

Informing Our Practice: Modernist, Transactional, and Critical Perspectives on Children’s Literature and Reading Instruction

Frank Serafini

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According to research reports, the amount of children’s literature published and its use in elementary classrooms have expanded exponentially during the past two decades ([Allington & Guice, 1997](#); [Cullinan, 1989](#); [Gambrell, 1992](#); [Harris, 1992](#)). The whole language and literature-based reading movements of the 1980s and 1990s fostered a burgeoning interest in children’s literature, unlike any seen previously in elementary reading education ([Goodman, 1986](#); [Weaver, 1990](#)). By the mid-1990s, children’s literature had assumed a prominent place in the elementary reading curriculum in the United States, as elsewhere ([Huck, 1996](#); [Smith, 1995](#)). Extensive collections of quality children’s literature began to appear in elementary classrooms, along with a proliferation of professional resources describing literature-based reading instruction ([Atwell, 1987](#); [Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 1998](#); [Peterson & Eeds, 1990](#); [Rogers, 1999](#); [Serafini, 2001b](#); [Short & Pierce, 1990](#)).

The neo-conservative backlash we currently find ourselves experiencing in the United States has resulted in changes in instructional approaches that include children’s literature in the elementary reading curriculum ([Taxel, 1999](#)). Responding to political pressures, elementary teachers frequently are forced to adopt instructional practices and commercial programs that focus on decoding and comprehension strategies designed to raise standardized test scores ([Putney, Green, Dixon, & Kelly, 1999](#), [online document](#)). In fact, many commercial publishers have advertised their reading programs based solely on their purported ability to increase test scores. With this shift in the political climate and the rapid expansion of high-stakes testing ([Kohn, 2000](#); [McGill-Franzen, 2000](#)), the role of children’s literature may be reduced to that of an instructional device used to teach children how to decode more effectively and to identify the main idea of a reading selection in order to secure higher scores on standardized tests.

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Children’s Literature in the Curriculum: Perspectives on Practice and Theory

Reading instructional practices that involve children's literature range from a "basalized" approach ([Shannon & Goodman, 1994](#)), in which literature is treated in the same manner as selections in a commercial anthology and instructional activities include scripted lessons, skills exercises, and predetermined-response questions, to "child-centered" approaches (Atwell, 1987), in which students and teachers select literature to read and to discuss in groups, and respond to the literature by drawing on the experiences they bring to the texts and the meanings they construct during reading (Serafini, 2001b).

Shifting from a basal reading program that includes excerpted children's literature to using authentic children's literature in instruction may not, however, reflect an underlying shift in theoretical perspective. I would argue that just because a teacher may move to using children's literature in the classroom, this does not mean that he or she is doing anything different than was done with the basal program. It is no longer enough to fill the classroom with high-quality books and read aloud one or two each day. Reading aloud and creating a literate environment are necessary but insufficient for implementing a literature-based approach to reading instruction. A shift in theoretical understandings needs to accompany this shift in instructional resources ([Walmsley, 1992](#)).

The ways in which children's literature is used in the elementary classroom are directly related to the teacher's definition of reading, her beliefs about how meaning and knowledge are constructed, the role of the reader in the act of reading, and the context of the reading event ([Levande, 1989](#)). Preservice and in-service teachers need to understand not only reading instructional practices, but also the theories that inform and support those practices. Without a substantial change in elementary teachers' theoretical perspectives concerning the roles that text, readers, and context play during the act of reading, there will be little or no change in the way that children's literature is used in the curriculum.

[McGee \(1992\)](#) suggests that in order for elementary teachers to implement a quality literature-based reading program and make a substantial shift in the way that children's literature is used in the curriculum, they must first make a parallel shift in the theoretical perspectives they use to ground their practice. Without this parallel shift, teachers may simply change the materials they use to teach reading, relegating children's literature to an instructional device in the service of higher test scores. In order to make a shift, however, one must first understand what the theoretical perspectives are and how they influence classroom practice.

