



## Purposeful Collections: Exploiting the Potential of Children's Literature in the Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

Purposefully selected collections of literature can extend, contrast or illuminate an experience or perspective to effectively exploit the potential of children's literature to shape curriculum and engage student learning. This paper offers a practical framework for creating purposeful collections of literature. As an illustration of this process, we have formulated two guideline acronyms, SIMPLE (guidelines for identifying a theme) and CRITERIA (guidelines for selecting books), explained within the context of one particular theme: Children and the Great Depression.

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The power of a book to entertain and inform readers is well documented by theorists and practitioners alike (see for example, Langer, 1995; Nystrand, 1997; McMahon & Rafael, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1978/94). Good children's literature draws the reader in, inviting the reader to envision a world that may offer further insight into real world understandings, or allow exploration of another world or time. Individual books not only offer the reader a window into an outside view of a new experience or perspective but also prompt the reader to explore personal feelings as a mirror reflecting the reader's situations or own ways of thinking (Galda & Cullinan, 2006).



As classroom teachers, we are well aware of the potential power of books to engage our students; and so we take great care both in the selection of read alouds for the class as a whole and in introducing appropriate books to each child for individual reading. As teachers, we understand that a well-chosen book encourages students to explore and make sense of their world. The “right” book can provide context to scaffold understanding of concepts, social norms or power relations (Ching, 2005). Literature can serve as a catalyst for engaged student talk and provide a creative interface with existing knowledge (McVee, Dunsmore & Gavelek, 2005).

But if one book is a powerful teaching tool, how much more powerful is a collection of books purposively selected to complement each other? When grouped together, books selected to extend, contrast or illuminate an experience or perspective can more effectively exploit the potential of children’s literature to shape curriculum and engage student learning. An exploration of a particular theme across content can be guided by purposively selected books, or textsets to offer students and teachers both a sense of ownership in, and responsibility for, the curriculum. Working together, both students and teachers propose connections across texts and content, and co-construct knowledge generated through inquiry and discussion. Such an exploration is not predetermined or formulaic as the same textsets can offer “dramatically different results while maintaining the core of district curriculum mandates” (Murray, Shea & Shea, 2004, p.33). Instead, as teachers contingently respond to and build upon student contributions, they can “lead from behind” (Boyd & Rubin, 2002, 2006; Wells & Chang Wells, 1992) to scaffold student learning that actively builds on student interests and needs, in ways that offer fresh and authentic insights. Purposively selected collections of literature offer new ways of addressing the curriculum as each reading of a text presents new opportunities to explore and make sense of a topic. Furthermore, each combination of texts offers connections across texts that shape construction of knowledge. Research indicates that instruction, guided by practices such as going beyond the “one size-fits-all” textbook and selecting multi-genre resources in content areas, promotes not only student motivation and engagement but also improves performance on assignments (see, for example, Murray, Shea & Shea, 2004). Research also shows how literature stimulates engaged discussions, and discussion about literature enhances meaningful connections across content, text and world. (See, for example, papers collected in Gambrell & Almasi, 1996).

How then do we initiate this process of purposefully selecting collections of literature to explore a particular theme or particular content across literary genres? Our experiences as a teacher educator and teacher candidates suggest that while a new teacher may acknowledge that using children’s literature across content is a good instructional practice, there is a gap between knowing this and knowing how to put it into practice. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by providing a practical framework of our process for use as a guide to creating purposeful collections of literature. To that end, the remainder of this paper focuses on our process of identifying a theme and organizing a collection of children’s literature that can be read to or by the class as a whole to capture that theme.

As an illustration of this process, we have formulated two guideline acronyms, SIMPLE and CRITERIA, explained within the context of one particular theme: Children and the Great Depression. We chose this theme to illustrate how trade books can provide powerful cross-content extensions to the curriculum. In this case, The Great Depression (a period taught in social studies grades 4-8), provides a focus for our explication of this process. In all our selections a child’s perspective provides the reader with context for the social studies concept or time period, thus making the concept or time period more accessible and relatable. We also sought to illustrate a range in the degree of explicitness in discussing the period. Importantly, though, each of these texts offers an opportunity to extend connections across curriculum. However, while our texts were chosen with The Great Depression theme in mind, we fully



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acknowledge that the same books used in different contexts, or ordered differently, make different issues salient.

### Why collections of children's literature?

The potential of an individual book to entertain, engage, enlighten and inform is exploited every day by good teachers as they select books for students to read individually or as a group. A teacher's satisfaction in finding exactly the right book for a particular student can be one of the concrete rewards of teaching. When the student finishes that text, the teacher should have the next one ready to suggest. In the following discussion, the teacher and student discuss books by Rodda (2000-2004), Farmer(2004), and Lowry (1993, 2000, and 2004).

STUDENT: I just finished the last book in the Rodda's *Deltora Quest* series, now what am I going to read?

TEACHER: If you enjoyed that series, then I think you might also like *The Sea of Trolls*.

OR

STUDENT: Thanks for lending me *The Giver*, I liked the characters, but I wish Lowry explained what happened to Jonas after he left his village.

