Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters
PATRICIA BANDRE’, PH.D.
USD 305, SALINA, KS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*In K-5, the Standards follow NAEP’s lead in balancing the reading of literature with the reading of informational texts, including texts in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. In accord with NAEP’s growing emphasis on informational texts in the higher grades, the Standards demand that a significant amount of reading of informational texts take place in and outside the ELA classroom. Fulfilling the Standards for 6-12 ELA requires much greater attention to a specific category of informational text—literary nonfiction—than has been traditional. Because the ELA classroom must focus on literature (stories, drama, and poetry) as well as literary nonfiction, a great deal of informational reading in grades 6-12 must take place in other classes if the NAEP assessment framework is to be matched instructionally* (CCSS, 2010, p. 5).
Classrooms Need Balance...

Fiction  Nonfiction

...Children Need Stories

“...literature provides the opportunity to “live through,” not just have “knowledge about” life. This vision provides a way for students to imagine and live within and across global cultures and relationships” (Short, 2012, p.13).

“Literature illuminates what it means to be human and makes accessible the most fundamental experiences of life – love, hope, loneliness, despair, fear, and belonging. Literature is the imaginative shaping of experience and thought in the forms and structures of language” (Short, 2012, p. 11)

“...children read literature to experience life; they live inside the world of story to engage in inquiry that transforms their thinking about their lives and the world” (Rosenblatt as cited in Short, 2012, p. 11)

Katherine Paterson (2000), a highly respected award-winning author of stories for children and young adults says, “Well, books are a kind of practice for life. Often people tell me they have given Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1977) to a child who as suffered some terrible loss. When they do, I want to say, “Too late, too late.” The time a child needs a book about life’s dark passages is before he or she has had to experience them. We need practice with loss, rehearsal for grieving, just as we need preparation for decision-making” (p. 6).
We want students to exhibit a depth of understanding, but what does it mean to understand something deeply? What part does literature play in the process?

“I can access information on almost any topic. However, as I argue throughout this book, access to information does not guarantee understanding, nor does it necessarily create the conditions for deep insight. Understanding requires interpretation, and interpretation depends on learned practices. Reading literature in school still matters because it creates opportunities for such practices to be learned” (Sumara, 2002, p. xiv).

“The reading, marking, re-reading, re-marking, of literary texts juxtaposed with engagement with non-literary texts, and other collected research data (autobiographical, biographical, ethnographic), creates the skeletal framework for interpretive work” (Sumara, 2002, p. 101).

Cognitive Strategies May Lead to …

- A Sense of Importance: a clear idea of what matters most
- General Empathy: the reader is part of the story - knows the characters, is part of the setting, brings something of himself to the events and resolution; emotions are aroused
- New Applications: retain and reapply newly learned concepts in new settings and circumstances
- Character Empathy: a sense of feeling and believing what the character feels and believes
- Connections: realization that new material links with and extends known information; affirms understanding
- Setting Empathy: a feeling of actually being there – experiencing the time, place, and conditions
- Clarity about the Problem and Possible Solution(s): what makes a situation problematic and what might be done to overcome that problem
- Conflict Empathy: a sense of experiencing a similar conflict – relates to the internal and/or external struggle being endured
- Author’s Intent: realizing what the author thinks is important and is trying to communicate
- Author Empathy: understanding why/how the reader’s interpretations are shaped as they are and what tools the author used to shape the reader’s interpretation

Essential Questions:…

- Are open-ended...tend not to have a final, single correct answer
- Are thought-provoking and engaging – may spark debate
- Require the use of higher-order thinking – analysis, inference, evaluation
- Lead to transferable ideas within – and sometimes across – disciplines
- Raise additional questions
- Require support and justification
- Require the need to be revisited again and again
An Essential Question in Your Class….

“Is standing up and speaking out worth the risk?”

How would different types of text help you and your students think about this question?

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Lowell Mill Women Create the First Union of Working Women

In the 1830s, half a century before the better-known labor movements for workers’ rights in the United States, the Lowell mill women organized, went on strike and mobilized in politics; when women couldn’t vote—and created the first union of working women in American history.

The Lowell, Mass., textile mills where they worked were wildly abused. But for the young women from around New England who made the mills run, they were a living hell. A mill worker named Amelia—she didn’t want her full name—wrote that mill girls worked on average of nearly 12 hours a day. It was worse than “the poor peasant of Ireland or the Russian serf who labors from sun to sun.”


Chapter 9 — The Weaving Room

Creation! What a noise! Clatter and clack, great shuddering mounds, groans, creaks, and rattles. The shrieks and whistles of huge leather belts on wheels. And when her brain cleared enough, Lydia saw through the murky air row upon row of machines, eerily like the old hand loom in Quaker Stevens’s house, but as unlike as a nightmare, for these creatures had come to life. They seemed moved by eyes alone—the eyes of next, vigilant young women—needing only the occasional, swift intervention of a human hand to keep them darning.

From the overarching metal frame crowning each machine, wooden harnesses, carrying hundreds of warp threads drawn from a massive beam at the back of each loom, clanked up and down. Shuttles holding the web thread hurled themselves like beasts of prey through the tall forests of warp threads, and beaters slammed the threads tightly into place. With alarming speed, inches of finished cloth rolled up on the beams at the front of the looms.
An Essential Question in Your Class…

“Is standing up and speaking out worth the risk?”

How did the two types of text help you think about the answer to this question?

Classrooms Need Balance...

Fiction vs. Nonfiction
“Stories have the power to direct and change our lives and world – if we provide the time and space necessary for their role in meaning making, life making, and world making” (Short, 2012, p.17).

References