Teacher educators and school administrators interested in incorporating literature in instructional frameworks are concerned that teachers may lack the appropriate preservice coursework and in-service professional development necessary for effective implementation of quality literature-based reading programs ([Gardner, 1988](#)). For instance, a university course in children's literature, let alone a course in literary theory, is not a requirement for elementary teaching certification in most U.S. states ([Hoewisch, 2000](#), [online document](#)). Limited experience with literary theory and children's literature is problematic for two reasons:

- First, without extensive understanding of literature and literary theory, teachers may reduce the role of children's literature to that of an instructional device used to help children learn how to decode more effectively. Instead, literature can be used as a way of understanding the world, or appreciated as a work of art that has value in and of itself.
- Second, with today's conservative political educational agenda, teachers are often forced to adopt reading programs that tell them how to teach, regardless of their beliefs and understandings. Classroom teachers need to understand contemporary theories of reading and literacy development and be able to articulate their theoretical perspectives concerning children's literature, the reading process, and their instructional practices, so they do not fall victim to the political pressures associated with standardized tests, state-mandated curricula, and commercial reading programs ([Coles, 1998](#); [McQuillan, 1998](#)). As literacy educators, we need to be able to understand and

discuss why we do what we do if we are going to create readers who can do more than decode texts accurately, read them aloud on demand, and score well on tests.

In this article, I suggest that many of the current instructional practices that use children's literature in the elementary classroom derive from "modernist" theories of meaning, readers, texts, and contexts ([Eagleton, 1996](#); [Elkind, 1997](#)), which do not reflect the transactional nature of reading ([Rosenblatt, 1978](#)) or perspectives from reader response ([Beach, 1993](#)) or various critical theories ([Lewis, 2000](#); [Luke & Freebody, 1997](#); [Luke, O'Brien, & Comber, 1994](#)). Many contemporary reading instructional practices are therefore based on an outdated understanding of reading, the reader, and the role of the social context in the construction of meaning.

In the following sections, I describe three theoretical perspectives associated with reading and literacy education -- modernist, transactional, and critical -- and provide examples of instructional practices that align with each. Although there are certainly distinctions that could be made within each perspective, I offer these three categories as a heuristic device to explain the various theoretical perspectives that affect reading instructional practices and the use of children's literature in contemporary elementary classrooms. Helping teachers to become aware of the theories that underlie their practices is the focus of this article.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Reading

The **modernist perspective** is based on a belief that meaning resides in the text (Eagleton, 1996). Reading is conceptualized as an orchestrated set of transportable cognitive processes that individual readers acquire through formal instruction and use to uncover that meaning (Beach, 1993). Only the most competent of readers, usually university professors and literary scholars, can ever truly understand the "pure essence" of a text, but all readings can be measured against this one true meaning ([Probst, 1992](#)).

In contrast, the **transactional perspective** is based on the belief that meaning is constructed in the transaction between a particular reader and a particular text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Readers bring their prior knowledge and experiences to bear on the reading event, and meaning is constructed during the transaction between reader and text. Both text and reader are vitally important. Reading is seen as the construction of meaning in the internal, cognitive space of the individual reader in transaction with a particular text.

Finally, a **critical perspective** focuses on the ways that texts are constructed in social, political, and historical contexts, and on the ways in which these contexts position readers and texts and endorse particular interpretations ([McKormick, 1994](#)). Reading is seen as a social practice of constructing meaning that cannot be separated from the cultural, historical, and political context in which it occurs. [Edelsky \(1999\)](#) suggests that "being critical means questioning against the frame of system, seeing individuals as always within systems, as perpetuating or resisting systems" (p. 28).

Each theoretical perspective supports a particular set of reading practices or pedagogies. These practices vary according to the amount of time allocated to reading instruction and reading of self-selected texts, the way that reading is defined, the epistemological assumptions about where knowledge is located and whether it is "found" or "constructed," and the emphasis placed on the role of the text, the reader, and the context in the reading process. Regardless of whether teachers can explicitly articulate their theoretical perspectives, their beliefs play a dominant role in the resources they choose, the instructional practices they employ, and the environment they create in their classrooms.

