

## Rachel Patzwaldt, Literature Position Paper

I am in my tenth year of teaching. I have devoted ten years of my life to educating children and probably will for the next fifteen to eighteen years. Surprisingly, that statement doesn't make me panic in the least. I can see myself teaching in the classroom for the next eighteen years. I feel that is because every day I am surprised and no day is the same for me in my career. That feeling is even more evident to me this year for two reasons. One, I am taking this course which has forced me (in a good way) to reflect, deconstruct and rebuild my beliefs about literature and its role in the classroom. The other reason is because I have a student teacher. This is my first year having a student teacher and I think I may have learned more this year than she has. As a mentor teacher I have had someone watching every move I have made for the past three months and then had that same person ask me the same question repeatedly. "Why?" There is no other question that cuts to the heart of what you believe as the simple word "why" does. Having a student teacher at the same time as this course has made me reevaluate and clearly articulate my beliefs on how students learn best, especially in the area of literacy. So, here I go: What role do I feel that literature should play in the classroom and the life of students and why?

I can put it simply, but I have never been one to do that. Literature should be a daily theme in the life of my fourth grade students. My students should and will be exposed to a variety of quality literature that not only supports the curriculum I am required to teach, but lifts their minds out of the classroom and into the realm of "Why?" Beyond that though, literature will be present every day in the life of my students because there are too many good books out there that can not and do not deserve to sit on a shelf and wait to be read. In addition to that, there are too many ideas and inspirations waiting in those titles. My responsibility as a teacher is to teach. This includes a curriculum that goes beyond the one my school board has adopted. Students should be exposed to literature because after ten years of teaching and reevaluating myself as a teacher of readers through this course, I can't imagine not doing it.

Now, in order for you to understand the big picture of my evolution as a teacher of readers, I have to back up a bit. When I first started teaching I created all of my units for almost every content area. The only thing I didn't have to come up with was Math and Spelling because the school I started off in had adopted two programs to satisfy the state requirements. I would slave away creating Reading units around the Grade Level Content Expectations and try to find books that would help my readers make connections, infer, ask deeper level questions, introduce higher level vocabulary-you name it, I was looking for it. As I traveled through my years, my units became richer and developed. I found book titles that I loved and could be utilized for many curricular reasons. I also found and purchased books that I just plainly loved. I would stand in Barnes and Noble or Schuler's, teacher bag on the floor and pore over books, buying them because they made me laugh, cry, think or even just smile. I would contemplate, *how can I use this in the classroom?* And even if I didn't a good curricular connection, I would buy it any way. The books would be put up on a shelf and maybe used randomly throughout the year, but there they stayed, waiting to be read.

As the years in my career passed, the number of pre-made units my district adopted increased. There was even a year in which I had a core Reading Program that

had a component for Reading, Writing, Word Study and Spelling; a Math pacing guide that dictated one lesson for every school day, a curriculum map of what Science to teach and when, and the same for Social Studies. My creativity as a teacher was non-existent. Not because I didn't have any, but because there wasn't room. I remember in the staff lounge one afternoon that year, a colleague stressing out about taking a half an hour to read a Patricia Polacco picture book to her class. She was reaching and grasping for a tie to the curriculum because she was anxious that our principal would question why she was taking precious instruction time to just read a book. Her response to her own question startled me and opened my eyes to a beginning evolution. She said, "I just can't imagine *not* reading it to them. It's just such a good book."

Her statement made me connect and understand why I always had, and still have, a protected time of the day-my read aloud. No matter what schedule changes occurred, my students would always gather together on the carpet area and listen to me read a chapter book to them. I even protect it so much that when I have a substitute teacher, I don't allow them to read from the chapter book in fear they might not read it the right way or not stop at a part and talk it out with the kids. My biggest fear would be that I wouldn't be there to experience a part or any part of the book with them. I leave one or two picture books instead and usually return to school the next day with several students saying, "We are so glad you're back so we can read the book again!"

It wasn't until this course and our examination of a variety of picture books from various time eras made me realize that I pick books for my read aloud that don't match my curriculum. In my first year of teaching I had no idea what books to pick, so I went back to the titles that my third and fourth grade teachers read to me. As time went on I may have picked a book by an African American author because I was looking for a book to read in February and figured I would enrich my students during African American History Month. Then, the curricular connection would dissolve when I realized I would read the books to my students because they were just good books. They were too good and too important to just sit on the shelf and wait to be read. I would find more lessons inside of three hundred and fifty pages than I could accomplish during one hundred and eighty days of school.

