

Children's Literature in Teacher-Preparation Programs

An invited contribution

[Allison K. Hoewisch](#)

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For decades, research has concluded that children's books not only provide great pleasure to readers, but they can also play a significant role in children's academic, social, and literacy success. In [1974](#), [Sostarich](#) reported that sixth-grade children who had been read to from an early age developed into better readers and valued reading more than did sixth graders who had not been read to, and they expected to continue reading throughout their lives. Others have determined that the more time children spend reading literature, the better their reading and writing abilities become (see, e.g., [Cohen, 1968](#); [Fox & Allen, 1983](#); [Hepler & Hickman, 1982](#); [Loban, 1963](#)). Significant increases have been found in young children's comprehension and vocabulary skills (Cohen), phonological production ([Irwin, 1960](#)), complexity of sentence structure ([Cazden, 1965](#)), concept of story structure ([Applebee, 1978](#)) and of expository text structure ([Pappas & Brown, 1987](#)), and understanding of interactional patterns ([Snow & Goldfield, 1983](#)) as a result of their being read to from an early age, either at home or in school. Children who have access to literature and stories in their homes have been found to learn to read more quickly, read more fluently, and have better attitudes toward reading ([Clark, 1976](#); [Durkin, 1966](#); [Thorndike, 1973](#); [Wells, 1986](#)). Teachers who provide time for sustained silent reading, who share books and highlight book authors with children during the school day, positively influence those children's reading outside of school ([Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988](#)). And the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(1996; online document\)](#) reported that children who frequently read for enjoyment out of school are better readers.

The value of children's literature to children's literacy development cannot be contested. Because children's literature is so valuable to children, it should also be valuable to the people responsible for educating them -- their teachers. And so it's unfortunate that something that can play such a critical role in children's lives is often relegated to a less than critical role in teacher education.

This commentary discusses three crucial issues surrounding the position of children's literature in teacher-preparation programs:

- Respect for children's literature content in teacher education
- The value of children's literature as a powerful educational tool
- Children's literature as an important literary form

Respect

An online check of teacher-education programs in the United States and the courses required for teacher certification at state and private universities across the country reveals that some institutions have chosen to place responsibility for children's literature courses on community colleges or to give them "general education" status, with the result that they are not offered within teacher-preparation programs. Other universities have eliminated stand-alone children's literature courses from teacher education, integrating them instead into existing methods courses, including those for content area

subjects such as science or math. In many teacher-education settings, children's literature is given only a 1- to 2-credit hour schedule or is attached to a 1- to 2-hour reading methods course to make a convenient 3-credit hour block.

While a host of complex -- or even simple -- reasons may be responsible for the current low status of children's literature courses in teacher-education programs, it is reasonable to assume that what underlies these scenarios, in many cases, is a lack of respect for the importance of children's literature to teacher education and children's education.

Consider this: When aspiring teachers enroll in children's literature courses prior to beginning their teacher training, as they do when such courses are only offered outside of the teacher-preparation program, their professional understanding of children's literature takes shape without the supportive structure of developmental courses such as educational foundations or child psychology, or of classroom field experiences with children and teachers. They have yet to develop a framework that might help them reflect on the importance of literature in children's lives and in educational settings.

[Dewey \(1938\)](#) and [Schon \(1983\)](#) insist that teachers must reflect in action in order to examine critically any educational content and theory. [Posner \(1996\)](#) states that "the foundations of education help us raise questions and supply concepts for thinking about our own teaching practices" (p. 67). [Shulman \(1986\)](#) explains that in order to be thoughtful and deliberate problem solvers teachers require a set of guiding theoretical principles on which to base instructional decisions. [Huck, Hepler, Hickman, and Kiefer \(1997\)](#) state, "Adults who are responsible for children's reading need to be aware of child development and learning theory" (p. 51). Preservice teachers develop their guiding set of theoretical principles through experiences in the early stages of their teacher preparation. They should not be enrolled in children's literature courses before they have some understanding of the possible educational circumstances in which literature might be used with children.