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Modernist Theories and Practices

[Street \(1984\)](#) has referred to a modernist perspective of reading and literacy as an “autonomous” model, in which literacy is associated with a set of universal skills readers apply to a neutral text in order to comprehend the meaning that resides within the text itself. From this perspective, reading is viewed as a cognitive, psychological process divorced from any of the forces that are inherent in social, political, or cultural institutions -- for example, public schools ([Siegel & Fernandez, 2000](#)). [De Castell and Luke \(1986\)](#) have described reading from a modernist perspective as a “context-neutral, content-free, skill-specific competence that can be imparted to children with almost scientific precision” (p. 88).

A modernist perspective is based on the belief that

- Meaning is located in the text and can be uncovered through close textual analysis
- Comprehension is a result of cognitive processes and has little to do with the social context of the reading event
- There is one pure essence (main idea) of a text that only competent readers have access to
- Readings of a text can be evaluated for correctness

Reading practices based on this perspective are concerned with finding the best methods for teaching children *how* to read, where reading is defined as the ability to decode text, read aloud fluently, and comprehend the main idea of a story. The teaching of reading skills in a direct, sequential manner ([Honig, 1995](#)) dominates these approaches to instruction. Instructional materials used with this approach often include commercial reading programs and workbooks that focus on selections in a basal anthology. Although many newer basal series contain selections from children’s literature, the lessons and quizzes accompanying them are designed according to modernist theoretical perspectives.

In many classrooms where commercial reading programs are in use, the reading of children’s literature is often viewed as separate from teaching reading skills. Children are given limited time to read authentic literature, since activities including preparing book reports, completing worksheets, or writing exercises may take up a large portion of the allocated reading period. Children’s literature may be considered an “add-on” to the primary reading instructional program, a frill available only to those children who are able to get all their other reading “work” done.

Another reading instructional practice that is often associated with a modernist perspective is the “balanced” or “eclectic” approach to reading instruction ([Pressley, 1999](#)). Here, the primary focus is establishing an appropriate pedagogical blend of direct phonics and skills instruction and the use of authentic texts and other “whole language” approaches ([Spiegel, 1992](#)). Many proponents of this approach suggest that in order to balance reading instruction, it is necessary to “inject” some direct, systematic phonics into a whole language classroom ([Adams & Bruck, 1995](#); Honig, 1995). In a sense, literature is used as a counterweight intended to balance direct phonics and skills instruction ([Freppon & Dahl, 1998, online document](#)).

The blend of reading practices offered by these approaches may be pedagogically balanced; however, it is limited by a narrow definition of reading and by the emphasis placed on decoding, oral performance, and literal comprehension ([Short, 1999](#)). Although competence in decoding, for example, is a necessary skill for readers, [Luke \(1995\)](#) and others argue that there are other competencies that readers need to develop in a democratic society. Balanced approaches may, in fact, teach readers to read just well

enough to pay taxes and become avid consumers, but not to participate as fully literate, informed citizens in a democratic state.

Another example of a popular reading instructional practice associated with a modernist perspective is the use of “leveled” texts associated with commercial reading incentive programs. Some of these programs offer stories in little paperback books that resemble the stories found in traditional basal anthologies, while others use authentic children’s literature, either in whole or abridged formats. Many of these commercially produced stories feature controlled or decodable text, and are leveled according to a specific formula or criteria.

