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**AN EVALUATION UPON UTILIZING CHILDREN'S  
LITERATURE: TECHNIQUES OF TEACHING  
READING**

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# An Evaluation upon Utilizing Children's Literature: Techniques of Teaching Reading

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**Abstract – The purpose of this paper was to develop a thematic unit of children's literature that combines skills-based and meaning-based reading instruction. The curriculum guide was designed for use with third and fourth graders. Lessons concentrated on relating each story to previously read stories through guided questioning. Emphasis was placed on critical reading and thinking skills, as well as the integrating of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.**

**Furthermore, the researcher concluded that the curriculum effectively integrated the four language art components in meaning-centered reading experiences which, in turn, enabled children to read, write, listen, and speak more often and at a higher level.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is a genre hard to define, mostly due to the fact that it does not fit any genre definitions; it contains multiple genres (mystery, fantasy, science fiction, crime fiction etc.), multiple literary forms (poetry, prose, and drama) (Nodelman 2008), mirroring literature per se. There are voices stating that children's literature should not be considered a separate genre. As Cunningham argues: "children" and "childhood" are social constructs determined by socioeconomic conditions and have different meanings for different cultures" (Zipes 2001: 40). Therefore, according to Cunningham, children's literature is an imaginary concept, as well. Zipes proposes, based on Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field, the idea that children's literature should be considered a cultural production field.

Considering these, the field of children's literature should include not only the children, but the entire children's publishing industry, along with those involved in children's education: teachers, librarians, parents, as well as all of the business corporations producing books related memorabilia (magazines and posters, candy, action figures, collectibles, etc.), including mass media promoting the goods; all of these using children as mere commodities. The fact that our society is a "Consumer Society" only encourages this proliferating trend. The children's literature publishing has become a major industry in the last thirty years. The number of books printed in one edition has increased exponentially. In 2000 the popularity of the first two books in the *Harry Potter* series determined *The New York Times* to introduce a new category in the best-sellers list (Smith 2000). At

first, the children's best-sellers list had the books for all age ranges fit in a single category, but the increasing sales and popularity of the genre determined *The New York Times* to further divide the children's books into several categories: Children's Picture Books, Children's Middle Grade, Young Adult, Children's Series, Hardcover Graphic Books, Paperback Graphic Books and Manga. The popularity of children's books changed the perspective on children's literature as a genre; unfortunately the change is not necessarily a positive one. This popularity brought them to the public's attention; however it only gave one more reason for the conservative academic world to dismiss them, as in their eyes children's books became a subgenre of popular literature; thus the necessity of genre definition.

Children's literature is considered to be less demanding than the literature for adults, and, therefore, of less value or interest. The academic world and most of today literary critics still regard with contempt the genre, despite the major attempt of the children's literature critics, in the last fifty years, to redeem its worth.

Much controversy exists regarding the teaching of reading in the elementary curriculum. Some advocate a back-to-basics approach, with emphasis on skills. However, studies in the areas of learning, language development, and reading acquisition have led many researchers and practitioners to reject skills-based approaches in favor of more holistic instructional methods.

At the heart of skills-based instruction is the basal reader. Basal readers dominate the reading curriculum of many elementary schools. In 1986, an estimated 98% of teachers in the United States used a basal series (Flood & Lapp, 1986). Basal readers emphasize phonics and contain stories with controlled vocabulary. Sequenced lessons are organized around specific skills. The mastery of these skills is viewed as a prerequisite to the act of reading.

Within this conceptual framework, learning to read is seen as a process wherein subskills are mastered in isolation. In contrast, whole-language approaches view reading as a holistic process, with meaning rather than skills acquisition, as the central focus. Kenneth Goodman (1986) asserts that skills-based approaches, which define reading as mastery of subskills, misrepresent actual reading development. Psycholinguistic research indicates that meaning is not simply transmitted, but is constructed by the reader when he or she interacts with the text. Therefore, a reader's background, past experience, and purpose, as well as the provision of real, meaningful texts are important in constructing meaning.

The use of children's literature, a key component in whole-language instruction, provides real texts that can be used to teach reading. Children's literature builds on background, past experience, and interests of the learner. The literature suggests that the use of children's books in the reading and language art curricula has many benefits. First, the use of children's literature has been shown to facilitate language development. It also has positive effects on reading achievement, as well as on the acquisition of reading skills and strategies.

