

This article is the sixth in a [series drawn from work in the *Handbook of Reading Research: Volume III* \(Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000\)](#). In the coming months, *Reading Online* will publish additional chapter summaries from the book, prepared by the chapter authors.

Research on Children's Literature

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Both interest in and research on children's literature grew during the literature-based curriculum movement that took place in many countries during the 1980s and 1990s. More and more children's books were being published, and they became available to teachers and students in elementary classrooms. The research community responded with renewed interest in examining children's literature, how children respond to the books they read and hear, and how children's literature is used in the classroom. As this research proliferated, so, too, did increasingly sophisticated methodologies, more complicated theoretical arguments, and more complex questions.

Research in children's literature reflects the diversity in the field. It is grounded in our understanding of the transactional nature of literary response ([Rosenblatt 1978, 1995](#)), our view of reading ([Pearson, 1986](#)) and learning ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)), and the influence of contexts on the nature of the reading transaction ([Beach, 1993](#)). Many scholars focus on text, exploring it through literary or content analyses from a variety of theoretical stances, such as critical theory or feminist theory. Others are concerned with how children read and respond to various books, what children like to read, or the effects of children's literature on its readers. Still other scholars explore the contexts that support children's engagement with literature.

In this article we define research in children's literature as any systematic inquiry into the nature of children's literature, the developing interests and literary understandings of its readers, and the implications of literary study in classrooms.

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[Research on Text](#) | [Research on Child Readers](#) | [Contexts That Support Engagement](#) | [Where Do We Go?](#) | [References](#)

Research on Text

There are two broad strands of research on text: those studies that examine texts or genres to describe what authors do, or literary analyses; and those that examine what texts are about, or content analyses.

Content analyses in children's literature research reflect the interests of the times. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, many researchers examined the presence and image of African Americans in children's books published in the United States (see, e.g., [Broderick, 1973](#); [Larrick, 1965](#)). More recent research on children's literature as text has been informed by more complex theoretical positions and more extensive qualitative research methodologies. Current studies are often based on an understanding of how texts are nested in the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are both created and read. Studies explore gender, culture, or other social issues, often through the lens of critical theory.

Literary analyses consider children's literature as an object of literary criticism and analysis. This type of research has increased steadily since 1970 ([Beckett, 1997](#)), focuses on illustration, genre, or style, and reflects a variety of perspectives ranging from structuralist criticism, archetypal criticism, and narrative theory to feminist and critical theory, historical criticism, and reader-response criticism. Most of these studies rely on a formalist, close reading of children's texts in order to examine literary and artistic devices within them, across an author's work, or within a genre or subgenre. With the exception of reader-response criticism, most literary analyses ignore the reader, assuming that meaning, however defined and analyzed, lies in the text itself. The reader, however, is the second major strand of research in children's literature.

[Back to menu](#)

Research on Children Reading Children's Literature

Children, the primary readers of children's literature, are the focus of a rapidly increasing number of studies. Early research consisted of preference and interest studies, with research on children's responses beginning in the 1980s.

Broad consistencies and individual differences marked a variety of early studies of children's interests and preferences. For example, children tend to like narrative forms with lively action, humor, and nonsense ([Purves & Beach, 1972](#)), and reading interests of boys and girls diverge in upper elementary school ([Landy, 1977](#); [Lynch-Brown, 1977](#)). Over the years, more details have been added to these broad patterns identified in the early research. That, plus an understanding that preference and interest are highly individual phenomena that change from reader to reader and book to book but are embedded in sociocultural norms and expectations, have complicated the earlier, simplistic notions of preference and interest ([Dressman, 1997a, 1997b](#) [[online document](#)]; [Summers & Lukasevich, 1983](#)).

How children respond to literature has also become a more complex phenomenon to study as an increasing number of researchers have attempted to describe this process. [Stephens \(1992\)](#) argued that children's literature is permeated by social and ethical ideologies, and researchers are beginning to explore what happens when the ideologies of the text meet the ideologies of a reader.

The notion of resistance is at the center of some of the most exciting contemporary studies of response ([Beach, 1997](#); [Enciso, 1997](#); [Rogers, 1997](#)). Recent studies by [McGinley and Kamberelis \(1996\)](#); [McGinley, Kamberelis, Mahoney, Madigan, Rybicki, & Oliver, 1997](#)) have sought to describe how literature influences the attitudes and values of its readers. This research, influenced by narrative and transactional theory and embedded within a social-constructivist notion of reading in classrooms, reaches beyond the realm of reader response, encompasses cultural and social issues, and is thoroughly grounded in the classroom. This reflects the ever-increasing awareness of the complexity of understanding readers, the texts they read, and the contexts in which they read.

[Back to menu](#)

Contexts That Support Children's Engagement with Literature

Investigation of the contexts that support children's engagement with literature is the third major strand of research on children's literature. This strand includes inquiries about literary studies in the classroom, effects of teachers reading aloud from children's books, and teacher beliefs and practices regarding children's literature.