One commercial program, *The Accelerated Reader* ([Paul & Paul, 1990](#)), levels authentic children’s literature based on particular readability formulas (e.g., the [Flesch, 1974](#); [Fry, 1977](#)). “Books with long sentences and big words are rated as more difficult, regardless of the difficulty of the vocabulary and concepts for a particular student” ([Worthy & Sailors, 2001](#), p.231). Although this program may vary in its application in any particular school setting, generally speaking it requires children to read only those texts that are determined to be at their instructional level. Children select a title from the list of books available at their level, read the book, and then take a computer-based quiz in which they answer a set of literal recall questions to assess whether they have comprehended the text. For each book read and each test passed, readers are awarded points that can be redeemed for bonus marks, prizes, or tokens. As students pass each test, they are directed to read books that come next in the series or are at a higher level. (See [Labbo, 1999](#) [[online document](#)] and [Topping, 1999](#) [[online document](#)] for a discussion of *The Accelerated Reader*.)

The evaluations used in this program align with a modernist perspective: they assume that meaning can be found in the text and that reading ability or instructional level can be determined quickly by computer through literal recall questions. These questions can be answered correctly with exact words or phrases from the text, and little or no inferring or personal response is required. Answers are literally in the text, and it is the student’s job to find them. From this theoretical perspective, reading literature is a leveled task that requires progression through a series of stories according to a particular formula.

The Accelerated Reader and other programs and practices that align with a modernist perspective impose a “premature closing” on children’s exploration of their responses to literature (Beach, 1993). There is one correct answer, one main idea, and it is the reader’s job to uncover it if she is to be evaluated as a competent reader. According to [Pressley \(2000, online summary\)](#), “Children are taught to read so that they can understand what is *in* the text...if the reader cannot decode a word, she or he cannot comprehend it” (pp. 545, 546; emphasis added). From such modernist theoretical perspectives, literature is usurped in the service of teaching children how to read, which is conceptualized as accurate decoding, oral performance, and literal comprehension or finding the main idea. Standardized test scores become the primary measure of a child’s reading ability and instructional level. Although these instructional practices may, in fact, match the requirements of standardized tests, their narrowing effect, the reduction of children’s literature to an instructional device for teaching decoding and literal comprehension, and the political pressures to raise test scores have restricted the definition of reading and ignored the research and literary theories that have emerged in the last three decades.

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Transactional Theories and Practices

From a transactional perspective, the reader plays a central role in the construction of meaning, drawing upon prior knowledge and experience to attend selectively to specific aspects of a text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Theorists who align with a transactional model reject the notion that meaning resides in the text

([Wells, 1986](#)) and instead focus on interpretive communities ([Fish, 1980](#)), the gaps that readers “fill in” during the reading event ([Iser, 1978](#)), the stances that a reader assumes while reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), and the ways that literature expands the reader’s understanding of the world ([McClure & Zitlow, 1991](#)).

According to [Morrow and Gambrell \(2000, online summary\)](#), meaning “is a two-way process that resides in the transaction that occurs between the reader and text wherein the reader constructs a personal envisionment of meaning that is guided by the text” (p. 565). This definition emphasizes the roles of the reader and the text, and views meaning as the result of the cognitive processes of an individual reader in transaction with a particular text. In this perspective, the focus is on a particular reader, transacting with a particular text in a particular context. All three components are included, although the focus seems to be on the transaction between reader and text and not on the context of the reading event, including the social, political, and cultural factors involved in the construction of meaning (Lewis, 2000).

From the transactional perspective, children’s literature is seen as a “way of knowing” and is used to help children make connections to the world around them, become acquainted with the language of stories, learn about the characteristics of the natural and social world, and discover insights into their own personalities and identities (Short, 1999). It is the lived-through or aesthetic experience of reading literature, and the ways that literature develops identity and understanding, that become the primary focus.