Now, my literature epiphany wasn't done on my own and after that one day in the staff lounge. My understanding of how students learn to read and appreciate what they read is still developing. Like I try to articulate to my student teacher, this is what I believe right now, but I know there might be a better way of thinking out there. This course provided the "out there" for me. The discussion group I had the pleasure of being a part of helped me to develop even more. So, in order to lay out specifically how I have changed in regards to the role literature will play in my classroom, I will adopt Donald G. Smith's approach of answering the question of why we read in my classroom (Smith, 1999).

I will have my students read literature because it is *entertaining*. In week five of our course, we took the time to read sixteen picture books from different time periods. One of the books, *Heckedy Peg*, was required while the rest were up for me to find and analyze (Wood, 1992). We were then asked to evaluate them not from a text standpoint only, but from a view of the illustrations and layout of the books. I didn't realize until that assignment how much detail a reader takes from the illustrations. There would be times in the classroom when I would purposely not show my students pictures from the

book because I wanted each student to create his/her own picture from the words. Yet, now, I realize that there is so much in the illustrations of a picture book that support the story. I am still moved by Don Wood's depictions of the montage of the seven children all asking their mother for something from the market (Wood, 1992, p. 4-5). I can just imagine the discussion alone in my class about what each of my students would ask for and have them explain why. And to see the light in my own students' eyes as they ask for their own gift would be just as entertaining as the delight in the book characters' eyes. I also appreciated how powerful it was to pull fifteen books off of the library shelf and just give them a shot. Trial and error is how most of my students find a book to read during our Daily Independent Reading Time and I got to experience that first hand. I liked looking at the books through a lens that wasn't searching for a classroom curriculum connection, but for literary and artistic elements.

I will have my students read literature because reading is a *natural part of life and an opportunity to escape life*. In reading and responding to everyone's literature autobiography, a key element that stood out to me was the amount of time that we each spend reading. Although there may have been a gap in the amount of reading (most often in the middle school years), all of the responses had a theme of reading to be entertained, pass the time or to escape life. When I was growing up, if we had to wait for anything or go anywhere, my brothers and I would always have a book ready to go. The greatest time for me was when I could leave the life of a girl in a rural Michigan town and be transported away to a far away land. My students do the same thing. The conversations we have about books almost always showcase and revolve around a life we could live if only we were the main character of a book. I have grown up reading, so it is no surprise to me to hold this philosophy true. Yet, after reading the literature autobiographies and seeing the similarities, I feel even more inclined to transfer that feeling to my classroom.

I will have my students read literature because it can *awaken awareness*. One kind of awareness to me that was created through this course is the amount of background knowledge one can possess about a book. When we were asked to do a literature group response on *Tea with Milk* and *Rose Blanche*, I was assigned to the personal response and critical response (Say, 1999 and Innocenti, 1985). When I had the personal response, I struggled to find background information on *Tea with Milk*. I feel very confident in my ability to do research online, yet this simple act was a struggle for me. When our online discussion ensued on the literary quality of *Tea with Milk* and *Rose Blanche* I was amazed at the amount of background information my teammates were able to come up with. What amazed me even more was the value that the background knowledge brought to our understanding of a text and the quality of our discussion. In order to for a book be utilized completely, I now know the importance of having an education about the book and the author. Understanding how an author grew up, what was the inspiration behind a storyline and characters adds value to a reader's understanding of the text and the discussion that naturally comes with reading. I understand and am willing to take on the role of researcher in my classroom in order to give more background information to my students.

I will have my students read literature because it can *inspire one to write and make change*. This course was my first formal introduction with the author Joseph Bruchac. The weeks in which we analyzed multicultural literature and asked ourselves the question, who has the right to write multicultural text, I had the biggest revelation as a

teacher of readers and writers. Bruchac wrote what he knew. He wrote about his childhood and his Abenaki heritage that affects and influences everything that he is and does. It was aware in his letter of response to Beth Kanell and her critics that he offers his support to other writers when they want to write about social issues. Yet, he also practices only what he preaches. Bruchac writes about the American Indians because he is one. He takes on the Vermont Eugenics movement in *Hidden Roots* because it is the story of his people (Bruchac, 2001). His style of writing also leaves a reader wanting to know more and inspires readers to never repeat history's mistakes.

