

Children's Literature in the Classroom – New Challenges

INTERVIEW



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Why did you decide to become a teacher?

I was a volunteer on special weekends with individuals who had disabilities when I was a teenager. Many of the other volunteers were teachers. They encouraged me to think about being a teacher. I continued to volunteer all through my university studies. I enjoy learning and exploring ideas. Teaching seemed like a natural fit.

Which experiences from this field were the most interesting, “attractive”, valuable, efficient?

I have enjoyed learning languages, studying art, and experiencing other cultures through international studies the most. I have had numerous international studies experiences and enjoyed each of them.

What kind of topics/themes have been the most (A) interesting, (B) most important, (C) most difficult and (D) most challenging during your teaching career in the Department of Education for American students in the 21st century?

- (A) I have found children's literature courses to be the most interesting to teach. There are so many beautiful books from cultures all around the world.
- (B) Our world as we know it is in peril. The exchange of ideas is more important than ever. We must learn about each other and learn to get along with each other in order to survive global threats (poverty, lack of education,

war) and the environmental changes human have created. There is always more I want to learn about people and other places I hope to visit someday. I want my students to know about them too. Books are the easiest and least expensive way to travel and experience the world.

- (C) But, it is difficult to get books in the hands of students in many places around the world. Access to books is often limited because children do not have the luxury of going to school or a library. This is true in America too. Even in West Virginia, a very rural state, many people lack the extra money, time, or opportunity to engage with current literature by American authors and illustrators... Let alone books from around the world.
- (D) The most challenging aspect of my teaching is working with students who are pressured by so many other commitments. Many of my students have to work full time jobs in order to pay for their university studies. Many of them are married, have children, and have little time to study, read, or think through and prepare for our classes. Consequently, they want me to just tell them what is important and layout every detail for an assignment... They want to be told what to do and how to do it rather than exploring on their own, taking risks, and experimenting with the content. This is disappointing to me as a teacher and as a learner. Most of the excitement and enjoyment in learning comes through the process of engaging with ideas, trying and failing, not from getting a good grade on an assignment. It is about the process of learning, not the product at the end of a course.

What does the situation with the syllabi/programs look like nowadays?

Everything on the syllabus must be listed out very carefully and thoroughly. This is helpful to a point. But, often students seem inflexible and become angry and discouraged if things shift or change. The university now has a syllabus template that all professors must follow. It seems a bit like using a cookie cutter mold. There is some security in that, but the best learning and most valuable learning experiences can't be designed or orchestrated from everyone following the same process and ending up with the same product. Forcing the use of "sameness" does not mesh well with a fundamental aspect in my thinking and beliefs about pedagogy, knowledge, and ideas. If every artist painted a tree the same way, we would never visit an art gallery. I want students to experiment with ideas using a minimal amount of guidance from me.

What kind of books for children are you reading with your students? Which genre is the "most valuable" in your opinion? Which characters and topics are most interesting for contemporary students? How do you understand the concept/definition/phenomenon of "picturebooks"?

Finding good books can be a bit of a problem. So, there are two resources I use most often with my students. The first resource I send students to is the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) (www.ibby.org).

I am on the board for the United States affiliate of IBBY – the United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY) (www.usbby.org). Our university has made a concerted effort to get the books for our students. We now have all the award-winning books from 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018, and 2019 in our library. The 2020 list of books was just released in February and the university library will purchase all of them as well. The second resource I send students to is the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Notable Trade Books (<https://www.socialstudies.org/publications/notables>). The most recent lists of books are only available online for members of NCSS. However, the older book lists are accessible online using the link provided above.

I am a huge fan of historical fiction. As a small child I spent a lot of time with my grandmother who had been a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse more than a hundred years ago. I have attached a photo of her with her children at the school from 1916. She told me about living and growing up in a time before telephones, cars, and indoor plumbing were in general use. These “stories” were thrilling and inspiring. As a consequence, I enjoyed learning history and reading stories about historic events and the people who lived in times long ago. What made the stories and books so compelling is how easy it was to identify with the characters, the settings, and events. The characters all seemed so normal... They were all just average people. People I saw photos of and was related to through family. It is great to find picture books that present real people and their everyday struggles.