TEACHER: I wondered the same thing myself. You might get some answers in *The Messenger*, but I recommend that you read *Gathering Blue* first.

Good teaching practices incorporate knowledge of students, their interests, and the degree of difficulty they can manage and still read for pleasure. A teacher's goal in offering choices for individual reading selections is to nurture a love for reading – what literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1978/1994) calls reading aesthetically: reading for pleasure- an experience which cannot be mandated. This private reader response experience is sometimes publicly shared in writing or speech during class, but the likelihood of such public experiences being an in-depth event is increased many fold when several students have read the same book.

In this paper, we have focused on selecting books that can be read to or by the class as a whole. Discussion stimulated by a particular book or across books can facilitate engaged student opportunities to articulate and revise individual interpretations. Children's literature invites reader response to characters, events and context. A narrative text is value-laden (Bruner, 1986); it invites us to empathize with or judge character behaviors or perspectives. Purposively selected collections of texts can provide different perspectives and contexts for characters and behaviors. Such collections of children's literature can facilitate student discussion of abstract concepts such as power, status and social justice (see, for example, Ching, 2005) as students further examine social norms in relation to their world and themselves.

Our process of identifying a theme and selecting children's literature to capture that theme is detailed below. Our love for acronyms and our teachers' drive to make things easy to remember has resulted in two guideline acronyms (SIMPLE and CRITERIA) for the process of creating purposeful collections and thus exploiting the potential of children's literature in the classroom. We have outlined our process of creating collections so that "you", the teacher, may incorporate this method into your own instructional practices. We begin by offering a simple way for you to tailor a collection of children's literature for your classroom by first identifying a theme.



## Choosing a theme is SIMPLE

Start with a familiar/favorite work of literature  
Incorporate student funds of knowledge  
Make connections to curriculum and learning standards  
Plan to make changes! Be responsive to students.  
Look for literature to support and extend your theme.  
Elicit ideas and feedback from students, parents, and colleagues.

### Start with a familiar/favorite work of literature

As a rule of thumb it is always good to start with a text with which you are very familiar. Your excitement and interest is contagious- so if you enjoy a particular book, then you may spark your students' motivation! *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) was a favorite of this group and it spawned several possible themes, from the struggles of adolescent girls to migrant worker issues to intergenerational families to power structures. It was set during The Great Depression, and although this factor is backgrounded, the novel provides a context to understand the everyday struggles of people during that time period.

### Incorporate student funds of knowledge

If you know your students, then you know how to represent them in terms of characters in texts and themes that are appropriate. For example, students that are struggling with fitting in can benefit from an understanding of sameness as shown in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993). Often times knowing your students and knowing children's literature means that student needs can be met more powerfully by addressing them less directly. While *The Giver* does not directly address The Great Depression it does provide a forum for understanding economic and power structures by presenting a "utopia" in which there are no economic or social structures.

### Make connections to curriculum and learning standards

Literature can offer context and perspective to a particular period in time. A selection could be made to illuminate a particular period connected to the NYS Social Studies curriculum. For example, *The Bread Winner* (Whitmore, 1990) and *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) are clearly set during America's Great Depression, but the great depression is also the background for *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000). Literature also stimulates student's literate dialogue and nurtures intertextual connections. Such student practices clearly meet two of the four New York State standards for English Language Arts (Standard 2: Language for Literary Response and Expression and Standard 3: Language for Critical Analysis and Evaluation).

### Plan to make changes! Be responsive to students.

We recommend planning the collection in advance, following our criteria below, but then adjusting such plans so as to respond to student contributions. Perhaps the order in which the books are read will change based on student responses, or perhaps another book will be added or one omitted from the collection actually read by the class. For example, if you start with a text such as *Smoky Night* (Bunting, 1994) you may have planned to note racial and socio-economic structures. Perhaps you would have followed *Smoky Night* with *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976) but the students' response to *Smoky Night* may have focused on potentially positive cultural outcomes from tragedy and so instead you follow with *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz



Ryan, 2000) to build further on the student initiated sub-theme. You may still direct an exploration for racial and socio-economic structures but its iteration has changed, taking direction from the students.

**Look for literature to support and extend your theme.**

Whatever the selected theme, it is wise to have a bank of pre-selected literature from which to draw. The order of the books will depend on student contributions and goals of theme development. For example, seemingly dissimilar texts such as *Encounter* (Yolen, 1992) and *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) can provide different contexts for examining the notions of power and control. The discussion path to that understanding is likely to be rich with student insights and allows students to direct the scope of the classroom discourse.

**Elicit ideas and feedback from students, parents, and colleagues.**

A thematic collection of children's literature is an organic creation. It is made more meaningful with contributions of its participants. What more powerful way to acknowledge a student than to act upon her suggestion? Discussing connections across literature is a useful practice for teachers and students. Through discussion with colleagues while formulating our theme, *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (Capote, 1967) was suggested by a librarian as a concluding book to our theme on The Great Depression and later *The Dust Bowl* (Booth, 1996) was suggested as a supplemental text.

