literacy educators face increasing pressure to produce high test scores, to prepare multiliterate students to navigate an ever-changing and technologically advanced world (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), and, in most districts, to adhere to a commercially produced reading program. These pressures may leave educators wondering where, or if, children’s literature fits into a language arts program at all. Has the teaching of children’s literature in language arts education become outdated, or is this simply the residual effect of another pendulum swing?

An enduring cyclical debate over what is considered appropriate and effective reading instruction for children has at times privileged literature over skills-based instruction and vice-versa. The earliest methods of reading instruction up to the mid-nineteenth century consisted of a two-step process of teaching the alphabet code and then having children read the texts available to them. This was typically limited to “The Bible, nationalistic and patriotic essays, and a few other materials written for adults” (Creighton, 1997, p. 439). The mid-nineteenth century witnessed the introduction of leveled books and a focus on comprehension, since phonetic instruction and comprehension instruction were deemed “mutually incompatible.” Emergent reading programs continued to focus on comprehension, recognizing whole words by sight and using context clues to decode text. Since the 1950s, deliberation around reading instruction and elementary literacy curriculum has focused primarily on the juxtaposition of whole-language instruction and skills-based instruction. While most educators would agree that a language arts program combining whole-language instruction, skills-based instruction, and quality children’s literature is best for academic literacy development, the overwhelming use of commercially produced reading programs in elementary classrooms suggests that literature, beyond abridged versions in anthologies, is not necessarily valued. In the spirit of this special issue, we sought out professional resources that successfully argue the contrary.

In this review, we focus on three professional texts that offer compelling arguments for: 1) integrating an arts-based approach to literature as part of a comprehensive literacy program, 2) using literature to prompt and support children’s inquiries of the world in a classroom guided by critical literacy; and 3) maximizing the connection between literature and literacy by developing students’ passion for reading. These texts speak to pre-service and pre-K–12 teachers, researchers, and graduate level educators with suggestions of useful and engaging children’s literature, as well as multiple approaches to accessing text with readers of all ages.

Encountering Children’s Literature: An Arts Approach
Written by Jane M. Gangi

In this era of high-stakes testing and pressure for “back to basics” teaching, Jane M. Gangi’s textbook makes bold claims that fly in the face of what has become conventional wisdom among many policy makers, administrators, and even educators themselves. Rather than pitting the arts against standards, subject-area teaching and learning, urban education, special education, and the like, Gangi maintains that giving time, attention, and funding to arts-intensive literature programs actually benefits the very areas that are usually seen as competitors for scarce resources. Using quotes from artists, scientists, politicians, and educators, along with the findings from a plethora of research studies to support her claims, Gangi...
presents a compelling argument for considering an arts approach to literature as an integral part of a literacy program.

If this text’s contribution to the field of children’s literature were simply to make an argument that an arts-based approach is beneficial in the study of literature and the acquisition of literacy, it would be significant; however, Gangi goes much further in her claims, maintaining that, in fact, arts-based approaches to education are multicultural and should be used to further the goals of critical literacy, culturally responsive teaching, and social justice. Gangi cites the studies of scholars and educators of color to support her assertions; these studies are not only integrated into the text itself, but also are listed on tables such as “The Arts and Academic Achievement: What Research Says” and in the “Further Reading” sections at the ends of the respective chapters. In addition, at the conclusion of each chapter, Gangi connects her perspectives to standards outlined by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), in this way solidifying her claims that arts-based education is, in fact, aligned with measures of effective teacher education.

While this publication can certainly be used for professional development, Gangi’s book is first and foremost a textbook—a resource for teacher education courses, intended for preservice and inservice teachers. As a fairly brief children’s literature text (softcover), Encountering Children’s Literature includes both theory and practice; Gangi balances the philosophical underpinnings of her perspectives on literature and the arts with practical directives to aspiring and practicing teachers.

Each chapter begins with a highly prescriptive arts-based activity intended to support those who consider themselves novices at an arts-based approach to literature (and because so few teachers were educated as students or trained as teachers in these methods, novices abound even among seasoned educators). These activities include narrative pantomime, reading aloud, storytelling, visual arts, choral reading, readers theater, literature circles, role playing, story dramatization, and the like; most of the activities lean strongly toward dramatic performance, and an entire chapter of the book is devoted exclusively to drama for children. Gangi also provides lists of books (the majority of them culturally responsive books by and about people from diverse groups in society) to aid teachers in book selections, and at the end of each chapter, Gangi includes several additional open-ended activities and readings designed to supplement the more structured interactions.