The concept of the picture book seems to be a bit in flux. It is easy to think of picture books as any book that includes illustrations. But, I think we have a number of different kinds of picture books. And each kind of picture book can be examined based of various characteristics. As a student I was introduced to the idea that we could have illustrated books where images (or illustrations) connected to the text, but did not necessarily provide a “re-telling” of the text. One beautiful and powerful example from the 1990s is the book, *Grandfather's Journey* by Allen Say. The illustrations in the book do not link so neatly together that one could tell the story *Grandfather's Journey* simply by looking at the illustrations. The illustrations are somewhat dependent on the text but not in a standard way you would think of illustrations supporting text and vice versa. Also, the label, picture books, tends to suggest books that are for the very youngest readers. In the recent past, it was not uncommon to hear young adult readers dismiss books because they contained images. However, the resurgence of graphic novels has shifted how we perceive and categorize books. It might be easier if we imagine a large umbrella with each of the panels in the umbrella representing a different genre of literature. Every genre may contain books with images or books we would call picture books. Under a slightly different umbrella we would have text only books – books with no images.

What is your definition of the reading process?

Generally, the reading process is divided into five areas of instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, vocabulary development, fluency practice, and text comprehension). In some programs, a whole course is offered in each of these areas. But, it is somewhat impractical to isolate each area of reading instruction because they are interrelated and dependent on each other.

What would you emphasize during courses on reading?

The courses in our program are guided by the International Literacy Association standards (<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/resource-documents/standards-appendix-A.pdf>) and provide our students with opportunities to examine the various theoretical foundations of literacy through a close examination and practice of literacy ideas in each of the following areas of literacy development and expression: viewing, visual representation, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. What kind of competences do you teach during courses on reading? Our students are required to demonstrate competence in their expression of the theoretical principles, ideas/concepts and practice of skills related to assessing, evaluating, and extending literacy for all individuals.

Do you have a curriculum for reading at schools? Can you recommend the most valuable books which are popular in the USA? Could you list 10-15 titles/authors? Is the literary canon changing?

Our program focus leans more toward preparing classroom teachers to be literacy specialists and literacy coaches. It is nearly impossible to list all of the books and resources instructors pull from in their classes. However, in our course on children's literature we generally list several books that students are required to have and read independently in addition to a bibliography of professional texts for the class. The children's books I select provide insight into the lives and experiences of people from around the world. I am trying to follow in the footsteps of Jella Lepman and Rudine Sims Bishop who have influenced our thinking about multicultural and international literature for readers. So, I endeavor to share children's books in my classes that bridge the gaps in our understanding of others – whatever "other" might be. The Outstanding International Books (OIB) list is always a great place to begin (<https://www.usbby.org/outstanding-international-books-list.html>). However, there are lots of great books each year that don't make it onto the OIB list.

So, I often talk with colleagues at conferences about the books they are reading. Here are two books I have read recently that I recommended to my students.

- ▶ Nielsen, Jennifer, A. 2019. *Words on Fire*. New York: Scholastic Press.
- ▶ Venkatraman, Padma. 2019. *The Bridge Home*. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books.

We selected *Words on Fire* for one of our whole class reads this semester. The students were also required to read one of the following books for our literature circle project this semester. These six books are from the OIB lists.

- ▶ Bassoff, Leah and DeLuca, Laura. 2014. *Lost Girl Found*. Toronto, ON, CA: Groundwood Books.
- ▶ Foreman, Michael. 2016. *The Tortoise and the Soldier: A Story of Courage and Friendship in World War I*. New York: Square Fish
- ▶ Kullab, Samya. 2017. *Escape from Syria*. Richmond Hills, ON CA: Firefly Books.
- ▶ LaBoucane-Benson, Patti. 2015. *The Outside Circle: A Graphic Novel*. Toronto, ON CA: House of Anansi Press.
- ▶ Parr, Maria. 2009. *Astrid the Unstoppable*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- ▶ Svingen, Arne. 2016. *The Ballad of a Broken Nose*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books.

Do you teach computer game narratives?

Our Literacy Education Program students are required to have a course in the use of technology for literacy instruction. All of our courses are online and available to teachers anywhere in the world. We use a variety of technology delivery formats for classes. Some courses have periodic asynchronous meetings that are recorded and made available to students who are unable to attend. Some courses have no specific meetings... Assignments are completed by students independently and monitored by the instructors. Regardless of the format for classes, instructors are available through email, etc.

What is the field of your scientific research?

I generally conduct ethnographic case studies in education related to art and culture. My dissertation research was a curriculum study that examined the issue of homelessness – how teachers share literature to teach about homelessness. I also do critical analyses of children's literature. The project I am working on currently is an examination of religious images and depictions of God in books for children. I was fortunate to receive a fellowship to the International Youth Library in Munich, Germany to work on this project in the summer of 2017. I returned to the library in the fall of 2019 to continue my work on this project.