This is a serious issue for teacher educators who know and love children's literature. We must demand that children's literature courses be offered within teacher-preparation programs. Furthermore, we must require that students master the appropriate prerequisite content prior to enrolling in such courses. Without a relevant or meaningful context for thinking about the value of children's literature, a course on children's literature becomes just a class where students have to read a lot of kids' books. It's one thing to ask adults simply to read about a poor peddler who shakes his fist at mischievous monkeys; it's another thing entirely for them to reflect on how *Caps for Sale* might be used to capitalize on opportunities for emergent literacy learning offered by the repeated phrases, to stimulate children to think about the story's subtle irony, to appreciate the humor the monkeys' unexpected imitation of the peddler generates, or to encourage children to dramatize the story's events. [Huck et al. \(1997\)](#) explain that "to have a successful literature program, teachers and librarians must know books well, but that is only half the task. It is also necessary to understand children..." (p. 39).

So what about the suggestion to keep children's literature firmly grounded in teacher-preparation programs, but to integrate its content with subject area methods courses? Many leaders in science education (e.g., [Sasche, 1989](#); [Shymansky & Kyle, 1988](#)), social studies ([Parker, 1989](#)), and math ([Dossey, 1989](#); [Richards, 1990](#)) agree that thematic or interdisciplinary teaching is necessary to cultivate greater student learning in these subject areas. Interdisciplinary instruction is part of the curriculum in more and more elementary and middle schools and has been proven effective for assisting learners in making connections across subject areas ([Tchudi, 1991](#); [Tchudi, 1994](#)).

Some might wonder whether this is really a serious issue for those who know and love children's literature, but matters of subject area turf and territory are certainly relevant in this discussion. If faced with the need to compromise in order to effectively integrate subject area content and children's literature content, many instructors will want to cling to their areas of interest and expertise in their courses. This makes sense. With only so much time to go around in teacher-certification programs, instructors in the various disciplines feel they have to guard against losing the precious few credit hours

they are allotted. For an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum to work anywhere, the faculty who teach the various disciplines have to talk to one another, make plans together, and teach cooperatively, if not collaboratively. Some faculty are willing to do this, but it usually takes extra commitment, patience, energy, and willingness to compromise -- things rarely rewarded by merit pay, benefits, or promotions.

But the real issue for children's literature experts is not whether an interdisciplinary curriculum is beneficial, or even whether it can be accomplished effectively in university settings. The real issue is respect for children's literature -- whether the valuable content of children's literature can be maintained if it is integrated with other courses. Consider this: Integrating children's literature courses (or most any course) would call for dramatic changes to traditional teacher-training programs. Most subject area experts in higher education have such specialized knowledge that asking them to teach the content in their discipline as well as content in children's literature is not appropriate or sensible. Likewise, asking children's literature experts to juggle science, math, social studies -- and, in some cases, reading -- content doesn't work either. Most can't do it -- at least not well. Moreover, there is no guarantee that children's literature content would get the time or attention it deserves and requires by being meted out into separate methods courses.

Additionally, the mere act of apportioning bits and pieces of children's literature content here and there among methods courses implies a lack of respect for children's literature. No one in higher education is proposing to slice up the math methods courses and integrate math content into literacy and literature courses. Integrating children's literature content gives the unfortunate impression that it is not valuable enough to the education of teachers and children to warrant a separate 3-credit hour course designation. Many already hold a low opinion of "kiddie lit," and combining children's literature with subject area methods courses may serve to reinforce these negative attitudes regarding the actual and impressive value of children's books to children's lives.

Debates about respect for children's literature and course configuration, however, are practically irrelevant if the children's literature course itself has little to do with substantive content. Is children's literature really worth all the fuss and bother if all that preservice teachers have at the end of the course is an annotated bibliography? Does generating reports on a handful of Curious George books and building shoebox dioramas based on *Little House on the Prairie* really deserve respect or require 2 or 3 hours of university or college credit -- or even part of a single credit? The real issue related to children's literature, then, is not just its configuration in a teacher-training program, but the particular content associated with children's literature courses in those programs.

Educational Value

To be considered substantive, the content of children's literature courses must include two critical elements. One is educational: Children's literature must be seen as a significant educational tool. The other is literary: Children's literature is a valuable, beautiful, and impressive part of literary history and as such is certainly worthy of study and analysis at the university level.