Short (1999) offers an approach to reading instruction, based on the work of linguist Michael Halliday, that aligns with a transactional perspective. In this approach, literature is used as vehicle for learning language, learning through language, and learning about language ([Halliday, 1980](#)). Learning experiences that highlight these three opportunities should be made available to students in their transactions with literature:

Students need opportunities to learn language by reading extensively, to learn about language by reflecting on their reading strategies and literary knowledge, and to learn through language by using literature inquire about the world and their own lives. (Short, 1999, p. 132)

The instructional practices that align with a transactional perspective generally involve whole class or small group discussions and workshops. The focus is on sharing individual interpretations within communities of readers to come to deeper understandings of a particular text. Various frameworks have been created by reading educators to support these interactions around texts, including book clubs ([Raphael & McMahon, 1994](#)), literature study groups (Peterson & Eeds, 1990), focus units ([Moss, 1984](#)), literary investigations and invested discussions (Serafini, 2001b), and lively discussions ([Gambrell & Almasi, 1996](#)). During these activities, the teacher supports the ongoing dialogue, entering into conversations with students and helping them reach more complex understandings about the text, their world, and their identity. The teacher becomes a member of the discussion group, supporting the conversation, not simply asking comprehension questions and evaluating responses.

Although Rosenblatt (1978) is certainly concerned with the role of literature in a democratic state ([Pradl, 1996](#)), she often addresses the local contexts of the reading event rather than the larger role of social, political, cultural and historical contexts associated with a critical perspective (Lewis, 2000). The shift from a transactional to a critical perspective is often associated with a shift from a focus on the local and particular to a focus on the larger contexts that influence the way texts are constructed, readers are positioned, and meanings are made available during the act of reading.

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Critical Theories and Practices

Although the term *critical literacy* can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways (Siegel & Fernandez, 2000), in general it is considered an approach that addresses the social, historical, and political systems that affect literacy and what it means to be a literate person in contemporary society. "Critical theories of literacy have been greatly influenced by critical social theory's view that meanings are always contested (never givens), and are related to ongoing struggles in society for the possession of knowledge, power, status, and material resources" ([Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001, online document](#)). A critical perspective on reading instruction acknowledges that reading "is tied up in the politics and power relations of everyday life in literate cultures" (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 185). The reading practices associated with critical perspectives are intended to help educators and readers understand the variety of meanings that are available during the transaction between reader, text, and context, and the systems of power that affect the meanings constructed.

Reading instruction in public schools is not ideologically neutral, nor is it accidentally designed. Rather, reading is "a social practice, comprised of interpretive rules and events constructed and learned in institutions like schools and churches, families and workplaces" (Luke, 1995, p. 97). From this perspective, texts are not neutral receptacles of information but cultural artifacts, created for specific purposes by people with political, cultural, and historical experiences; texts are social constructions that promote particular interests and versions of reality, and are sites for construction of plural and possibly conflicting meanings ([O'Neill, 1993](#)). The main idea is simply one possible meaning available to a reader, usually an officially sanctioned interpretation of a particular text. It is the uncovering of the systems that affect meaning and the analysis of the social contexts of texts, interpretations, and meanings that make this perspective "critical."

From a critical perspective, instruction focuses on helping readers understand how different meanings are constructed and how readers themselves are positioned by various readings and interpretations. Instructional practices are constructed in classrooms by teachers and students; they are not predetermined and mandated by commercial reading programs.

Children's literature may be regarded as a space for constructing critical conversations and interpretations, where both teachers and students negotiate meanings, discuss the systems of power inherent in the meanings available, and share experiences of how these stories relate to their lives and communities ([Serafini, 2001a](#)). In this sense, critical reading practices are alternative ways of organizing classroom experiences around texts to address cultural, political, and historical forces and their impact on the lives of students. Pedagogical decisions are made at the classroom level, taking into consideration larger societal contexts and forces. The classroom is no longer seen as an independent, neutral space, isolated from political agendas and cultural contexts; rather it is a part of society, influenced by the political, cultural, and historical forces contained therein.

Drawing on the work of critical social theorists (e.g., [Gee, 1996](#); Street, 1984), classroom teachers can begin to understand how these critical perspectives are transformed into classroom experiences. In many classrooms, literature discussions have taken on new dimensions, in which texts are interrogated by focusing on issues of gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. The issues raised during discussions of carefully selected pieces of children's literature within the context of contemporary society can invite children to make connections to their lives and communities. For example, teachers and students now interrogate pop culture ([Alvermann, Moore, & Hagood, 1999](#)), television commercials and newspaper advertisements (Luke, O'Brien & Comber, 2001), and classic children's stories ([Hanzl, 1993](#)) from a critical perspective. These educators are adopting a critical stance in their classroom experiences and are helping students understand the political, historical, and cultural implications involved with the texts they read and the meanings they construct.