### **When not just any books will do...**

Having determined a theme, (in this case Children and the Great Depression) how, then, do we as teachers choose from the thousands of books available? To facilitate this selection, we offer the following CRITERIA for a purposeful collection of children's literature:

#### **CRITERIA**

Child protagonist  
 Represents diverse characters  
 Interprets subject matter in a fresh way  
 Texts connect to each other in meaningful ways  
 Enhances/ deepens understanding of a concept  
 Relevance to theme  
 Illuminates a new/ Different perspective  
 Award-winning literature

**Child protagonist**

This was a requirement for every book we selected – it was an explicit criterion because we wanted all of our students to feel represented. Exploring the period of the Great Depression from a child's perspective offers students a relevant point of connection to issues that are specific to a child's experience.

**Represents diverse characters**

We thought that this was important to consider across the collection. Incorporating books that depict a diverse cast of characters, cultures, perspectives, and issues will communicate to students the importance of considering multiple perspectives: the primary purpose of using multiple texts. Above all, we wanted to introduce students to characters that students could both relate to and learn from. Texts, *Smoky Night* (Bunting, 1994), *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976),



*Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), and *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) are some examples. The central characters in each of these texts represent children that students can empathize with and in turn gain a better understanding of thematic concepts. Diversity and perspective are better explored across texts; collections provide potential for moving beyond the stereotype or token cultural experience toward potentially transformative understandings. Examining power and social structures across texts such as *Smoky Night*, *Roll of Thunder*, and *Esperanza Rising* from the perspective of a child invites students to identify important social problems and issues and as they read clarify their values and take reflective actions to help resolve the issue or problem. (A social action approach in Banks & Banks, 1993, p. 209).

#### Interprets subject matter in a fresh way

This was a driving force behind the themes we chose. We wanted texts that addressed The Great Depression in a less direct but more personal way. Our selections were, therefore, unexpected: *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000), *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), *The Bread Winner* (Whitmore, 1990), and *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (Capote, 1967). The political notion of a “Great Depression” is not directly recognized in *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) and *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (Capote, 1967), but instead it is the hardships the main characters face in their personal stories that drive the students’ connection to the theme.

#### Texts connect to each other in meaningful ways

A purposeful collection will offer many opportunities for intertextual connections. Within the above selections for the Great Depression, the concepts of going west to find employment and the idea that children needed to grow up quickly and become providers for their family were showcased in *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) and *The Bread Winner* (Whitmore, 1990). Another traceable connection between two books was the idea that even with all the bigger problems occurring during the Great Depression basic children’s struggles still continued. For example, in both *The Thanksgiving Visitor* (Capote, 1967) and *The Bread Winner* (Whitmore, 1990) the protagonists had to deal with bullies and face them on the playground.

#### Enhances/ deepens understanding of a concept

We felt the dual impact of a narrative text offering a child protagonist’s perspective and struggles enhanced a young reader’s understanding of the Great Depression. For example, the problem of bullying persisted at that time, which provides a context and perspective for the local and national issues at this time.

#### Relevance to theme

While our selected texts contained explicit and direct connections to the selected theme, we also found more indirect handling of the themes to be very effective. For example, it is not until the end of *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2000) that one realizes that this story took place during the Great Depression. We felt that addressing the theme in multiple ways (across genres, perspectives, and with varying degrees of explicitness) offered a rich intertextuality.

#### Illuminates a new/ different perspective

For us, illuminating a new or different perspective was critical. Collections of literature can offer narratives with contrasting perspectives, opening eyes to how others think and behave, challenging our personal beliefs and judgments, and providing insight into our own thoughts and behaviors.

#### Award-winning literature

We attempted to start out all our themes with award-winning books as a guide. From these notable books and our knowledge of other great children’s literature, we formed connections between the books and initial new meaning beyond the original texts. We responded as a new



collection of books was created, as books took on new meaning, and as they were read in concert with other selections. Therefore, while award-winning texts tended to be an appropriate starting point, we did not limit our selections in this way as new texts were introduced to strengthen a collection.

### Put ‘em all together and what do you get?

In our selection of texts, we consciously considered varied genres and perspectives. We sought to consider how particular books resonated with others. We noted how the order in which the books were presented shaped what became salient to the students. We observed how sometimes what we considered sub-themes were more the scope of discussion than we expected. This is the beauty of a purposeful collection of children’s literature – it becomes its own entity, affording its own potential to stimulate engaged student thought and discussion. In essence, the teacher can orchestrate the selection of the collection, but not the composing of the dominant themes.

We consider the purposeful selection and ordering of texts to be an important instructional strategy. The effectiveness of this strategy is shaped by the teacher’s knowledge of children’s literature and her ability to appropriately select books that not only meet student and curriculum needs but also engender intertextual connections across and within texts. These connections can stimulate student critical thinking and understanding of context, content or theme. Purposively selected collections of children’s literature can help meet curricular objectives while also providing a space for students to explore and direct the scope of their learning. Indeed, such collections, when coupled with the teacher’s ability and willingness to welcome and accept student contributions and to contingently respond to student needs and interests, can form a shared bed of experience to which members of the class can relate to and identify. Once again, the teacher is key to whether the potential of literature is unlocked.

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