Children's literature

Dr Alyson Simpson
Senior Lecturer, English and Literacy Education
The University of Sydney

Alyson Simpson: The power of literature in children’s lives cannot be underestimated. Of all the activities that impact on education, reading literary texts plays one of the most important roles of all because of the power of narrative.

From the time when children are first read to, to the time when children become independent bookworms reading under the covers by torchlight, the values, knowledge, skills and pleasure that accumulate from these sustained experiences with books of good quality build the foundation material of what it means to become a creative, informed, communicative person.

Sounds like a big challenge to fulfil but where children are given the opportunity to read great books of varying genres, they are practising habits of mind that will support their lifelong learning.

My name is Alyson Simpson. I speak to you from my current position as an educator at The University of Sydney, who has been a teacher librarian and a parent. My knowledge of books spans a range that includes classics as well as contemporary multimodal texts.

Over the years, I have worked with very young children through to mature pre-service teacher education students and seen the excitement that being switched on to reading by good books (and knowledgeable librarians) can bring to readers of any age. I can tell you personal tales and I will quote from authors but I will also back up my claims with research findings that prove unequivocally that wide reading across a variety of children’s literature should be a central part of all education programs.

I am not the only one to believe that frequent, voluminous book-reading creates readers out of page-turners. Good teachers will fill their classrooms with well-crafted writing that appeals to children, providing rich, accessible examples of literary technique for students to notice and appreciate. Great schools have teacher librarians who also support children’s reading needs. For research shows that it is important to allow children choice of their reading materials rather than locking them into materials judged to be age or ability appropriate.

In a recent study of children’s reading habits, one student put it this way: “I reckon you should have interesting books and simple, so you have a range. If you stick to simple it will be boring but if you stick with hard ones it will be too hard.” This insight connects well to Krashen’s study that proposes that self-selected reading is a powerful predictor of reading achievement.

As author Jackie French states, “The secret to getting kids reading is to give them books that absorb them. So often, poor readers are given small, funny, simple books that promptly bore them. The kids have problems reading, not understanding!”

One of the key questions to ask about literature is: What do we mean by ‘literary’ texts? Robyn Ewing suggests that literary texts will demonstrate the following characteristics:

- they will have real, not controlled language that makes sense beyond sentence level;
- they will be rich in words and/or images
- they will be multi-layered
- they will be intellectually challenging
- they will be provocative of emotional responses, and
- they will represent life in an artistic manner rather than everyday.
I am going to read to you a poem that I believe is an example of what I would call a literary text. Listen to see if you think it meets the conditions we set just now.

**The Little Boy and the Old Man**

Said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon."
Said the old man, "I do that too."
The little boy whispered, "I wet my pants."
"I do that too," laughed the little old man.
Said the little boy, "I often cry."
The old man nodded, "So do I."
"But worst of all," said the boy, "It seems
Grown-ups don't pay attention to me."
And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand.
"I know what you mean," said the little old man.

*(from *A Light in the Attic* by Shel Silverstein)*

What does this poem show we can learn from children’s literature? My ability to empathise, to see life through someone else’s eyes has been built through my long literary history. I am not a young boy and I will never be an old man yet my imagination allows me to step into their shoes.

If imagination is the ability to think of the possible, not just the actual, if it is the source of invention, novelty and flexibility in human thinking, then my rational thought has been greatly enhanced by the literature that I have read. But, as Ken Robinson warns us, we tend to educate creativity out of our school children. We devalue the importance of reading literary texts and leave time for reading out of the daily program because we insist on building up one side of the brain while we value the other.

The interesting contradiction here is that humans dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative.

And this ability to create narrative depends on imagination. So, if, as Maurice Saxby states, imagination is the basis of all creativity we should be placing a higher value on literature in our classrooms and our homes.

I am not naïve, however. I know that teachers must teach so that all students will meet syllabus outcomes for linguistic skills and knowledge. So it is wonderful to recognise that reading good books helps to build grammatical competence, broaden vocabulary and improve writing and spelling.

This knowledge can be absorbed as a result of listening and reading but the skills will be supported further through explicit teacher-modelled activities that lead to guided practice and independent exploration. Classroom activities that teach reading should provide opportunities for students to hear, speak, write and read language, as well as building comprehension skills.

