



What Do We Mean When We Say We Want Our Children to Be Literate?

Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section

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Balancing the Literacy Curriculum: **A New Vision**

Show Time

When I told my mother that I had just won
Second place at the regional Orator's Club,
She said, "I was always good in school too."

When someone asked my father,
"Is Jerry smart?"
He said, "He must be, he's 30,
And never worked a day in his life."

One day I announced to my parents
That I had joined the Peace Corps,
That I had been invited to work
In community development in Bolivia.

My mother said, "You're giving up
your teaching job
to work with Indians?
I just don't understand you, sometimes."

My father said, "I hope to hell you know
what you are doing!"

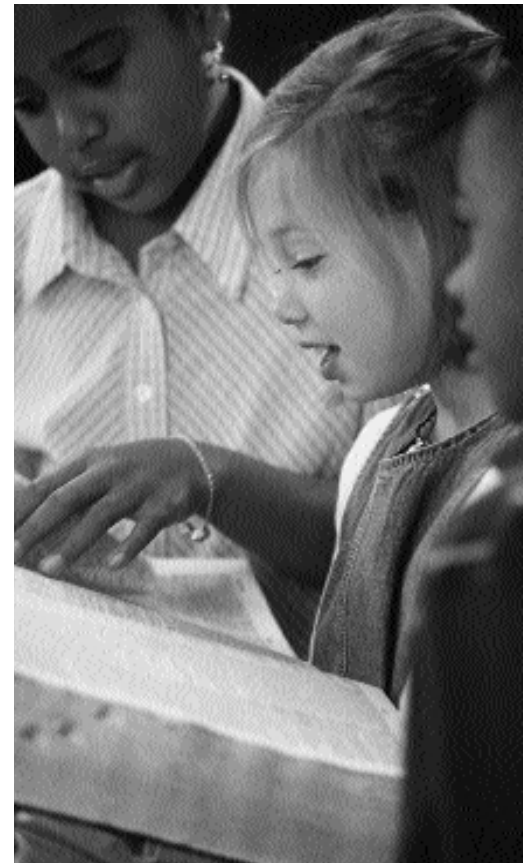
After the Peace Corps,
I got drafted.

My mother said, "Ah, my son, the soldier."
My father said, "You look real nice
in that uniform."

J. Harste

Reading this poem is a good way to begin a classroom conversation on critical literacy. Students notice right away that the narrator of the poem and his parents have very different perspectives on the events of the narrator's life. Readers are pushed to grapple with issues of perspective and history and the experiences of different generations, even within the same family. The discussion of such a text highlights a particular kind of literacy—a much more sophisticated "balance" of literacy skills than those often in place in schools today.

In this issue of *School Talk*, we'll offer a framework to think about the kinds of engagements that help readers and writers develop a critical perspective. We'll include some of our favorite texts that invite taking different perspectives, and then share some classroom strategies to get the ball rolling. ▼



Rethinking a **Balanced Curriculum**

Carolyn Burke says that the function of curriculum is to “give perspective,” by which she means provide teachers and students with a bigger picture (Short & Burke, 1991). Unfortunately, the current call for “balance” in the curriculum, regardless of its initial intent, fails to invite teachers to see the big picture. In district after district, the call for balance is too often read as a mandate to drop whatever you have been doing and add a half hour of systematic phonics to the already packed reading and writing program.

Rather than walk away from what we know about language and learning, it is important that we incorporate such mandates into a bigger picture of what it means to be literate. The framework we use to think about the kinds of literate beings our students are becoming has four components and builds on what we know about language learning. It includes the insight that literacy is a particular set of social practices, meaning that there is not just one literacy but multiple literacies. Practically, this insight means that to be truly literate we need to help children understand whose story is being told, as well as what options are available to them. It also includes Michael Halliday’s insight that children learn language, learn about language, and learn through language whenever they engage in a literacy event (see the April 1998 issue of *School Talk*, “Reading and Writing Workshop: What Is It and What Does It Look Like?”). Our evolving framework, building from Halliday’s work, appears in the chart on this page.

Strategically Balancing All Four Components

Too often language arts curricula include Learning Language and Learning about Language, without addressing Learning through Language or Learning to Use Language to Critique. This is an error. Learning drives the reading process, and questioning things that we take for granted offers choice. It is these twin processes that make literacy empowering.