At the same time, Gangi provides a solid theoretical basis for an arts-based approach to literature in a number of ways: she includes an impressive history of children’s literature in general, as well as histories of poetry, picturebooks, drama, and other genres of children’s literature, paying particular attention to milestones in the development of literature by and about underrepresented groups, and she provides critiques of literature that overlooks or denigrates diverse groups of people. Each chapter has lists of relevant research, websites, and suggested scholarly readings, providing a strong conceptual base to balance the practical suggestions that are provided through the lists of literary texts and activities.

Quite surprisingly, as part of her quest for diversity in literature and in artistic expression, Gangi includes an entire chapter devoted to “Celebrations and Commemorations,” in which she examines literature from various religious traditions and cultural commemorations, and presents historical sources of religious literature (including Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Jainism, Sikhism, and various American Indian spiritual practices).

Joseph Bruchac, renowned American Indian storyteller and writer, provides an impressive introduction to this text, in which he says, “I celebrate books that help shape a wider awareness of the world, especially when they are for young readers. The marvelously inclusive approach of this book is one reason why I was delighted to be asked to write these few prefatory words. But there is more. I do not know of another book that has both undertaken and succeeded so well at the task shouldered by this text, the important job of bringing the arts—in the fullest and most glorious sense of the word—into the study, the experience, the celebration of the best literature available to children” (p. x).

While in the opening chapters the links between culturally responsive pedagogy and an arts-based approach may seem a little weak (with the goals of each occasionally conflated, and the connections between these areas poorly developed), and while some of the links Gangi makes between various aspects of her arguments may
seem a bit tenuous, as she works her way through the genres of children’s literature, she shores up her claims and supports her perspectives in ways that are eventually quite compelling, even to those who are disinclined to accept her original assertions. While Encountering Children’s Literature works best as a text for those who are already convinced of the importance of the arts in education (there are some excellent quotes that argue in favor of arts-based education that beg to be used in faculty meetings and teachers’ lounges), Gangi’s extensive research and tireless suggestions for activities go far in making a convincing case in favor of the arts as a form of critical literacy and culturally responsive teaching.

At a time when most of the current children’s literature texts move farther and farther into the worlds of standards, assessments, and reading interventions, and increasingly away from making serious arguments for pleasure, passion, and engagement with books, Gangi’s text stands out from the rest. The trade books she includes as examples are new, interesting, and often uncommon, and while critics might argue that in her privileging of multicultural literature she neglects some of the “old favorites” of the world of books for children, in fact the literature she introduces is relevant, authentic, and a necessary counterpoint to generations of “classics” for children that have been written almost exclusively by and about white middle class European Americans.

This is a smart, thoughtful, and innovative text. For those of us who have not ventured into the world of drama, choral reading, storytelling, and the rest, Gangi’s passion may seem a little daunting; however, her arguments are convincing, her histories of the various genres and movements in literature are valuable, and her lists of relevant research and culturally diverse literature are impressive.

**Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children**

*Written by Vivian Vasquez*


While Gangi includes highly prescriptive arts-based activities in her text, Vivian Vasquez approaches the use of children’s literature in her classroom from a perspective that leaves little, if any, room for prescriptive curriculum or practice. In *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, Vasquez discusses her role as a critical pedagogue and, drawing from her research and experiences as an educator, argues that a “critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived” and incorporated into children’s daily lives “to help children understand the social and political issues around them” (p. 1). Vasquez shares with readers how her Junior Kindergarten students experienced a literacy-rich inquiry curriculum that addressed issues of social justice and equity by drawing upon multiple genres of children’s literature, including well-known fictional texts such as *The Great Kapok Tree* (Cherry, 1990) and *Baby Beluga* (Raffi, 1992), the fractured fairytale *Bad Egg: The True Story of Humpty Dumpty* (Hayes, 1992), and the folktale *Something from Nothing* (Gilman, 1992). She traces the process of how her critical literacy curriculum evolved through daily discussions that arose out of books or issues confronting their immediate environment. Her children engaged in critical literacies that challenged the status quo or questioned their own assumptions of various texts. Often these inquiries occurred in response to literature, or were addressed through children’s literature. To document their developing curriculum and make connections among five overarching themes throughout the school year (environmental issues, different people and different places, girls and boys, TV and newspapers, strength and power), the class created an audit trail, or *Learning Wall*, comprised of book covers, photographs, drawings, stuffed toys, magazine ads, newspaper clippings, and transcripts of class discussions.

