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Children's Literature and Literacy: Diversity and Transformation

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In 2006, the Children's Literature Assembly (CLA) submitted the "[Resolution on the Essential Roles and Value of Literature in the Curriculum](#)" to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in which they expressed their concern about the marginalization of children's literature in the curriculum as a result of the growing emphasis on high stakes testing, scripted reading programs, and the use of external reading incentives (Freeman, 2007). This resolution was subsequently adopted as a position statement by the NCTE Board of Directors. The issues it raised—such as the value of literature for learning and enjoyment, the critical role of children's literature in the classroom, and the need to foster the love of literature for its own sake—became the main focus of its annual meeting in November 2006.

In an era characterized by standardized testing, the question of how to promote a love of literature is indeed an important one. As the academic future of children depends significantly on the results of these tests, educators feel compelled to focus on enhancing reading abilities, while children's involvement with books for the pure sake of aesthetic enjoyment can be pushed in the background. Some educators argue, however, that there is a middle way, and in spite of the constraints of the testing environment many teachers continue to keep a balance between these two objectives and create space for meaning-making opportunities and literary inquiry within their classrooms (Mathis & Albright, 2007). As a reinforcement of such balance in literacy classrooms and as a response to the concerns raised by CLA, NCTE recommended the implementation of holistic reading curricula that incorporate a wide range of high-quality children's literature representing diverse topics, experiences, or perspectives as well as various levels of difficulty. NCTE also laid further emphasis on the integration of children's literature into reading instruction and other content areas.

Thus, in today's literacy education, children's literature serves as a foundation that enhances various aspects of reading instruction such as phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Moreover, it offers a medium for children to learn about the world and provides enjoyment and access to artistic experiences. Chapter books, series books, graphic novels, nonfiction books, and multicultural literature are all important trends in today's publishing that address a multitude of topics relevant in children's lives such as family, friendship, school achievement, immigration,

fictional worlds, or others. Since schools in America are experiencing a tremendous increase in cultural and ethnic diversity, publishing companies have produced bilingual or multicultural books that deal with immigrant experiences and the voices of non-mainstream American groups that have been oppressed in the past or continue to be silenced in the present. The emerging number of wordless picture books characterized by innovative new illustrations, fragmented narrative styles, and postmodern code breaking (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2006) have also opened new grounds in the field of children's literature and gained the attention of literacy educators who investigated the various ways in which multimodal elements of texts influenced children in their responses to literature. In the past few years, literacy research also devoted attention to students' interests in online texts, as educators have argued that some aspects of popular culture serve as a motivating factor and could lead towards literacy activities that are valued in schools.

A common goal of these trends is the incorporation of diversity both in content and form in the field of children's literature and literacy education. The objectives of multicultural literature, postmodern children's books, and online texts are to promote difference and the integration of new approaches towards the way we view children both as subject matter and consumers of literature. What changes did the digital age bring for the definition of children's literature? How do multimodal elements of books enhance text comprehension? How is diversity represented in the books written for children? These are the questions addressed by the articles of this special issue.

### **Framing the Special Issue**

In January 2007, we invited literacy scholars, classroom teachers, and school media specialists to contribute to *JoLLE*'s third special issue on children's literature as a result of a growing attention towards this field of study both on national and international levels. In the hopes of critiquing and extending the field of children's literature, we asked contributors to consider issues of race, class, and gender in children's books; popular culture books in the media center; motivating reading and writing with children's literature; or new directions in research and criticism. We recognize that it is not an easy task for many of us to look at children's literature with a critical eye or to call into question the value of certain books that we cherished and loved as children. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that children's literature as a "cultural conversation" (Graff, 1987, p. 10) is not free of ideologies that can shape our social lives and our perceptions of the world. Children's books are complex cultural products that authorize certain values and discriminate against others and thus the messages they create or transmit should be examined critically. The articles of this special issue outline some of these issues in children's literature and further reveal important aspects of the interconnectedness of children's literature with literacy education.