What we as teachers focus on in our classrooms makes a difference. The social practices that we put in place help our students to acquire particular kinds of literacy skills. If curriculum is a metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be, then we and our children need a framework that allows us to develop rich experiences and see the “big picture” when planning and living curriculum.

The ability to sound out words and make meaning from texts makes children good consumers rather than good citizens. To be truly literate, children need to understand how texts work and that they as literate beings have options in terms of how they are going to respond to a particular text in a given setting. Even further, they need to know how to use reading and writing to learn. Whether students are investigating issues of personal inter-

est or responding to a community issue through writing for the school paper, engaged and active learning is the goal.



While working with “Show Time” (the poem that introduces this issue) incorporates all four components of what we see as a balanced curriculum, it is important to understand that not every engagement needs to be this comprehensive. Some curricular engagements may highlight just one component of this framework; later, teachers can make sure that other components are addressed. And often curriculum engagements take us in directions we may not originally predict. Having such a framework in mind allows us to think more strategically about the balance of experiences we provide. ▼

Learning Language	Learning about Language
<p>Using language and other sign systems as a meaning-making process, as during regularly scheduled read-aloud, partner reading with big books, readers theater, or independent reading and writing engagements. Students might also keep journals, say something to a classmate about what they read, or symbolize in art what they think the story means.</p> <p>Examples: Read Aloud Writer’s Notebook Shared Reading Big Books Partner Reading Journals Readers Theater Reading Log Independent reading and writing</p>	<p>Understanding how texts operate and how they are coded. This includes the teaching of letter-sound relationships and understanding how language works, as when introducing strategies that students might use in comprehending books, demonstrating how texts include some people while excluding others, or conducting a mini-lesson on how authors get texts to serve their purposes.</p> <p>Examples: Strategy Instruction Mini-lessons Demonstrations Class Charts Focused lessons</p>
Learning through Language	Learning to Use Language to Critique
<p>Using reading and writing as tools and toys for learning about our world, as when teachers put together text sets that allow children to explore topics of personal interest, ask them to keep reflective journals, or support them in conducting focused studies centered around their own inquiry questions.</p> <p>Examples: Literature Study Sketch to Stretch Inquiry or Focus Studies Say Something Reflective Journals Process Drama</p>	<p>Using language to question what seems normal and natural, as well as to redesign and create alternate social worlds, as when teachers create spaces in their classroom for conversations about social issues or invite children to interrogate the Internet, media, advertisements, and other everyday texts.</p> <p>Examples: Audit trail “Building off the every day” Social action projects Books that support critical conversation</p>

Teacher Story #1: Jerry Harste

Engaging Writing

After reading “Show Time” with a class, I like to have children break up in groups of three to try reading the poem for themselves and to talk about what the setting for this poem might look like as well as sound like. I’ve successfully used this poem with all ages from nine-year-olds to adults.

At some point, I like to stop and play “Three, Two, One,” a strategy in which children are asked to:

- generate **three** ideas/words that they think capture the spirit of the poem (“uniform,” “conditional,” “values,” etc.)
- write **two** short phrases using any one of the identified ideas/words (“uniform lives,” “conditional love,” etc.)
- write **one** phrase or sentence that captures what they think is the “cultural story” being told in this poem (“The generation gap!” “Parents just don’t understand,” and our favorite, “Uncle Sam wants you!”)

I’ve already talked with the children about “cultural stories,” of course. I’ve explained that these are the frameworks we have available in our culture to make sense of things. Men are supposed to fight for their country, act tough, be breadwinners, and, if they have a role in the family, it is often disciplinarian (“Just wait until Dad gets home!”). Women are seen as gentler, more loving, and, in terms of the family, caregivers and nurturers. There are, of course, exceptions to these cultural stories, but for the most part cultural stories represent our society’s dominant way of thinking about things. “Show Time” captures the dominant thinking in society, as well as what is often taken to be both “normal” and “natural.”

After discussion of the students’ one-sentence cultural stories, we invite them to discuss any one of three questions we’ve written on the board:

1. How would you describe the narrator’s perspective? Explain.
2. Is the person narrating the poem a male or a female? How old? What arguments can you make for your decision?
3. When have *your* intentions been misunderstood? What did you learn?