Further, writing skills are improved and writing styles broadened through the use of children's literature. Children's literature encourages both high-level thinking and learner involvement, important in motivating students to read (Heald-Taylor, 1989). An additional benefit of using children's literature is that the connections between reading, writing, listening, and speaking can be enhanced. Pearson (1989) asserts that if activities are used that stress these components in meaningful, purposeful ways, the curriculum is rendered more authentic as a result. And Hiebert (1991) cautions, «Unless they have many occasions to participate in authentic literacy in school, many students will not develop patterns of lifelong literacy.

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## CHILDREN'S HABITS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS READING

Lewis and Ellis (2006) outline the importance of learning to read and suggest the far reaching consequences of mastering, not only the skill of reading but also the development of children who are readers, able to use their skills for pleasure and purpose. An analysis by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded that 'being an enthusiastic reader' and 'being a frequent reader' were more significant in terms of advantage than 'having well-educated parents' (OECD, 2002) and 'finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change'.

The focus of political activity in the United Kingdom has been around the teaching of early reading – how to ensure that all children are able to read with “increasingly cognitive accounts of reading” but “just because someone is able to read does not mean that he or she will choose to do so” (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). An analysis of children's habits and preferences is therefore an essential element of building a picture of the health of a reading country.

In 2001 the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS cited in Lockwood, 2008, p. 5) reported that English pupils came first in terms of attainment in reading for literary purposes [but] were placed 27th in terms of attitudes to reading (Lockwood, 2008).

Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) emphasize Twist's (2004) suggestion that a decline in the enjoyment of reading is a long term phenomenon, which may be resistant to the influence of teachers, a number of reports (Office for standards in education (OFSTED), 2004 and 2005) have identified the significant role of the class teacher and school leadership in developing positive reading attitudes, dispositions and habits.

Baker, Dreher and Guthrie (2000) identified the benefits of reading and so the more a person reads the greater the benefits in terms of reading skills, abilities and wider knowledge. Those who choose not to read, we may conclude, are not only making a choice about how they use their time but also, possibly unknowingly influencing their future abilities, skills and understandings.

It is worth noting that when considering children's reading preferences Clark and Rumbold (2006) have found that research findings are also likely to present only a temporal snapshot of children's and young people's reading preferences.

## THE TEACHING OF READING

Children have different approaches to reading and Beers (2003) categorises readers as motor readers, auditory or visual readers. Motor readers vocalise or move their lips as they read and as a result, their speed of reading slows down because they artificially keep their speed down to the rate at which they can pronounce words. Such an approach may lead to poor comprehension since readers are concentrating more on the mechanics of reading instead of reading for ideas. Auditory readers on the other hand 'hear' the words they read, but they do not sub-vocalize to themselves.

Thus auditory reading is faster than motor reading and auditory readers may be seen as more skilful. The fastest readers are visual readers. Visual readers understand words and phrases without saying and hearing them. They read with their eyes and mind, not with their mouths or ears. Beers' categories are examples of different approaches to reading which have profound implications for the ways in which reading is taught. There has been much debate about the teaching and learning of reading in England and since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in 1998 the teaching of phonics as the prime approach to the teaching of early reading has been controversial. Goswami (2005) suggests that the orthography of English, in comparison with other languages, presents considerable challenges to the beginner reader. English has an opaque orthography, with graphemes often representing more than one sound and sounds being represented by more than one grapheme. Phonics, as an approach to the teaching of early reading is therefore not without its difficulties. Since the introduction of the NLS various reports have focused on the teaching of early reading with the most significant, The Independent Review of the teaching of early reading, by Rose for the Department For Children, Schools and Families. Following this review the 'searchlights model' of reading that had been used in schools (a model that suggested the beginner reader draws on a range of cues to read) was replaced by Gough and Tunmer's (1986); Simple View of Reading. The Simple View of Reading identifies two components to reading: word recognition processes and language comprehension. With a recent change in government the focus on word recognition processes has intensified, with the publication of 'The Importance of Teaching' (Department For Education which states that the evidence is clear that the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics is the most effective way of teaching young children to read, particularly for those at risk of having problems with reading. The English National Curriculum sets out the requirements for the teaching of reading and descriptions of national expectations for reading as well as identifying phonics alongside other strategies to teach reading. The National Curriculum is due to be revised in the light of the new guidance on

the teaching of reading in 2012/13. It also details the range and scope of reading children should be engaged with as they develop as readers and sets out a genre range for study alongside how children should be engage with and appreciate text.