Early research pointed out that reading children's literature influences children's attitudes toward reading and increases their knowledge of the world and of text patterns. [Morrow and Gambrell \(2000\)](#) and [Gavelek, Raphael, Biondo, and Wang \(2000\)](#) discuss current studies of the use of literature in the classroom. Here we review studies of literary instruction, reading aloud, discussing literature, and teacher beliefs and practices.

Most research on literary instruction has, like the instruction itself, focused on children's ability to recognize literary elements and to use these elements in their discussions and writing. Research by [Lehr \(1988\)](#) has indicated that the use of quality children's literature in the classroom increases the likelihood of students being able to identify literary elements such as theme. Reading children's literature also increases the likelihood that students will use literary elements in their writing ([Dressel, 1990](#); [Lancia, 1997](#)) and literary registers in their discussion and retellings ([Hade, 1988](#); [Pappas & Brown, 1987](#)).

Extensive research and theory support the use of read-alouds of children's literature to prepare students for literacy and to develop literacy skills, interest in reading, language development, reading achievement, and opportunities for social interaction (see [Galda & Cullinan, 1991](#), for a review of this research). Further research indicates that children enjoy being read to ([Mendoza, 1985](#)), but how books are read and what is read influences both children's literacy and literary development.

Research on reading aloud looks closely at factors that influence the oral presentation of literature, focusing on group size, frequency of read-alouds, genre and style of text, and reading style. For instance, children read to one on one or in small groups are much more likely to engage in active discussion of the texts during and after the reading ([Klesius & Griffith, 1996](#); [Morrow, 1988, 1990](#); [Morrow & Smith, 1990](#)). When books are read and reread, students' reading fluency develops ([Dowhower, 1987](#); [Rasinski, 1990](#)) and their talk about text improves in form and focus ([Martinez & Roser, 1985](#); Morrow, 1988). There is some evidence that when series of books are read to children there are positive effects on decoding, reading comprehension, and story retelling ([Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1986](#); [Rosenhouse, Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1997](#)), and the reading aloud of informational text may increase children's intertextual connections ([Oyler & Barry, 1996](#)). Finally, storybook reading style can vary ([Dickinson & Keebler, 1989](#)), with [Martinez and Teale \(1993\)](#) suggesting that it does so along three axes: focus of teacher talk, information shared during reading, and strategies used by the teacher.

Discussion is probably the single most frequent venue for children to respond to what they are

reading and hearing. Discussion is an excellent activity for helping students construct meaning ([Eeds & Wells, 1989](#)), but recent research has underscored the importance of the structure of those discussions. It is clear that students who are left to wander into discussion unaided, untrained, and unarmed might as well sit alone and ponder the meaning of their text ([Wollman-Bonilla, 1994](#)). How discussions of reading are structured depends on who, what, and why: who controls the discussion, what type of book is being discussed, and why is discussion an engaging social interaction for the students.

How discussions are structured reflects the beliefs and practices of the classroom teacher. How a teacher views a children's book and the activities that surround it is not necessarily how the students view the same. Teachers, however, seem generally enthusiastic about incorporating children's literature into their curriculum ([Lehman, Freeman, & Allen, 1994](#); [Scharer, Freeman, Lehman, & Allen, 1993](#)). Unfortunately, most do so by using literature to teach a skill in reading, writing, science, social studies, or other curricular area; rarely do teachers explore the literature itself as a work of art ([Allen, Freeman, Lehman, & Scharer, 1995](#); [Johnston, Guice, Baker, Malone, & Michelson, 1995](#)).

Recent research on contexts that support children's engagement with literature points to the complexity of examining those contexts. What is read, how it is read, whether and how it is discussed, and the teacher's beliefs about reading, learning, and literature all influence the experience of a child with a text.

[Back to menu](#)

Where Do We Go From Here?

We began this summary with a description of the multidisciplinary nature of children's literature as a field of study and of research in children's literature as encompassing a diverse set of methodologies and theoretical perspectives. As interest in children's literature has grown, the scope of research in children's literature has enlarged as well; it now is an integral part of many reading programs and, as such, has become enmeshed in the greater body of reading research. The ubiquity of children's literature is at once its strength and its weakness. Literature is present in many studies of literature-based classrooms or of reading comprehension, but it is often not attended to. Comprehension is of text rather than particular text; literature-based instruction is seen as a set of generic strategies rather than related to particular readers and particular texts. Literature is present, but often treated as invisible.

Yet it is those studies that explore particular readers and particular texts in particular contexts that are most exciting and enlightening. Whether a textual analysis, a study of response, or a study of literary instruction, research that explores the complexities of children reading books is the research that informs us. We need more studies that are grounded in theory, whether it be sociocultural, transactional, narrative, or critical, and that use articulated strategies for a close and careful analysis. We need more studies that cross the boundaries among us, that allow us to speak to one another across schools of library science, colleges of education, and departments of English. Today we have many ways of looking at the complex issues that surround children's literature. Scholarship can benefit from hearing from multiple, informed voices.

[Back to menu](#)

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[Back](#)

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[Back](#)

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[Back](#)

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[Back](#)

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[Back](#)

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[Back](#)

[Back to menu](#)

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[Back to top](#)

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