Class-generated inquiries invited the children to draw upon multiple literacies as they pursued their questions and initiated social action. While reading *Quick as a Cricket* (Wood, 1993), one student’s question about the difference between toads and frogs led the class into an exploration of their habitats, including the rainforest. As they learned more about the rainforest through research using both narrative and informational children’s texts, they wrote letters to parents asking them not to buy wood taken from rainforests, they designed a poster and sent it to the local lumber yard asking that they not buy wood from rainforests, and they organized travel trunks to send to classrooms...
around the world informing other students of rainforest destruction. Students also wrote and performed a play for their school, designed the backdrop, created invitations, and produced information sheets for the play.

Each chapter focuses on a different critical literacy event originating from the children’s inquiries. Two chapters in particular focus on the role of children’s literature in addressing their inquiries. In chapter four, when the class learns that a classmate cannot participate in the annual school barbecue because he is a vegetarian, the class writes letters to the barbecue chairperson and the principal asking them to provide food for vegetarians at future school barbecues. Vasquez uses this opportunity to share Where the Forest Meets the Sea (Baker, 1988) to connect the issue of vegetarianism to their previous inquiry on environmental issues. Recognizing the power and multiple uses of literature, they ask the school librarian to add books about vegetarianism to their library. In the following chapter, the class decides to take action when one student shares the previous evening’s news that the beluga whales in southeastern Canada’s St. Lawrence River are in danger because of toxins flowing into the water. Vasquez reads Raffi’s Baby Beluga picturebook to provide a contrary perspective to the life of a beluga prior to the class completing an intertextual analysis of both the book and news report and then adapting the Baby Beluga text to include a plea to save the belugas. After comparing these two texts, they decide to donate money raised from their classroom store to the World Wildlife Fund of Canada, an organization dedicated to saving the belugas.

After months of reading and questioning children’s literature to explore the five overarching themes, the children were adept at exploring other texts within the context of the themes. In the final chapter, Vasquez shares how her students completed a critical analysis of McDonald’s Happy Meal toys framed by the themes “girls and boys” and “strength and power.” Through the previous use of literature, students learned how to read texts beyond the words on the page to learn more about their world. The same inquiry skills used to read Quick as a Cricket, for example, were applied beyond children’s literature for a powerful learning experience for both Vasquez and her students.

While the critical literacy curriculum originated from children’s inquiries, Vasquez, like most K–12 teachers, was still bound by the mandated curriculum. Rather than adding on critical literacies as an extracurricular activity, Vasquez found spaces within the curriculum mandates to negotiate critical literacies “as” and “into” curriculum, while encouraging class-generated inquiries (p. 32). The initial inquiry by a four-year-old about the differences between toads and frogs, based on Quick as a Cricket, occurred on the first day of the school year and commences Vasquez’s conceptual understanding of how to “do critical literacy theory.” As she conceptualized critical literacy, she created additional curricular spaces that developed into a recursive practice. Vasquez’s book pushes the reader’s thinking about what is possible in curriculum at any level, with the support of quality literature as the springboard and resource for engaging in critical literacy.

Vasquez’s book provides a compelling illustration of the role of children’s literature in the classroom and in children’s lives. Although her students were young, they consumed and produced texts within and beyond the classroom. Literature played a significant role in prompting inquiries and providing information to research solutions. For these reasons, preservice and inservice pre-K–12 teachers, researchers, and graduate level educators will find this book compelling and motivating. To use Vasquez’s words, it will challenge us “to make significant” the issues that matter.

The Power of Reading: Insights from Research (2nd ed.)
Written by Stephen Krashen

Just as the connections between literacy and literature are made evident throughout Vasquez’s book, Krashen, in a new edition of his 1993 book, also discusses these connections and what educators, parents, researchers, policy makers, and curriculum developers might consider when questioning the role of literature in the lives of students. He provides a no-frills, research-rich discussion in three succinct chapters about the benefits of reading. He presents a
compelling argument for spending increased time and resources on developing readers who read for the sheer pleasure of it—a refreshing viewpoint in an environment of prescriptive reading programs, mandates, and a fixation on high test scores. Similar to Vasquez, Krashen does not provide prescriptive lessons or formulas, but rather identifies what he asserts has been lost in many language arts programs: a focus on helping students to cultivate a love for reading first, which leads to increased reading followed by more highly developed literacy skills and eventually the high test scores with which many are concerned. He also addresses how the pleasure of reading benefits students who are learning English or another language, making his book timely and significant given the increasing percentage of school-age English Learners.