Since 2004, Eggertsdóttir (2009) has been implementing an interactive balanced reading approach – *Beginning Literacy* – in 1st and 2nd grade in schools in Iceland, now endorsed all over the country. This has been administered by the Center of School Development at the University of Akureyri. Since 2006, 67 schools out of 174 schools in the country have signed a contract with the Centre to take up *Beginning Literacy* (Eggertsdóttir, 2011). Eggertsdóttir (2009) explains that the approach highlights inclusive practices, collaboration and active participation of pupils as well as integrated language arts. Participating teachers have stated that the approach offers rich opportunities to work with vocabulary, comprehension, comprehension strategies, creative work and autonomy as well as authentic writing. Comparison of outcomes reveal that pupils using *Beginning Literacy* succeed at least as well as pupils taught by other methods and that boys get good results with this approach.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Major differences regarding the relationship among knowledge, learning, and motivation exist between the two theoretical philosophies of whole language and skillsbased approaches.

Constructivists believe that knowledge develops when a learner attempts to construct meaning from experience. It is structured by each individual, depending on not only their past experiences but their interpretations and purposes, as well. Therefore, skills and isolated facts become knowledge only when they acquire personal meaning.

Behaviorists, on the other hand, view knowledge as discrete units that exist outside of the learner. These facts and skills must be transmitted to the individual. Learning and motivation are viewed differently by the constructivist and the behaviorist. To a constructivist, learning is an ongoing process that emerges from experience. Children assume power over their own learning and they learn from each other. The roles of the students and the teacher are interrelated. Motivation comes from the task itself, so the curriculum takes shape as a consequence of intrinsic rewards. In contrast, behaviorists view learning as occurring only within the context of appropriately reinforced responses. What is learned and how it is learned must be controlled.

Therefore, the roles of both teacher and learner are welldefined within the social context of the classroom.



Motivation occurs when the perceived value of an external reward is equated with the value of a task. Instructional practice in skills-based approaches to reading reflects this part-to-whole view. McCarty (2001) describes the materials, methodology, and assessment procedures in skills-based instruction. Basal readers, language textbooks, worksheets and teachers' manuals comprise the curriculum. Lessons are sequenced. Each lesson is planned around a specific skill. Information is transmitted by the teacher, with children assuming a passive role in their learning. Homogeneous groups are used. Reading and the language arts are taught separately from other content areas. Children are assessed via objective measurements, such as standardized and teacher-made tests.

There are several reasons for the widespread use of skills-based approaches to reading. Many teachers continue to believe that reading is decoding and that skills must precede the act of reading. Also, there is growing concern in the United States over the lack of students' minimum skills and competencies.

As a result, there has been a cry for a back-to-the-basics approach. Furthermore, the poor test scores have emphasized a need for accountability. The increasing pressures for accountability have forced a resurgence of support for the skills-based approach.

Several major learning theorists have influenced instructional practices in whole language. The theorists include Dewey, Vygotsky, Halliday, and Piaget. Dewey emphasizes the power of reflective teaching and the learner at the center of the process of curriculum development. He further stresses the importance of integrating language with other subjects. Vygotsky explores how social context influences individual learning. His zone of proximal development stresses that although students are ultimately responsible for their own learning, the teacher plays an important role in guiding that learning. Halliday's systemic linguistic research looks at context of situation on learning and language use. His model stresses the importance of functional and natural use of language.

The use of children's literature in the teaching of reading is one technique for combining skills-based and whole language instruction. It is an ideal way for teachers who are making the transition from skills-based approaches to more holistic instructional methods.

Although literature-based instruction has proven to be an effective approach advocated by many, literature is often on the periphery of the curriculum.

Using children's literature for teaching reading is becoming more prevalent, due to research findings confirming its benefits. The literature review indicates the following advantages to using children's literature: (1) facilitating the development of language; (2)

increasing reading achievement and enhancing reading skills and strategies; (3) enhancing writing skills and styles; (4) encouraging higher-level thinking; (5) enhancing the integration of the four language components; (6) motivating children to read; and (7) encouraging learner involvement.