The distinct educational value of children's literature to children's lives has been well documented over the years. I think teacher educators would find it difficult to identify the same level of research support to suggest that any other subject or content area so thoroughly enhances the literacy and academic lives of children. Preservice teachers need exposure to the educational benefits of children's literature and to ways of effectively sharing literature with their students. The course content I feel is necessary for this to happen must include the following elements:

- History of the discipline
- Opportunity to interact with the relevant instructional materials
- Pedagogical principles
- Field experience

For many, this might seem like an obvious list for most any course in teacher training. We might look at our current children's literature content to see whether these elements are present. They are, aren't they? We all know that the history of children's literature is being taught -- for goodness sake, it's usually the very first chapter in the required textbook. And of course preservice teachers have the opportunity to interact with books -- they're required to read all the award-winners from the past decade, more or less, in 16 weeks. And students obviously deal with pedagogical issues when they develop that good old thematic unit using children's books as the basis. During their capstone field experience, student teaching, preservice teachers can implement their literature-based units with children (unless, of course, their topic was apples and they wind up teaching in the spring when butterflies are the theme).

Sadly, children's literature hardly becomes educationally worthy when the content associated with it looks this shallow. The critical issue for instructors of children's literature then becomes how effectively the elements of history, opportunity, pedagogy, and field experience are being dealt with currently in our courses. Are preservice teachers really learning enough about children's literature to capitalize on its educational benefits with children? My experience tells me no. I have observed enough children's literature courses, attended sufficient International Reading Association presentations, and read and reviewed a large enough variety of articles and books related to the classroom use of children's literature to know that many are still dealing with children's literature in trite, stale, and educationally empty ways. How many pots of pasta will first graders be forced to cook after reading *Strega Nona* before we ask ourselves, "Why?" Why are they making pots of pasta? What are the educational benefits? Is cooking pasta the real lesson from *Strega Nona* that we ought to be highlighting with our students?

Preservice teachers cannot be expected to know how to use children's literature as a purposeful and meaningful educational tool unless we teach them well. Surely preservice teachers must do more than deal with the history of children's literature as a simple timeline of events from the invention of the printing press to the proliferation of paperbacks in discount stores. Reading 30 or 100 or even 1000 children's books during a semester only to jot down the characters, setting, and plot on index cards will probably not influence preservice teachers' instructional pedagogy in ways we intend and in ways they need. Likewise, having preservice teachers listen to the children's literature instructor spout off recent winners of the Caldecott and Newbery medals so they can spout them back later for the final exam does little to promote the type of thinking and reflection we want them to develop.

History. Obviously, there is a great deal for preservice teachers to learn about children's literature that is educationally valuable and academically rigorous. For example, preservice teachers do need to learn that the history and evolution of children's literature over four centuries -- from stories heavily laden with didactic moral lessons to adventure stories and so on -- have paralleled changes in society, politics, and education. They need to understand that children's books published today are not exactly like the stories they read as children, but that there are constant classics that each generation enjoys.

Preservice teachers must therefore be encouraged to analyze (not memorize) society's important influences on historic literary milestones, to examine the impact of art, music, science, politics -- and, of course, education. They need to thoughtfully weigh, both in a historic and an educational context, the range of characters, themes, and perspectives presented in literature for children over time. For example, they need to understand the repercussions of the 1962 publication of [The Snowy Day](#), before which there had been few children's stories written and illustrated with African American characters. They should evaluate the current availability of books that represent minorities and diverse perspectives. They should consider whether [Cinderella](#) is blatantly sexist or a timeless classic. They need to gain perspective about the differences between the lessons subtly shared within the plots of the [Peter Rabbit](#) tales and those didactically imparted in the resolutions of the Berenstain Bears books. Preservice teachers should develop a sense of the influences on the historic progression of illustrators, from [Greenaway](#) to [Gag](#) to [Gammell](#). They should be having serious discussions about the influence of censorship, from the banning of Shakespeare in 1864 to present-day parental objections to [Lois Lowry's](#)

[The Giver](#) ([Donelsson & Nilsen, 1997](#)). And they need to be acquainted with the authors, illustrators, and others (such as educators, curriculum designers, [publishers](#), and censors) who influence children's literature and how it is used in school settings.

