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IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE: INTEGRATE IT, DON'T ELIMINATE IT

Barry Rubin

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Once upon a time storytellers were the guardians of imaginative literature. They repeated and embellished tales that educated and entertained. Today, teachers have the power to spread imaginative literature throughout the land. Just as the storyteller had a yarn for every occasion, today, books of fiction and poetry relate to almost every aspect of the world around us and inside us. Yet, too many teachers make too little use of these precious resources.

Imaginative literature, when read to the student or by the student, can affect the child in many positive ways: it feeds and gives expression to the child's imagination; it exposes the student to varied use of language; it stimulates identification with an understanding of human conditions, values, and feelings; and it motivates children to read more as it delights and satisfies them.

While urging teachers to make greater use of literature in their classrooms, I am acutely aware of the time and curricular pressures being placed upon them which make this difficult to do. Many feel forced to parcel out time to the various subject matter areas parsimoniously and often in accordance with mandated guidelines. The study and use of literature has been shortchanged in the process. A valuable resource is being ignored by many teachers.

An exciting, worthwhile solution

to this problem does exist. It is possible to integrate imaginative literature and traditional subject matter areas. By mixing, matching and combining language arts, social studies, science, and art activities with the appropriate literature the teacher can overcome the time problem and simultaneously create enriched, exciting lessons. The basis for all imaginative literature and subject matter is human experience. The commingling of the two brings new, rich perspectives to both. Students' minds know no artificial boundaries between subjects. Why should the curriculum?

Over the past several years, I have made use of imaginative literature in conjunction with a wide variety of objectives and subject matter units. By sharing a few of them, I hope teachers will be encouraged to bring more literature into their own rooms to educate and captivate imaginations, as did the storytellers of yore.

IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE AND READING

Imaginative literature can most obviously and easily be integrated with reading. In my classroom better readers individually discover children's novels; poorer readers select and read literature aloud to kindergarteners; and everyone reads silently, daily, for almost half an hour from the material in our

classroom library. Time to read is an important ingredient of any reading program. These activities, in addition to my basal program, which also makes extensive use of literature, illustrate my time commitment to reading, listening to, and discussion of printed material. To create better readers more time must be devoted to all three than is presently allocated in most classrooms. Too much time is devoted to workbooks and worksheets. I encourage teachers to examine their own use of time in this regard.

The major component of my reading program remains the basal reader. In my school each student must be placed in a basal at his or her appropriate reading level. Here, too, I make extensive use of literature. Textbook publishers have awakened to the fact that children appreciate interesting, well-written literature, and the texts themselves, at least at the levels I teach, contain much fiction and poetry written by prominent, popular trade book authors. Unfortunately, many stories are only excerpted from longer books; but at least the boring, unimaginative fare of older basals has been reduced. When students are excited by chapters taken from books written by Beverly Cleary or E. B. White or others, I guide them to further reading of these authors' works.

I often integrate the basals and literature in comprehension and critical thinking activities. For example, one of my reading objectives this year was to have students identify the setting of a story and the role it plays in the development of the plot. To accomplish this I first selected a trade book with distinctive setting. I chose Albert Lamorrisse's delightful *The Red Balloon* (Doubleday, 1957). After a word about the elements of setting, time and place, and how they might affect a story, I instructed my students to listen for clues as to the milieu of this book. Then I read it aloud. When I finished we reviewed what they'd found and how the setting affected the plot. Only after this introduction to the idea of setting did I direct each student to read a particular story in his or her basal which was also set in distinctive environment. Each child read his or her story and afterward identified the setting and its importance to the plot.

Employing the same general methodology, I taught one of my school district's fourth grade objectives: to be able to identify a character's feelings. I read a story in which the main character had distinct reactions to a particular situation aloud. As a class we identified those feelings. Then I assigned follow-up reading in the basals, selecting stories in which characters faced similar circumstances. Students compared the feelings and situations of the characters in their basals to those of the character in the trade book story.

When integrating reading objectives with imaginative literature, as these strategies attempt to do, it is important not to compromise the literature. I chose to use literature, not lectures or worksheets, to help develop these comprehension skills; therefore, I did not want to interfere with the effects the literature can have. The teacher must respect the integrity of the story and avoid trivializing or over-analyzing it. When I read *The Red Balloon* I did not interrupt my oral presentation to belabor the reading objective.

The students were allowed to enjoy the story. Only after I concluded the book did the class proceed to analyze the setting. At this time we also discussed why the story was appealing to them.