Children's literature is effective for expanding and enhancing reading skills and strategies. Freppon (1991) reports that although students who are taught with a skills-based as compared to a literature-based approach have similar knowledge of phonics, the two groups differ in their process and concept of reading. Those taught with literature use varied, more balanced reading strategies. Those taught with a skills-based approach use sounding-out as a primary cuing technique.

## CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND READING INSTRUCTION

The ways in which children's literature has been used in classrooms is based in part on trends in education, particularly as they relate to teaching reading. Approaches used to teach reading have varied widely throughout history. For example, teaching reading was once based on the ability of students to recite words aloud. This was considered an effective means of instruction until the introduction of phonics-based texts in the early 1900s. This system for teaching children how to read opened up a new field of scientific research, and throughout the first twenty-five years of the 20th century, researchers reported numerous discoveries about reading instruction.

As practices in teaching reading have changed, so has the use of children's literature in the elementary classroom. In the first half of the 20th century when phonics-based, controlled vocabulary, or sight word approaches were used to teach children how to read, children's literature was primarily used for story time or supplemental and recreational reading. When the exclusive use of basal readers for teaching reading was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s, it opened the door to using quality children's literature for reading instruction (Martinez & McGee, 2000). By the 1980s, literature-based reading programs were being developed and new research was conducted on classroom practices used for teaching reading.

Legislation has also played a role in reading instruction and how children's literature is used in the classroom. The findings of the congressionally-mandated National Reading Panel (NRP) were published in 2000 (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development). In order to receive federal funding, districts were required to adopt a reading program based on the practices specified, and teachers were expected to adhere to the prescribed reading curriculum. Although reading texts adopted by schools may have included children's literature, the published stories were often abridged or edited for each grade level.

## CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND MOTIVATING READERS

The body of research on teaching students *how to* read is distinctly different from that on motivating students *to* read. It is an unfortunate fact that possessing the ability to read does not necessarily make one a reader. Therefore, teachers have a responsibility to not only teach children how to read but to motivate them to be readers. Children's literature has played a significant role in accomplishing this goal. Quality literature is at the heart of key classroom factors that motivate readers (Gambrell, 1996). These factors include: 1) a teacher who models reading, 2) access to a book rich classroom environment, 3) the opportunity to self-select books, 4) familiarity with books, and 5) social interactions with others relating to books.

**Reading role model.** Being a reading role-model is one of the most effective and simplest ways to motivate readers. According to Allington and Gabriel (2012), the only requirement or skill needed to read aloud to students is a conscious decision to allocate class time. Many benefits from reading aloud to students have been identified including improving vocabulary, comprehension, background knowledge, and sense of story. Unfortunately, as students become capable of reading independently, adults are less likely to read aloud to them.

**Access to books.** The classroom environment itself supports enthusiastic readers as well as reluctant or struggling readers. Access to books is necessary for students to develop a love for reading. This has been identified as a key factor for young children in their home (Lindsay, 2010) as well as in school. Students in classrooms with well designed and stocked classroom libraries spend more time reading and interacting with books and exhibit more positive attitudes towards reading and increased levels of reading achievement. English Language Learners (ELL) also benefit from greater access to books. ELLs placed in classrooms identified as book-rich environments experienced enhanced comprehension and motivation to read.

**Self-select books.** Children need an opportunity to self-select the books they read. Struggling readers in particular need authentic experiences with quality children's literature. When students are encouraged to choose books they want to read, reading motivation and comprehension improve, the likelihood of reading for pleasure increases, and students' reading performance is enhanced (Krashen, 2011). Self-selected books may be based on students' interests or may include books that are popular among a particular age group.

**Familiarity with books.** Students have a heightened interest in books that are familiar in some way. This

includes familiarity with an author, characters, and book series.

**Social interactions with books.** Giving students the opportunity to talk about what they are reading is a natural way to motivate readers. In discussing what they've read with peers, students naturally engage in higher-order thinking such as analyzing and making connections to the text. Conversations about books improve comprehension and attention to the text. Discussing books with peers has even been shown to improve scores on standardized tests.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, children's literature as a genre is greatly underestimated, yet as it was stated it also has a lot to give. If given the chance it may surprise the reader with unexpected depth and intricate narratives, beautiful language and deep and subtle human motives, literary innovations and difficult themes treated with grace. The purpose of this paper was to develop a thematic unit of children's literature that combines skills-based and meaning-based reading instruction. Emphasis was placed on critical reading and thinking skills, as well as the integrating of the four language art components -reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

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