Opportunity. Preservice teachers can understand and appreciate this history more effectively, however, as they have the opportunity to select, read, and analyze a wide variety of literature (and relevant technology and related resources) for themselves. Considering the number of children's books from which to choose, particular communities' beliefs about censorship, and the level of demand that literature be used to teach, preservice teachers must learn to distinguish which are the best and most appropriate books to share with their future students. And they really must come to this knowledge themselves. Are the tasteless, gruesome [R.L. Stine](#) books to be left on the shelf? Or is there some merit in a book that reluctant readers can't wait to get their hands on? Instructors of children's literature content can either didactically provide their students with lists of "good" and "bad" literature, or they can provide preservice teachers with supportive opportunities to select, read, and analyze literature in order to construct criteria for themselves about how to judge what is great literature for sharing with children.

[Rosenblatt's \(1976\)](#) transactional view of reading supports this need. As readers interact with stories, they find personal and significant ways to relate to characters, settings, and conflicts. "A friend or teacher telling you about a book is not an act of reading -- engagement -- for you, nor is reading a summary an act of experiencing the text...the range of possible readings of a given text is potentially infinite considering the variety of personalities and the breadth of experiences among readers" ([Karolides, 1997](#), pp. 9-10). This changes the role of the instructor from a lecturer to a collaborator. Karolides asserts that "directly or indirectly, the teacher or the textbook's questions and instructions can markedly affect the stance that operates in student transactions [with literature]. Key ingredients are classroom atmosphere and teacher's expectations" (p. 15).

As a collaborator, the role of the children's literature instructor can be to create a classroom atmosphere that encourages and values preservice teachers' choice of readings from a wide range of genres, authors, and illustrators, past and present. [Boyd-Batstone \(1997\)](#) explains that "part of the process of opening up the classroom to self-selection is trusting that students will follow a natural curiosity and impulse. This impulse is at the discretion of the student.... Allowing for students to pursue their interest moves the student from being a passive recipient of knowledge to an active, self-directed learner" (p. 193).

In addition to encouraging students to select a variety of readings, instructors of children's literature must also set high expectations for learning about and analyzing those selections. Analysis of literature is a far deeper and far more meaningful activity than trading opinions about which Eric Carle book has the cutest illustrations. [Allen \(1997\)](#) explains that analysis helps readers "become aware of the more sophisticated attributes of books, such as authors' writing styles" (p. 56) or an illustrator's artistic choices. An effective way to promote sophisticated analysis is through small-group literature discussions (Allen; [Peterson & Eeds, 1990](#); [Pierce & Gilles, 1993](#); [Rosenblatt, 1983](#)). [Lauritzen and Jaeger \(1997\)](#) explain "since stories can be approached from a variety of intellectual and developmental levels, everyone has the opportunity to find a measure of delight...to stretch their minds, and to inquire and explore the possibilities" (p. 42). Allen found that small-group discussions helped readers to "fully share, examine, and clarify their responses to literature" (p. 55), "invited personal responses, and encouraged sophisticated literary meaning making" (p. 67). When readers share what they have gleaned from a text they help others see dimensions of characters and plots they might not have noticed alone. They begin to understand the value of certain themes, styles, and illustrations, and come to respect others' perspectives ([Eeds & Wells, 1989](#)).

Pedagogy. Knowing which books to choose is crucial for preservice teachers, but so is knowing how to use them most effectively with students, particularly in schools moving to more literature-based and interdisciplinary curricula. Sound pedagogy tells us that children's literature cannot be used as a simple, trendy device for organizing instruction, offered as the revolutionary replacement for textbooks or

curriculum guides. We have to ask ourselves whether having preservice teachers dress up like Mrs. Frizzle so they can rattle off oral reports on a series of Magic School Bus books to their peers really prepares them for the serious instructional task of selecting books and planning literature-based lessons for their students. We have to ask ourselves whether activities unrelated to school curriculum standards reinforce the notion that children's literature is not a serious and powerful educational tool.