After reading Bruchac's *Faithful Hunter*, I immediately put on my discussion post that I wanted to add it to the mythology unit I was currently teaching (Bruchac, 1988). Yet, as our group discussion continued and the question of authenticity and accuracy in multicultural literature came to the surface, I wavered on my decision. Initially I thought I could use the book to inspire writing ideas in my own students' minds. Then, I came to the understanding that unless I was prepared to equip my students with the right tools to write tales of American Indians, I shouldn't put it out there as an inspiration to write. I could still read it to my students and have them break it apart to see the literary characteristics, but I need to be careful not to put myself or my students in a situation in which stereotypes or misinformation would be carried on to another generation. The tales could certainly be evaluated as myths, but I need to be cautious and aware of my purpose for having my students read it. Bruchac is such a masterful writer because he writes what he knows and is intentional about educating his audiences about the Abenaki culture and people. That alone is a lesson I could teach my students and I can be intentional about it in the right way.

I will have my students read literature because there needs to be *an education that goes beyond the curriculum*. In celebration of March is Reading Month, I assign every one of my students to a day in which they will be in charge of the class read aloud. Although as I have stated earlier my love and protection over my read aloud time, I want to empower my students to feel the way I do when I open up a cover and share a story with my students. I was shocked this year at the struggle my students had in choosing a book for this activity. I have some requirements that guide them in their choices: it has to be able to be read aloud in ten minutes, it must be appropriate for fourth graders (meaning NO Dr. Seuss!) and one that the reader will think the rest of the class will enjoy or learn something from. Over half of the kids needed guidance in choosing a book. Some struggled to understand what I meant when I said picture book and the majority had difficulty in picking one that would be appropriate for fourth graders.

I first placed blame on myself for not modeling the reading of picture books enough in my classroom. I made note that I should show more titles or read some leading up to the assignment so students would understand what I meant. Then I realized that I already had. I showed them examples and we reflected back on picture books I had read to the class previously. It then occurred to me that this class of students was the first year that the ninety minute reading block was enforced in my district for first through fourth grade and included the use of the core reading program. For four years, the majority of learning about reading has come through exposure of a basal sourcebook. It was no surprise to me then of the struggle they had picking a book, because the definition in their mind of a short book to be read to the class was not one they had seen in action consistently. There are stories that need to be heard by students not because a class could

learn so much about from them, but because the students can learn so much about themselves and the world around them. As a newly informed and educated teacher of readers, this is of the utmost importance to me.

I know that as I profess over and over that I will have my students read literature just because they need to, I still have conflicting ideas in my supporting reasons. I have been a teacher for ten years and I still struggle with separating myself from the curriculum I am bound to and required to teach. Especially facing a time when my student growth and achievement will be directly tied to my success and rating as an educator is frightening. So even as I have come to the understanding of the importance of literature in every child's life, I still struggle how to fit it all in. I feel comfort in the fact that my discussion group felt the same way. In our conversations about practicing literature circles in our own classrooms, we spent the majority of the time discussing logistics. We didn't have to convince ourselves that doing literature circles was worthwhile, we just continued to struggle with making it work with everything else we have to accomplish in one day. This doesn't just apply to reading. The biggest enemy I face in the classroom is time. How am I supposed to decide what is most important?

I know literature is important and I will continue to use it in my classroom because there are too many reasons not to. But, I am still realistic in the fact that I know I can only accomplish so much in a day, week, and school year. What I can take comfort in now, in an even more confident way, is that if anyone asks me why I am choosing to take some of my class time to read a book, I will have the answer for them. And as I said before, I could give them the simple answer, but that's just not me.

Overall, I can identify three major changes in myself as an educator as a result of this course and the activities I have participated in. One is my responsibility to bring quality literature to the classroom and put it in the hands of my students. Second, I have to be educated and aware of accurate and authentic multicultural literature and again, use it in my classroom as a way to make positive change. Lastly, I not only need to be educated, but I need to do research on books before I use them in the classroom. I can start by just pulling books off the shelf at a book store or public library, but I need to know the author, inspiration and motivation behind the book in order to extract successful conversations from it. Although there may have been different intentions for the course or I may have only grasped on to a few of the major themes, I can take pride in the fact that this "old dog" has learned some new tricks. And I will be passing that change on to my students and a future teacher that can do the same.