Classroom activities that help children create opinions about books build the capacity for critical understanding. Where currently we have a strong emphasis on testing reading skills, there needs to be a balance between the learning to and the learning about work we do with texts.
The British children’s laureate Michael Rosen warns of the risk of limited skills-based approaches to reading. He states, “The reason we write books for children is … to intrigue, entertain, educate, amuse, excite, stir up, challenge our audience. I do not know of many writers of books for children who would say. ‘I write children’s books so that a class of Year 5 children can count the adjectives on page 43 of my latest novel’.”

The knowledge about reading outcomes supports children to understand how authors structure their texts to achieve their purpose through reading complex texts. Students can build understanding of concepts such as audience, representation, point of view, and character as well as understanding of techniques such as figurative language, literary devices and characterisation.

As students become strong readers they build fluency, stamina, vocabulary, confidence, critical abilities, habits, tastes, and comprehension.

It is important to balance the learning to and the learning about reading outcomes in order to support literacy within English and other curriculum areas. But it is vital to go beyond this as well to encourage response to literature that allows all children to share their understanding to enrich each other’s appreciation.

One of the ways that teachers can work towards incorporating literature into the classroom is encourage reading through collaborative text-response activities. When these activities are planned in partnership with students, the classroom becomes a very powerful learning context.

**Student:** Wasn’t it a really sad story that he was talking about?

**Student:** Yeah.

**Student:** Something about his life.

**Student:** And in the picture it showed that he wasn’t exactly turtle, he was a lot of animals. And so I think that he’s upset because he’s not completely a turtle.

**Student:** I think later on he’ll tell us how he became pig, pup, turtle.

**Students:** Yes.

**Alyson Simpson:** One very strong example of that can be seen in the use of literature circles. Literature circles help children engage with the literary texts and improve their reading in a way that research shows can encourage reading for meaning and reading for enjoyment. They are temporary discussion groups of students who elect to read the same text.

**Student:** Sort of, it seemed like she was trying to get rid of her. So, like, “Oh, you can go there now, so I can go do my thing.” ’Cause, yeah, that was sort of how it came to me.

**Student:** I don’t know; it’s a hard one.

**Student:** So that she knows, like, what’s happening from, like, their point of view.

**Alyson Simpson:** Each member has specific responsibilities as s/he prepares for the discussion with supporting notes for a nominated role, such as Artful Artist who depicts part of the reading (for example, a character, a moment, a setting) and offers a statement justifying why it is important to the story and to them; or Word Wizard, who selects four words that might be interesting or challenging and provides a definition for each, along with an activity to use the word and justifies why they chose the words as important to know.
**Student:** I did Word Wizard. I found ‘timid’. It’s an adjective. So, ‘lacking in self-assurance, courage or bravery; easily alarmed or is shy’. And I found ‘tremulous’.

**Alyson Simpson:** Or, Creative Connector, who finds a way to link the reading to her/his own life, world knowledge and/or other texts.

**Student:** Ah, I did the Creative Connector. Um, and so the mock turtle reminds me of my grandpa, because my grandpa tells a lot of, like, stories. And they’re normally from when he was a lot younger, so they go on for quite a while.

**Student:** That’s like most grandpas. They always talk about the past.

**Alyson Simpson:** The circles meet regularly and the roles rotate. At the end of a cycle, the group finds a way to communicate their discussion to others.

Literature circles can be built around what Freebody and Luke called a ‘repertoire of practices’. Each of the literature circle roles will need the reader to:

1. **Decode**, that is, they will need to recognise the meaning-making potential of the signs and symbols in the text.
2. **Participate**, that is, the reader needs to bring personal significance to attach meaning to the graphophonic codes.
3. **Use**, the reader should make some socially appropriate response to the text this may just be reading it aloud. The traditional roles such as Word Wizard, Artful Artist and Passage Picker can all be fulfilled using the lower-level reading practices.
4. **The fourth role** asks for text analysis. In this role, the reader may need to consider what the author’s ideological purpose was in telling the story in just that way.

In order to prompt this higher-order thinking, teachers have to introduce more challenging literature circle roles, such as Paradigm Profiler or Investigator. It is important to note that all children are capable of working across all four levels, given appropriate support, working in mixed ability groupings such as literature circles.

Let’s watch a class during a literature circle activity and listen to the conversations about texts that are encouraged through these different roles.

**Student:** Who wants to be the Duchess?

**Students:** I’ll be.

**Student:** Okay.
Student: Ah, I'm a bit confused. At first it seemed like you didn't like Alice and now it seems like you're really into her and you think, like, she's really nice and stuff. Why?