Unfortunately, teacher educators must battle these and other powerful influences on preservice teachers' pedagogical beliefs. [Lortie \(1975\)](#) states that often much of what preservice teachers believe to be most educationally effective is learned in the 13 or so years of schooling they have prior to their teacher training. For most preservice teachers, this did not include participation in literature-based or interdisciplinary teaching and learning. In fact, today's preservice teachers probably experienced mostly textbook-driven and compartmentalized curricula. A decade ago, [Tyson and Woodward \(1989\)](#) found that "textbooks structure from 75-90 percent of classroom instruction. In most subject areas, textbooks define the scope and sequence of instruction, and the accompanying teacher guides provide a road map from which few teachers make major detours" (p. 14). And perhaps most distressing, the present-day teacher resource market is being flooded by thousands of attractively packaged workbooks masquerading as literature-based teaching tools. Many are either skill and drill with literature instead of basals, or encourage only nonacademic postreading activities like cooking pasta or making quilts.

But rather than develop a long list of "best practices" for using literature as an effective educational tool or for integrating instruction (there are many), I'd like to suggest that good teaching comes after development of a theoretical basis for instructional decisions ([Kagan, 1992](#); [Lortie, 1975](#)). [Posner \(1996\)](#) states that in order to develop a theory base, preservice teachers must have the opportunity to reflect on actual experiences, otherwise they will "rely on routine behavior...guided more by impulse, tradition, and authority than by reflection" (p. 21). The role of the children's literature instructor, then, is to provide first-hand opportunities to select, read, and analyze children's literature and relevant resources, as I have already suggested. Lectures and textbook readings can provide preservice teachers with an important foundation of information about children's literature. However, actual experiences with children's literature and suitable field experiences using literature in education settings are likewise critical for developing a pedagogical theory base for instructional decision making.

Field experiences. The difficulty in presenting preservice teachers with opportunities to read, analyze, and select children's books and examine the relevant resources to learn pedagogical principles that may be new or unfamiliar to them is that their beliefs may be difficult to change unless they are able actually to experience the success of the methods with children ([Campoy, 1998](#); [Hoewisch, 1998a](#); [Kagan, 1992](#); [Lortie, 1975](#); [Richardson, 1986](#); [Richardson-Koehler, 1988](#)). Since convincing teachers what works and what doesn't is a matter of experience and experimentation, preservice teachers must have the chance to test and reflect on the instructional methods that they hear and read about in courses ([Campoy](#); [Hoewisch, 1998b](#); [Posner, 1996](#); [Schon, 1983](#)). And if we really believe children's literature is as valuable to children as the research says it is, preservice teachers must have this chance long before student teaching. Children's literature courses must be designed to provide preservice teachers with field experiences in classrooms with children using children's literature and complimentary instructional methods even as they are learning about children's literature.

While most would agree that field experiences are a critical component of teacher training, there are those -- including instructors and students -- who believe they are not a *convenient* component. Preservice teachers have jobs, families, and other commitments outside of their teacher-preparation responsibilities that can complicate scheduling of appropriate field experiences. Finding, scheduling, placing, and then supervising field experiences for preservice teachers can also become a logistical nightmare for the individual instructor -- especially if more than one school or educational setting is needed to support a large number of preservice teachers.

However, for every reasonable problem associated with attaching field experiences to children's literature or any teacher-education course, there is at least one solution. For example, students who

take evening-only programs, field experiences can be arranged with after-school clubs, scouting organizations, library programs, preschools that operate before and after the traditional work day, and child-care centers attended by school-age children before and after the school day. Instructors can build relationships with schools that have a commitment to improving literacy and are willing to partner with the university so that schedules, goals, and even staff development are created to include preservice teachers and children's literature course components. In this way, cooperating classroom teachers and building administrators, and even parents of students in the school, can participate in the supervision of the preservice teachers' field experiences along with the course instructor. Certainly, a host of other solutions and innovations can satisfy logistical concerns or objections to field experiences for preservice teachers. The real issue here is the undeniable benefit of having preservice teachers participate in authentic experiences with children and books. The challenge is to establish the best sort of field experiences for preservice teachers in order that they become more reflective about the books they share and the instructional methods they implement with children.