After talking about these questions, we invite students to think about how they were raised and what a similar scene from their lives might look and feel like, and to write it up in *Show Time* style. Children love to dramatize their write-ups. We, of course, insist that they play “Three, Two, One” after each drama. Not surprisingly, students get very good at identifying, as well as comparing and contrasting, the different cultural stories that underlie their poems. The more diverse the student body, the more distinct the cultural stories told, and the greater the insight into how language and experience shape different social worlds.

While we want children to read for meaning, we also want them to begin to understand how language works and what kinds of work it does. We want them to use reading, writing, and the arts to learn; we want them to get smarter about their world and to be critically literate, that is, consciously aware of how language constructs them and how it is that the things they read that seem normal and natural position them. We want children to know how to write powerful texts that counter the dominant way of knowing, and to be able to consciously make decisions as to how they are going to act in and interact with the world. ▼

Teacher Story #2: Barry Hoonan

Engaging Everyday Texts

Anyone working with children these days can’t help but suspect that children learn more about literacy outside of school than they do in school. The social practices that have made Disney, Nike, the Internet, television, Old Navy, Eminem, cell phones, computer games, and other icons of popular culture so prevalent constitute the kinds of “everyday literacies” that truly impact kids’ lives. By contrast, school literacy pales to insignificant.

One of the challenges to us as educators is to create the critical spaces in our classrooms that can engage these everyday literacies and encourage taking a more critical per-

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spective. One strategy Barry Hoonan uses is looking closely at magazine covers to see how artists use art as a vehicle for commentary or countercontext to current cultural issues. Parents from his classroom community regularly save magazine covers to support such discussions, from *The New Yorker* in particular. The students look closely to see how issues are captured metaphorically through art.

Barry’s fifth/sixth-grade class had divided up a set of such covers one afternoon last fall. A lot of laughing

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Engaging Literature

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and energy came from one group as they came to a Halloween week *New Yorker* cover (November 1, 1999) that depicted children in masks trick-or-treating and Pokemon, with a Pokemon mask, moving away from the group dragging a giant knapsack full of money. The students' interest in Pokemon had energized their conversation, but Barry saw the opportunity for yet a closer look. He borrowed the cover and made a transparency during the lunch break, then gathered the class after lunch and invited them to look more closely. Here are several comments:

Yeah, *Pokemon* is the fad and everyone is going crazy buying *Pokemon* candy and cards. Here *Pokemon* is holding all the money because all the kids are buying that merchandise. There's also a mix of traditional costumes in the background and then there is Darth Maul and Spiderman up front. This seems to be because they're more trendy. Kids want in on the new fad and what's most popular. I bet fifty kids dressed up as Darth Maul and next year we won't see any! That's how fast fads can change!

Pokemon is making so much money that *The New Yorker* put Pichaku on the cover showing how much it makes. Kids are willing to pay so much money!

I see *Pokemon* raking in all the money, while the classic businesses look bewildered. It's because this new guy is coming into their area and making all the bucks!

Barry recognized the seed of a larger project in this critical instance, but he wasn't sure quite how it could evolve or how to support its further development. As he later described, engaging critical issues isn't part of the conversation among his colleagues and peers. He wonders how other teachers might have capitalized on this incident, bringing it to the center of the curriculum rather than leaving it as a fringe experience. ▼

In the April 2001 issue of *School Talk*, the editors shared the story of Lee Heffernan's efforts to inspire more passion in her students' writing. In this issue we'll share the next step on Lee's journey—what turns out to be the fourth year that she and Mitzi Lewison have collaborated to make the reading and writing workshop curriculum more critical. Their work engaging literature began when Lee realized that the texts used in the ongoing classroom literature study didn't add up to anything bigger than talk about books. Reading Julius Lester's book *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*

gave her a new sense of the possibilities. She read the book aloud to her students, noting their somber and thoughtful responses, as well as some uncomfortable laughter and insensitive comments. She knew that she had a lot of thoughtful work ahead.

Since that time Lee has developed the following six-session format for book discussions. She and Mitzi credit these directed but open-ended response strategies for launching the powerful literature discussions that now characterize reading and writing workshop in her classroom. We invite you to give this format a try. ▼

Session 1

Read the book aloud with lots of interruptions for student response and questions.

Session 2

Picture walk through the book.

Small groups meet to discuss the book and fill out a response sheet:

What's important to remember about this book?