In the first article of the *Features* section, Serafini and Ladd scrutinized the way multimodal elements of texts open up interpretive spaces for literature discussions. The picture book as a multimodal text uses written words, design features, and visual images to tell the story; accordingly, as students construct meanings through transactions with books, they should have opportunities to focus on these three elements as they engage in open-ended questions. Serafini and Ladd contended that it is crucial for teachers to go

beyond literal questions so they can open up interpretative spaces within which more sophisticated understandings of the text can be generated. Stone and Veth discussed the issue of stereotypical gender portrayals of four popular websites. Online texts include a variety of attributes, such as multimodality, intertextuality, and participatory culture, that can be used to support many of the literacy practices valued in school. Moreover, since online texts, like traditional print-based texts, can carry harmful representations such as gender stereotypes, children also need to learn how to critically approach these sites.

Misrepresentations and exclusion are the themes of the last two articles as well, which deal with the problem of Other prevalent in multicultural children's literature. Many scholars have raised questions about how multicultural children's literature can define non-dominant cultural groups as the Other. Some educators and scholars have claimed that multicultural literature includes books about multiple types of diversity: books that address diversity of skin color, culture, sexual orientation, gender, and class. From other perspectives, multicultural literature is only about people of color while the portrayals of other 'non-mainstream' groups presently living in America do not belong in its purview. Such definitions have excluded many people from children's literature. Texts mediate understandings of ourselves, but where do children stand when their existence is not acknowledged by the mediator? Jones raised these and other questions as she advocated for the inclusion of the experiences of working-class lives in children's books. She asserted that there is a great need for materials that represent the classed lives of children in more authentic and creative ways. As part of her commitment to engaging children as critical readers, Jones recommended that students question and reinvent texts that exclude working class perspectives. The issue of the Other is a central theme for Reese as well, who asserted that misrepresentations of Native American languages, histories, and traditions are still rampant in children's literature and in media representations. Reese deconstructed and examined two popular and award-winning children's books that perpetuate stereotypes about native nations, paying close attention to the social-political context in which the books were created, their text and illustrations, the current status of the books, and their potential effects on children.

The *Voices from the Field* section captures the experiences of children and school media specialists as interpreters of children's literature. McLeod, a middle school media specialist, reiterated concerns about the exclusion of certain voices from children's literature and introduced several young adult books through which the exploration of working class experiences with children become possible. Gardner, an elementary school media specialist, also argued that the implementation of diverse perspectives is crucial in today's education. She described how the inclusion of multicultural children's books in her reading program became a way to support diversity across the curriculum. This section also features an interview with the award-winning children's book author David Wiesner, who discussed the origination of the idea of wordless picture books, the importance of art and reading in children's lives, and the difference between new and old ways of childhood. Finally, our special issue concludes with Cowan's and Rycik's reviews of two recently published books on children's literature.

It has become crucial to recognize that the boundaries within which we perceive the form and content of children's literature are expanding. In the face of a rapidly changing digital age, dominated by the presence of new technologies in children's everyday lives, we need to pay special attention to how their reading interests have

broadened in the past few decades and how this change has altered old definitions of literacy practices. Furthermore, we need to attend to certain problematic aspects of these new literacy practices, such as misrepresentations of race, class, and gender apparent in both print-based children's literature and online texts.

Perhaps a way to bring the old and new approaches together is through the concept of *diversity*, which includes both diverse forms of representations (multimodal texts) and diverse contents or subject matter (multicultural texts) and ensures the attainment of a rich literary and literacy experience within the shared space of children's literature. *Diversity* urges us to consider the inclusion of new patterns and to accept the emerging possibilities of a growing field. Such considerations become possible through mutual *respect* towards our differences and through an ongoing *collaboration* between educators, scholars, and administrators as they seek to effectively implement children's literature into the curriculum. It is our hope that the articles of this special issue will serve as a resource for readers interested in the contemporary trends and future directions of children's literature.

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