy directives, rather than as active co-constructors of curriculum for their students. Ylimaki and McClain (2007) state that the "reading wars" have been contested within the political arena and not classrooms, and expressed through punitive legislation aimed at controlling teachers. Teachers are denied agency in the teaching process beyond selecting from approved instructional practices and packaged reading programs produced by approved textbook companies. At best, teachers and students are engaged as problem-solvers in their use of these materials, but not as problem-posers who inquire into tensions that are significant to their lives within the world or as literacy learners.

The politicized nature of decisions about the teaching of reading has created an ever-changing search for and imposition of single silver bullet solutions to the

challenges of teaching literacy. The solution changes as governments, politicians, and policy makers move in and out of office and public approval but the focus on quick, easy solutions that can be imposed on schools and teachers remains constant. Soler (2007) argues that this emphasis on solutions reflects a shift from a discourse of liberal humanism in schooling toward a discourse of management based in “a view of the individual as a subject to govern and/or be governed” (p. 43). Child-centered views in elementary schools have been replaced with technocratic views that stress basic skills and prescribed methods and approaches to teaching. Indeed, the current national debates on literacy are not even how best to teach reading, but how best to teach phonics (Hall, 2007).

Polarities and oversimplification have won out over the realities and complexities of teaching reading in ways that are motivating, substantive, and relevant. And literacy research has been characterized as negative, inconsistent, and irrelevant for informing literacy instruction. Although literacy researchers, as social scientists, value debate, dialogue, critique, and multiple viewpoints across questions and directions for change, these cornerstone practices of well-developed research are dismissed because they cannot provide clear, simple solutions.

Since literature-based approaches are typically viewed as child-centered and as located within liberal discourse, literature is often not included in these discussions and is viewed as a mere accessory to children’s learning and development. In addition, from an economic standpoint, the publishers of large textbook literacy programs and reading schemes have much to gain from the imposition of prescriptive approaches on schools and so maintain strong lobbyist positions (Shannon, 2007). Reading literature in elementary classrooms does not meet the political criteria of providing easy solutions to literacy instruction or of supporting large corporate efforts to maintain their positions in the school markets. The belief that children learn best in holistic contexts that strive to preserve the authenticity of materials and encourage inquiry is under attack or has been dismissed in many parts of the world, and many policy makers now view reading literature as a supplementary activity in elementary schools.

Conclusion

An inquiry stance to literature and curriculum invites children to make meaning of texts in personally and culturally significant ways to facilitate learning and to develop lifelong reading attitudes and habits. Children gain a sense of possibility for their lives and that of the society in which they live along with the ability to consider others’ perspectives and needs. Engagement with literature thus allows them to develop their own voices and, at the same time, go beyond self-interest to an awareness of broader human consequences. An inquiry stance encourages this engagement through focusing on children as problem-posers who

seek out the questions that are significant in their lives and world, as well as problem-solvers who investigate those problems to reach new understandings, take action, and pose more complex questions and problems.

Elementary educators value the role of story in children’s lives and the ways in which children use story to construct their understandings of themselves and their world. This belief in the power of story as inquiry, however, has often focused on how to *use* literature to support the teaching of literacy and content, rather than on also valuing literature as a way of thinking and re-visioning life. In addition, many elementary educators are struggling with the politicization of reading instruction to the point that children are no longer able to meaningfully engage with literature. Research that investigates the complex roles literature can play within elementary classrooms and that challenges the current politicization of reading policies has tremendous potential for opening new possibilities for how literature is read within elementary contexts.

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