What surprised you about this book?

What questions do you have?

Name a possible writing topic from your own life that relates to the book.

The teacher compiles questions from all of the groups onto a single sheet.

Session 3

Different groupings of students meet to discuss the question list generated from the response sheets.

Groups monitor their responses to the questions by putting a check next to questions that didn't generate much conversation and a star next to questions that they discussed at length.

Session 4

Whole-group meeting to discuss starred questions.

Session 5

Find a way to represent our thinking about this book for the class Learning Wall.

Which picture should be photocopied for our Learning Wall?

What caption will best represent our discussions about the book?

Session 6

Everyone writes a couple of pages in his or her writer's notebook about the writing topic named on the response sheet in session 2. These entries are later revisited to determine potential topics to develop further.

Try a New Book

We've spent the last several years collecting children's picture books and young adult novels that support critical conversations. Each is full of potential to start conversations among the readers and writers in your classroom community. Here are five of our favorites:

***Bat 6* by Virginia E. Wolff** (New York: Scholastic, 1998): At the end of World War II, two Oregon towns are gearing up for the annual sixth-grade girls' softball game. From the perspectives of 21 different characters, we hear first of the excitement and preparation leading up to the game, and then how it is cut short by an incident of racial violence. The characters' struggles to make sense of what happened bring many to question their acceptance of the war's racism and violence and provide fertile ground for a discussion of diversity, difference, and dissent, especially in the context of World War II, which is often portrayed as uniting all Americans.

***Making Up Megaboy* by Virginia Walter** (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 1998): This remarkable book presents an extremely disturbing, realistic, and well-crafted tale of a 13-year-old boy who shoots and kills the elderly Korean proprietor of a convenience store. The story, told through the voices of community members, brings us face-to-face with real-world issues that have no easy answers, including teenage violence, the proliferation of guns, the plight of victims of violence, and small-town prejudice. Because of the disturbing content and treatment, this book is probably best used as a read-aloud text followed by a class discussion.

***Seed Folks* by Paul Fleischman** (New York: HarperCollins, 1997): A nine-year-old Vietnamese girl plants dried lima beans in a trash-filled vacant lot in an attempt to spiritually connect with her dead father. Through a series of human interactions, the lot is transformed into a community garden, a place where people who had previously been distrustful of each other are able to come together with a common purpose. The individual and collective stories of the 13 charac-

ters can stimulate classroom discussions of such topics as ageism, the social toll of economically depressed inner cities, the immigrant experience, and racial prejudice.

***Sister Anne's Hands* by Marybeth Lorbiecki** (New York: Dial Books, 1998): Set in the context of the racially torn 1960s, this is the story of second-grader Anna Zabrocky and her first encounter with an African American. Anna's teacher, Sister Anne, turns a classroom incident into an opportunity to learn about Black Americans and to understand the systems of oppression and opposition in our society. Hands become the metaphor for what we can give and learn across the racial divide. A gentle and uplifting story, *Sister Anne's Hands* presents a good way to initiate conversations about difference.

***Whitewash* by Ntozake Shange** (New York: Walker, 1997): An African American preschooler named Helene-Angel is walking home from school with her brother one day when they are surrounded by a gang of white kids, who paint her face white as they show her how to be a "true American." Based on a series of true events, *Whitewash* is a powerful story that gives voice to a little-known incident that became a lesson in tolerance and a child's triumph. The book lends itself

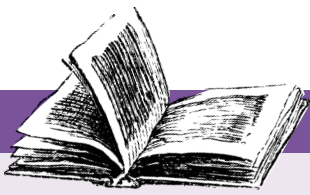
to conversations on diversity, difference, and the role that each person plays in a multilingual and multicultural society.

For additional resources, see *Adventuring with Books*, 12th edition, Chapter 20 (Harste 2000). ▼

Join a New Conversation

We hope these teacher stories and titles of great books will inspire you to create a "new balance" in your own classroom. And we're inviting you to become part of a new conversation about making reading and writing programs "add up" to something more. Barry Hoonan doesn't yet have a school-based community to help him work through the possible directions he could have taken his class conversation about *Pokemon*, and we recognize that he might not be the only teacher eager for a community to help push his thinking. Join Barry and other educators on a new NCTE listserv: becoming-critical@lists.ncte.org. We want to hear from you! ▼





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