Student: Um, well, with the pepper, it makes me very angry in the kitchen, so I got very angry and annoyed at Alice. But outside where there's no pepper I was very calm and I realised how nice Alice can be.

Student: Why do you keep agreeing to everything that Alice is saying, the same morals and stuff?

Student: Well, I don't know, really. Because it's just kind of what ... I just agree with her. It's very ... I understand what she's saying.

Alyson Simpson: The literature circles demonstrate how reading is a social activity. Anyone who has read a good book knows the excitement of sharing it with others. Indeed, it has been said that “One of the key factors in motivating students to read is a teacher who values reading and is enthusiastic about sharing a love of reading with students.”

Student: Just go: “Off with her head! Off with her head!” And, yeah.

Student: Okay, I also did Interviewer. Who'd like to be the Duchess, anybody? Angie? So, you're being really nice to Alice. Is it just because she set you free from prison? Or, are you just being sarcastic to make her like you?

Student: Well, like, she stood up to the queen.

Alyson Simpson: But teachers need to incorporate critical as well as personal response in school work in order to support higher-order thinking and achieve a balance between Affect and Intellect.

So what should teachers do in the classroom? Or parents in the home? It is our responsibility to serve literature ‘by the brimming glassful’. We need to make available to children a wide range of wonderful novels, picture books, graphic novels and other multimodal literary texts. However, making good reading material available is not enough. As the literature circles video showed, it is important to help children develop critical awareness through collaborative discussion that builds habits of the mind.

These habits include:
• reading closely for challenging vocabulary
• appreciating word play
• considering different points of view
• justifying your opinion
• looking for multiple meaning
• taking risks, and
• being prepared to be challenged (or wrong).

I am going to tell you a story that I believe is an example of someone who did not build these habits of the mind when she was in school. Listen to see if you can identify the reason/s why.

A very excited university student stopped me in the corridor the other day. She is in her final year of her pre-service teaching degree. She is now 25 and for her birthday last week she asked her parents to buy her some picture books and novels because, through her teacher education degree, she has seen how powerful literature can be in the teaching of reading for the first time in her life. Her mother wanted to call me up and thank me personally as this was the first time the student had shown any interest in reading literature since she was very, very young.
The student told me she was not taught to read through pleasure or collaborative response or for critical awareness. When she was at school, she learned to fear reading because she was ashamed she was not a good reader.

Her memory of learning to read was sitting in a circle, knowing it would be her turn to read a paragraph, so she read and reread her paragraph in her head to make sure that when called upon she would get it right. The fragmented skills-based approach that she experienced meant that it was not until her fourth year of school that she finally learned to read and so she had not read books for ‘fun’ ever since.

It is only recently that she has reframed her perception of reading to see the potential of literary texts to underpin an approach to teaching that balances skills, knowledge, values and pleasure. Her excitement that she would be able to help young children learn to read in ways that would encourage collaboration as well as comprehension was palpable.

What does this story show we must learn about reading and literature? Research shows the importance of learning from good models. Shared reading incorporates the learning strategies for reading.

Modelled reading and silent reading are about allowing time to engage with books for pleasure as well as learning. Teaching reading is important through ALL grades—not just the early years. It is clear that to achieve all literacy goals, teachers need to actively lead children to read a wide range of books and respond in different ways, including critical discussion. This will lead students to develop literary consciousness as well as good spelling, fluency and comprehension.

**Student:** She kind of saved my life, so of course I’m going to be nice to Alice.

**Student:** Okay, and who would like to be the Queen?

**Alyson Simpson:** Activities such as literature circles are just one of the rich face-to-face learning contexts in which we can stimulate collaborative critical responses.

**Student:** Now this may shock you, but they’re actually set free. Their heads aren’t being chopped off. So how do you feel about that?

**Student:** Okay, then I’m just going to chop everyone’s head off now, because I’m so mad.

**Student:** Really?

**Alyson Simpson:** With developments in technology, we can build social networks of readers for students through book raps or other Internet activities.

The use of blogs in the primary classroom to participate in online discussions with other readers in book raps adds a new mode in which to discuss all forms of literary texts.

Voting for children’s choice awards, such as Kids Own Australian Literature Awards (KOALA), on the Internet, is another way that the authentic use of technology helps the teacher to support students’ interaction round texts.
KOALA is the NSW children's choice reading award. There are other awards in other states. The advantage of online communication is that archived postings provide a record of the 'visible thinking' processes.

For students who take part in these activities, the technology offers a new community of learners that goes beyond the classroom walls. But that is another story …

Bibliography