How do you encourage children to read books? What do you think about the relationship between reading, experiences, and emotions?

The most effective way to encourage children to read books seems to be through sharing and talking about books with them. If you ask any group of people why they have read a particular book, you will probably be told, someone recommended the book to them or they heard about the book and thought

is sounded interesting. It is safe to assume the more exposure children have to books and being read to as young children the greater likelihood there is they will develop reading skills and continue to read as they grow older. These are not new ideas. Drs. William Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby did extensive research in this area in the 1980s. The emotional response children express to hearing a story or reading is evident in classrooms around the world. Every literacy teacher has numerous examples of how her students reacted to a specific book she read in class, or they will share about a passionate discussion she had with students after reading an assigned text.

Do you think that emotions connected with reading help children to understand literature?

Yes, our emotions help us navigate the world. They may be unreliable and inaccurate at times, but they provide a pathway into understanding events and feelings we are compelled to explore. It is important to help readers explore their emotional response to a book and to provide opportunities for them to express why and how reading the book touches us on many different levels. Our responses to books are not always positive and/or pleasant. When children or adults express their dislike, it is helpful to explore why they didn't like a book. We learn, through repeated readings of texts, viewing the images, and discussions of the illustrations, more about a writer and/or illustrator's craft and how the careful use of words and images elicits our responses. Television advertisers have become masters at crafting messages through words and images that manipulate us emotionally into buying all sorts of things we don't need and will never use. Stories don't just happen. Authors and illustrators work with texts and images in books to craft/capture an experience, a memory or an idea they wish to share.

Which academic textbooks/academic books can you recommend for teaching in the Department of Literary Education?

- ▶ Andersen, Rebecca S., Grant, Michael M., & Speck, Bruce W. (2007). *Technology to Teach Literacy: A Resource for K-8 Teachers*. 2nd Edition. Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- ▶ Barr, R., Blachowicz, C., Bates, A., Katz, C., & Kaufman B. (2013). *Reading Diagnosis for Teachers: An Instructional Approach* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- ▶ Bear, D. R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2016). *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary and Spelling Instruction* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson Education.
- ▶ Clay, M. M. (2014). *By Different Paths to Common Outcomes: Literacy Teaching and Learning*. Auckland, New Zealand: Global Education Systems (GES).

- ▶ Dobler, E. & Eagleton, M.B. (2015). *Reading the Web: Strategies for Internet Inquiry*. (2nd Edition). New York: Guilford Press.
- ▶ Gunning, T. G. (2016). *Creating Literacy Instruction for All Students*. 9th Edition. Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- ▶ Johnson, A. P. (2012). *A Short Guide to Action Research*, (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- ▶ Leslie, L. & Caldwell, J. (2017). *Qualitative Reading Inventory-5*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- ▶ Ruetzel, Ray D. & Cooter, Robert B. (2012). *Teaching Children to Read: The Teacher Makes the Difference* (6th Edition) Columbus, OH: Pearson Education, Inc.
- ▶ Short, K., Lynch-Brown, C. M., Tomlinson, C. M. 2013. *Essentials of Children's Literature*. 8th. Edition. Boston: Pearson.
- ▶ Tompkins, G.E. (2013). *50 Literacy Strategies Step by Step*. 4th Edition. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- ▶ Vacca, Richard T., Vacca, Jo Anne L., & Mraz, Maryann E. (2017). *Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum*, 12th Edition. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Do you cooperate with local communities and authorities? Are there any particularly interesting activities you have taken part in? Can you tell us about the goals and most important results of such projects?

This particular question does not seem to apply directly to me. However, I can say I have worked with teachers and other community agencies and professionals to promote and support literacy efforts in West Virginia and Northern Kentucky. I am the State Ambassador for the United States Board on Books for Young People in West Virginia. As a literacy professor, I have provided opportunities for my students to present research, strategies, and projects regarding literacy instruction at state, regional, and national conferences. One of the goals of our program is to support our students as they become the literacy leaders of tomorrow.

What are the most challenging issues the Departments of Education in the USA have to struggle with?

Funding for education is perhaps the greatest problem in the USA. In general, it seems educators in the USA continue to be undervalued in many states. This is especially evident as they have had to go out on strike to demand raises in pay and access to benefits. Federal and state funding cuts in education for professional development coupled with the lack of access to quality resources and materials for all children regardless of where they live in the USA has a huge impact on a child's academic achievement. It is sad to admit, but where a child lives and the child's family income level play a significant role in the academic success a child has in school.