In addition to these classroom experiences, critical literacy theorists have focused on the role of media - - for example, the Internet, television, and film -- and its effects on students' literate abilities ([Luke, 2000](#); [Myers & Beach, 2001, online document](#)). These educators often discuss the extension of a critical

perspective to include multimedia and technology. As we begin to expand the definition and role of all texts in the elementary classroom, adopting a critical perspective becomes more and more important.

An emphasis on instruction aimed at developing students' ability to assume a critical stance towards media and children's literature extends to the teacher education classroom, as well. Luke (2000) writes that the goal of the teacher education curriculum "is to provide students with the critical analytic tools to understand reader and viewer diversity of reading positions and sociocultural locations and differences that influence affinities to, or preferences for (and pleasures derived from), particular kinds of media forms and messages" (p. 425).

A critical perspective on reading assumes that there is no neutral, context-free construction of meaning. Reading is a social practice that cannot be separated from its political and cultural context. A critical perspective focuses on the larger social, political, cultural, and historical contexts in which reading and other literate activities are practiced. Children's literature is no longer seen as a neutral receptacle of information from which readers are required to extract the correct meaning. Rather, literature is used as a vehicle to provide a space for critical conversations, discussions that go beyond the walls of the classroom to include the political, cultural, and historical contexts of the world in which we live.

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Concluding Remarks

Although children's literature has emerged as an important resource in contemporary elementary reading curricula, its role can be conceptualized in different ways: as an "add-on" or treat available when children finish the exercises in the commercial workbook, a pedagogical balancing device, a way of knowing the world, or a space for critical conversations, used to explore the systems of power that affect the ways students are positioned as readers and the meanings available to them. A shift in the resources used in the classroom, from controlled texts to authentic children's literature, must also include a parallel shift in the theoretical perspectives that support classroom instruction if significant changes in reading practices are to occur.

Transactional theories of reading tend to focus on the cognitive processes of individual readers as they construct meaning in transaction with a text, whereas critical theoretical perspectives focus on social, political, historical, and cultural contexts and their ways of constructing readers and readings. What is common to both perspectives is the rejection of the concept that meaning resides *in* the text and is predetermined, waiting to be discovered by competent readers. These theoretical perspectives view the reader as an active constructor of meaning, not as a passive recipient of ready-made "truths."

Determining a text's main idea is no longer a viable pursuit in transactional and critical theories; instead, it is seen as identifying a sanctioned interpretation by an external authority rather than a truth hidden in the text. In both of these theoretical perspectives, reading is not a set of decontextualized cognitive skills that can be universally transmitted via commercial reading exercises. Rather, reading is a social practice that is constrained, mediated, and shaped by the social forces inherent in a particular community of readers. Meaning does not just generically arise in neutral contexts; it is grounded in the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts of the reading event. Readers are individuals in society, unable to escape from the contexts in which they live and read, but capable of rendering unique interpretations as they transact with particular texts at particular times.

In order to make the shift from a modernist perspective to a transactional or critical perspective, teachers must begin to interrogate the theoretical assumptions that support their reading instructional practices. As literacy educators we should shift the focus from trying to find the right method for teaching children how to read, to determining whether the reading practices and experiences constructed in classrooms are addressing the broad repertoire of practices required in today's society.

Because of this, reading education has to go beyond scientific considerations to include the social, political, and cultural dimensions, if our students are to become the kinds of readers we want in a democratic society.

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About the Author



Frank Serafini is an assistant professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, where he teaches courses in children's literature, reading instruction, and literacy research. He can be reached by e-mail at serafini@unlv.edu. His research interests are literature-based reading instructional frameworks, children's literature, reading comprehension, and literary theory.

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