I would suggest that providing preservice teachers with opportunities simply to read aloud to children is one of the best sorts of field experience in a children's literature course. Preservice teachers should have the opportunity to determine through personal experience how best to hold a book so 28 kindergartners can see the illustrations. They should experiment with seating arrangements to consider whether fifth graders can listen while lounging on bean-bag chairs. And they should be responsible for selecting literature they believe is appropriate, so that when their students yawn in apathy they will seriously consider why.

Preservice teachers should also go into the field to talk to kids, teachers, parents, and librarians about children's literature. They can determine for themselves that not all public or even school libraries and librarians are created equal. They can discover how much or how little children actually care about certain authors, illustrators, and stories. They can investigate the extent to which classroom teachers and parents find literature helpful in supporting children's learning and perhaps share their own insights about its value.

And preservice teachers should implement literature-based lessons related to reading in content areas. In this way they can discover that not all books that refer to or illustrate numbers are useful for teaching math. Or they can determine that some of the best books to support science learning are actually fictional accounts of flying frogs, such as *Tuesday*, in which concepts like gravity and physics can be explored. And they can consider how best to capitalize on children's strong emotional responses to *Faithful Elephants*, *The Endless Steppe*, and *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* in order to assist them in examining the underlying historical causes and effects of and perspectives on World War II.

In addition, preservice teachers' experiences must be supported by opportunities to reflect on their level of success with certain books and seating arrangements, with children and lessons. Since "we do not actually learn from experience as much as we learn from reflecting on experience" (Posner, 1996, p. 21), preservice teachers must be encouraged to consider the significance of their instructional decisions. The unreflective teacher might give up on [The True Story of the Three Little Pigs](#) after it flops with children because he has not considered that they cannot possibly appreciate the book's rich irony without having heard the original *Three Little Pigs*. On the other hand, the preservice teacher who reflects on her suburban students' languid response to [Charlotte's Web](#) after the opening chapters might consider developing a concept map related to farming and rural life in order to activate schemata while building her students' vocabulary and interest in the topic.

Literary Issues

Although children's books have enormous potential as educational tools, there is far more to literature than its usefulness for teaching academic skills. Preservice teachers must understand that while Kevin Henkes' *The Purple Plastic Purse* is great to pair with a phonics lesson on the letter *p*, the author probably had a very different purpose in mind for readers and listeners. And while Mildred Taylor's *Roll*

of Thunder, Hear My Cry is an excellent choice for teachers who want to address social, historical, and even geographical issues related to the Civil Rights era with their students, the book's distinct characters, theme, and style affect readers far beyond the parameters of a social studies curriculum.

Children's literature instructors whose courses focus on "how to teach with trade books" do a disservice to preservice teachers, children, and children's literature. In a commentary about the role of literature in teaching phonics skills, [Trachtenburg \(1990\)](#) states that "if we wish to stimulate the imagination, provide stimulating language models, expose students to lucid discourse, and expand their cultural awareness, we need quality, meaningful literature" (p. 649). A third issue related to children's literature, then, is its literary value and how best to convey it.

According to C.S. Lewis, who wrote books for both children and adults, children's literature is a true literary art form. Picture storybooks are both literary and artistic art forms; as [Huck et al. \(1997\)](#) point out, "The picture storybook conveys its messages through two media, the art of illustrating and the art of writing" (p. 198). [Rosenblatt \(1976\)](#) explains the literary power of children's books, stating that "through the medium of words, the text brings into the reader's consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes" (p. 30).

Preservice teachers must be shown the aesthetic worth of children's worth and have opportunities to savor its literary value. They should be able to wallow in the wonder of naughty rabbits who steal vegetables from gardens and resourceful spiders who weave messages into webs. I have already suggested that instructors of children's literature should provide preservice teachers with opportunities to select, read, and analyze literature -- something that will promote their understanding of a book's educational benefits. This same opportunity can also provide them with literary satisfaction. [Britton \(1978\)](#) asserts that "a student should read more books with satisfaction...[and] he should read books with more satisfaction" (p. 110).