In the Introduction, Krashen begins with a quote listing the benefits of avid reading, then follows with a familiar question, “Is there a literacy crisis?” He argues that recent media portrayals of a “literacy crisis” are misleading. Few adults who have been through the educational system can not read or write at a basic level; in fact, literacy in the United States has steadily risen over the past hundred years. However, the complex literacy demands of modern society require skills beyond a basic third- or fourth-grade level. Rewording the question to specify the more advanced literacy skills needed to thrive in this society would spark a more relevant discussion of whether or not people are “literate.”

The opening paragraphs prepare readers for the remainder of the book, which is essentially a lengthy and convincing literature review of the advantages of incorporating free voluntary reading (FVR) in classroom practice from preschool to adult programs and with native and non-native language learners. Written reports and tests for comprehension, spelling, or vocabulary are absent in FVR. Instead, readers engage in authentic, pleasurable interactions with texts, reflecting a common practice of highly literate people. Krashen does not claim that FVR is the solution to needed complex multiliteracies for a rapidly changing and technologically advanced society, but he successfully demonstrates through abundant research that reading for pleasure has been shown to improve reading and writing proficiency. Krashen includes national and international research to address familiar classroom practices, literature genres, the connection between literacy and libraries, and motivation to improve literacy achievement.

The first chapter, “The Research,” is a dense literature review confirming the benefits of FVR and the disadvantages of isolated direct instruction. Krashen asserts that, “FVR is the missing ingredient in first language ‘language arts’ as well as intermediate second and foreign language instruction” (p. 1). He proceeds with empirical research on “In-School Free Reading Programs,” such as sustained silent reading, self-selected reading, and extensive reading, as well as “out of school self-reported reading” and how participants in multiple studies demonstrated improvement in reading comprehension, writing style, grammar, spelling, and vocabulary development.

When students are given opportunities to read for pleasure, children’s literature becomes an obvious resource. Since children’s literature is written specifically with children’s interests and reading abilities in mind, fostering a passion for reading can easily begin with these texts. Krashen then synthesizes research showing direct instruction to be less effective than FVR and describes common arguments against direct instruction. He also identifies emotional benefits of reading, such as increased motivation and students’ preference for FVR over traditional language arts practices. He concludes the chapter with a synthesis of the research, encapsulated in five words: “Reading is good for you” (p. 37). Once readers have navigated the compilation of research, it’s difficult to doubt Krashen’s claim that “Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammatical competence, and the only way we become good spellers” (p. 37).

Many of the convincing, commonsense assertions made in the first chapter are further supported in the second chapter, “The Cure.” Based on findings from international empirical research, Krashen states, “If free voluntary reading is the only way to develop adequate levels of reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling, the implications are clear . . . ,” FVR must be a part of language education. He spends 20 pages justifying the need for well-resourced, accessible public and school libraries managed by knowledgeable, full-time librarians.
He offers a compelling suggestion for how to fund libraries and make FVR an attractive possibility for more children. He states, “An article in Education Week announced that the testing required for No Child Left Behind will cost $5.3 billion between 2002 and 2008” (p. 77) and invites readers to consider how the interest alone would support book purchases and staffing in schools serving a high-poverty population. In addition to access to literature, Krashen provides new ideas on how to make his theory a reality. Other “cures” include engaging children in read-alouds, providing time and space for in-school FVR programs, modeling reading for children of all ages, and directly encouraging reading. The chapter then explores literature genres and the benefits of comic books, teen romance literature, and magazines. Krashen acknowledges that these “light readings” will probably not lead to advanced levels of development, but studies suggest they may improve comprehension and vocabulary development and lead to more challenging and substantive reading. Certainly, children’s literature would be more appropriate for younger readers than the comic books, teen romances, and magazines he discusses, but the benefits are similar. Based on the research Krashen discusses, engaging children in pleasurable reading as part of a comprehensive language arts program promises literacy developments and other positive outcomes.