Another common fourth grade reading comprehension objective is for students to be able to distinguish between realism and fantasy in fiction. This is a literary skill which demands the use of imaginative literature. To illustrate fantasy I have, in the past, presented units focusing on specific folk or fairy tales and their variants. The search for similarities and differences between tales fascinates children and sharpens critical thinking. An investigation of "Cinderella" variants led to exciting discoveries of how certain elements in one story were reproduced in different forms in another. With this background, the students eventually wrote their own variants of the story.

My class had no trouble understanding the characteristics of realistic fiction after I read aloud, serially, Judy Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* (Dutton, 1972). The book was received with great critical acclaim and high laugh ratings. Fudgie, the narrator's younger brother, became an instant favorite with the class. His antics led inevitably to discussions of the behavior of my students' younger siblings. Although the book was a work of fiction, its format was that of an autobiography of a nine-year-old. My students understood the idea of detailing the events and people in one's own life and proceeded to write their own autobiographies.

A STIMULUS TO WRITING

Imaginative literature is both a model and stimulus for creative writing. Few people write a lot who do not read extensively. Language arts professors have filled volumes with lesson ideas using pieces of literature to stimulate creative writing. While in general I support these efforts, I have found that one-

shot, isolated attempts to spur children to write usually yield disappointing results. I think the conditions most suitable for stimulating children's writing result from activities in which literature has already been integrated with other materials. Two examples are the variants and the autobiographies I described before. My students usually produce their best writing when they have received a lot of input from the literature and subject matter materials and have discussed everything thoroughly before writing. This builds their fund of ideas and relevant vocabulary, and familiarizes them with the rules or styles of the genre they will be producing.

INTEGRATION WITH SOCIAL STUDIES AND SCIENCE

Many of my strategies call for the teacher to read aloud to the class. This is not done enough in most elementary classrooms. It allows students who could not read many things on their own because of decoding or other problems to share in the joy, richness, and knowledge of literature. In many cases the enjoyment of a story is an incentive for many to read more on their own, especially that which has been read aloud. Furthermore, it makes it possible for all class members, regardless of their reading levels, to react to and share ideas about work of imaginative literature. This is an important fact to remember when attempting to integrate literature with social studies or science. In most cases it is almost impossible to find enough literature written on different reading levels that is relevant to the specific unit being taught.

The effectiveness of a social studies unit can be greatly enhanced by the use of appropriate imaginative literature. A well-told story can have great impact on its listeners or readers. All human beings are interested in and affected by an exciting narrative. Gossip, television, comic books and movies, in addition to printed stories, owe

their popularity to this fact. A story set in a certain location or historic period being studied, or one which incorporates famous people in the past or present, adds to a social studies unit glimpse of attitudes, feelings, and details that a nonfiction account would not reveal or might leave lifeless.

Last year, when I was teaching third grade, the focus of my social studies curriculum was on cities. To add a different dimension to the unit, I read aloud *The Cricket in Times Square* (Dell, 1970), by George Selden. The book is a delightful fantasy about a cricket who fortuitously comes to live with several other small animals in the Times Square subway station and the animals' interactions with a human family who own the newspaper stand there. It is also full of common, fascinating, urban scenes. Most of my students knew nothing of New York, rush hours, or subways. Without spoiling the story, which they demanded to hear each day, I expanded their knowledge of the urban phenomena presented in the book at other times during the day. I also integrated art into the unit by having the students build Chinese cricket cages as they were shown in the book. Students even pretended to be Chester Cricket and wrote letters to his friends and relatives back in Connecticut detailing what he'd found in New York City. The book helped to integrate many activities and enhanced the students' knowledge of urban life.

In a similar fashion imaginative literature can be gracefully integrated with science. A reading of Jean George's *Who Really Killed Cock Robin?* (Dutton, 1971) would add immeasurably to a study of environmental science. In the book scientific characters trace the food chain, using scientific methods to crack the mystery which the reader or listener becomes involved in solving. A dissection of owl pellets and analysis of their contents would be a relevant and exciting follow-up activity to the book. Flow charts of the food chain plotted in the book

could be drawn and compared to food chains involving local birds.

Studies of animals, weather, space and space travel could all be enriched by the use of imaginative literature. Students could make comparative studies of fiction and factual material presented in the unit. This would serve two useful purposes: the student would be better prepared to understand and evaluate the factual basis for each of the works of literature; and simultaneously, the student would get a view of the scientific material in a social context as it related to the characters and their situations in each story.

Enjoyable, well-written, thought-provoking literature is based on knowledge of the human experience and the world around us. It is a vast resource that is as close to the teacher as the school library. I hope that some of my sample strategies and broad suggestions supported by my arguments have indicated how and why more of it should be used in the classroom. The words and ideas contained in the works of imaginative literature are a rich, valuable resource teachers cannot afford to ignore.

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Details of the competition may be obtained by writing to:

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Inquiries must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The deadline for entries is June 15, 1980.