The nuances of meaning that preservice teachers derive from text can be enhanced by the adept instructor of children's literature, so as to highlight the significant aesthetic aspects of literature. Stories, poetry, and passages from literature selected by the instructor or by the students should be read aloud during class. The "heads down, eyes closed" technique as someone reads a chapter from a children's novel aloud might be the best way to encourage aesthetic awareness and appreciation of children's literature. [Huck et al. \(1997\)](#), [Pappas \(1993\)](#), and [Smith \(1979\)](#) note that children's books often include their very own brand of rich and sophisticated language, rhythm, and structure, different from the language we use to talk with one another. Hearing stories read aloud can assist listeners -- children or preservice teachers -- in grasping the differences among literary forms and functions, teach them to anticipate story patterns and endings, help motivate additional reading, and expand vocabulary.

I have already suggested that preservice teachers should have the opportunity to explore children's literature in small-group discussions, giving them a chance to explore a practice they can apply to their own future classrooms as well as encouraging insights about stories. Small-group discussions also provide a means for preservice teachers to enjoy the beauty of books as they share their insights about the literature they have read and hear and describe personal responses to it. [Allen \(1997\)](#) comments on a classroom designed this way: "Through their interchanges with each other and the teacher, the students mulled over and clarified their literary responses. Although they spent time simply retelling story events, they also shared interpretations and evaluated the author's choices" (p. 65).

Call to Action

Those who want to advocate for more meaningful children's literature content housed within rigorous children's literature courses must take action. We must stand up and shake a fist at the monkeys who've pilfered our caps. In order to retain, or in some cases regain, respect for children's literature, we must ask ourselves if the role of children's literature in our own teacher-preparation programs has evolved into something deserving of attention and respect by preservice teachers and by other teacher

educators, or whether it can be disregarded with a simple "tszst, tszst, tszst!"

While there are many possible ways of retaining or regaining respect for children's literature, an important consideration is its configuration within teacher-education programs. We must demand that the children's literature course be firmly grounded within the program. And we must be vigilant, as institutions of higher education and even state departments of education consider innovative and integrated course configurations, that the integrity of the children's literature content is maintained.

In addition, we must systematically and carefully review our children's literature course syllabi, the required assignments, the textbook emphases, and even students' attitudes about children's literature when they leave our courses. We need to examine whether our own instructional styles -- that of lecturer, collaborator, or something in between -- support or impede our students' knowledge, understanding, appreciation, and application of children's literature and instructional methods. We should thoughtfully analyze the actual benefits of employing the practices children's literature instructors have long employed, such as requiring preservice teachers to write some form or fashion of the traditional book report. We must critically scrutinize the real value of newer, popular practices in children's literature, such as the role of technology and the use of literature-based resource books for educating preservice teachers and children. We will need to confront the difficult, even controversial issues in our institution and in our courses, such as censorship or the role of field experiences. We should review our current children's literature course content and assignments in light of professional standards from the literary and literacy fields and research found in professional journals, as well as state guidelines and goals for educating children. And we must determine whether we have struck an effectual balance between the academic and the aesthetic benefits of children's literature with our students.

Assuredly, authors and illustrators are going to continue showering us with beautiful books and memorable stories. It is up to us to equip preservice teachers with the appropriate knowledge and tools to select and share the best children's literature with children. Our children's literature course configuration and content ought to promote preservice teachers' serious consideration of the role of children's literature as an educational tool, while highlighting the aesthetic worth of children's literature as a literary form. If the basis of our children's literature courses fails to leave our students with much more than that warm, fuzzy feeling one experiences after reading a Marcus Pfister story, we have not done our jobs.

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Author Information

Allison Hoewisch works with preservice and inservice classroom teachers in the areas of language arts, reading, and children's literature in the Division of Teaching and Learning at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (St. Louis, MO 63121, USA). Her research focuses on reflective practice, particularly as it is supported (or not) in teacher-preparation programs and schools, as well as on the role of children's literature to encourage reflective practice among teachers of reading. Allison can be reached by e-mail at AllisonH@umsl.edu.

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