In the third and final chapter, “Other Issues and Conclusions,” Krashen addresses questions and concerns readers may have generated while reading the research and his proposed cures. He admits that FVR cannot ensure complete acquisition of writing conventions such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation, so these might be addressed by direct instruction and the use of grammar handbooks and dictionaries, but not at the cost of authentic writing. He returns to promoting FVR, arguing that with extensive free reading, individuals will eventually acquire writing conventions and develop their writing style since “writing style does not come from actual writing experience, but from reading” (p. 132). In other words, writing alone does not guarantee better writing; one also needs to do extensive reading to support and develop personal writing style.

In the second half of the chapter, Krashen discusses the impact of television on reading and other aspects of language, as well as on second language learners, who are rapidly becoming a significant percentage of K–12 students. He reminds readers of what research has confirmed for over 20 years (Cummins, 1981), that it is easier to learn to read in the first language and transfer those abilities to the second language. Aside from language acquisition, reading for pleasure in the first language will presumably transfer to a pleasure of reading in the second language.

In the chapter conclusion, Krashen does not contend that FVR should become the reading program; rather, educators should implement FVR within their existing language arts program as a complement. He speaks to educators, administrators, and parents in a direct and convincing manner about the pleasures and academic benefits of FVR. It is a refreshing break from the discouraging talk around high-stakes testing, limited teacher agency, and what students and teachers are not accomplishing in schools.

The text is highly accessible with marginal notes summarizing key points. At the end of each chapter, Krashen provides explanations and detailed commentary on the research cited, making the reference section a valuable resource for those interested in topics such as international literacy research, in and out of school literacy practices, and second language acquisition. Given the current prescriptive nature of educational pedagogy, Krashen’s book is hopeful. He includes reasonable suggestions that could easily add to the quality and enjoyment of education for both teachers and students. For newer teachers who entered the profession with the current emphasis on high-stakes testing and commercially produced reading programs, Krashen challenges one to think beyond Teacher Guides and scripted curriculum to make room for quality time to read interesting literature. For veteran teachers who can recall a time before prescriptive language arts programs, when teachers had the time and authority to create thematic units and incorporate quality children’s literature, Krashen validates the belief that there is still a need for children’s literature in today’s classrooms. For all educators, he provides a wealth of research confirming most language arts educators’ intuition about the positive benefits of using children’s literature to engage and develop readers. Despite a climate in which this is not the “norm,” incorporating children’s literature into our curricula and classroom
practices can produce similar, if not more impressive, outcomes.

Finally, Krashen addresses serious concerns in K–12 classrooms, such as equal access to resources and meeting the needs of second language learners. By including international literacy research, readers can think beyond American schools to consider new possibilities for ensuring that students acquire more than basic reading and writing skills. Krashen reminds readers that students deserve more than limited direct instruction and that bringing pleasure back to the classroom may not be as difficult as we think if we are willing to reintroduce engaging literature and time to read in language arts programs. By offering concrete examples and practical strategies for how educators can make changes in their instruction and classroom space, Krashen bridges implications from research and innovative classroom literacy practices.

The three books discussed in this review provide varied perspectives on how children’s literature might be used in the classroom, from Gangi’s specific arts-based activities for approaching literature, to Vasquez’s examples of how literature can both prompt inquiry and support students’ search for answers, and finally Krashen’s conceptualization of a comprehensive language arts program that develops students’ fervor for reading while increasing literacy skills. One of many common messages among the texts is that literature can be used to teach beyond basic skills. Educators are encouraged to envision children’s literature as an engaging and useful resource for teaching academic literacy, for developing artistic skills, for enhancing critical perspectives of the world, and for renewing students’ passion for reading. Gangi and Vasquez easily convince their audience that children’s literature can be used to teach within a multicultural and critical literacy approach by including texts that address real-world issues and dilemmas written from various cultural perspectives. When Vasquez included these types of texts in her classroom, her children became engaged in and beyond the texts to the point of taking social action. They were passionate about the texts, a critical component that Krashen would argue is missing in many language arts programs. Children’s literature has a great deal to offer readers, which the three authors convincingly demonstrate in their books. It is our hope that texts such as these will help to once again make children’s literature an essential component of language arts programs, at least as an important complement to the commercially produced reading programs dominating literacy instruction today.

References

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