

## Children's Literature and Learning: Literary Study Across the Curriculum

reviewed by [Monica Gordon Pershey](#) - January 08, 2008

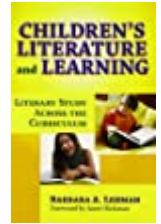
**Title:** Children's Literature and Learning: Literary Study Across the Curriculum

**Author(s):** Barbara A. Lehman

**Publisher:** Teachers College Press, New York

**ISBN:** 0807748234, **Pages:** 148, **Year:** 2007

[Search for book at Amazon.com](#)



*Children's Literature and Learning: Literary Study Across the Curriculum* offers an enriched perspective on teaching literature to elementary school students. The purpose of the book is to provide teachers with guidance on how to “make the link between teaching reading and reading literature” (p. xi). Lehman’s impetus for the book was her observation that two distinct curricular goals, literature study and teaching literacy, may not be explicit and complementary. A lack of focus on both goals may leave elementary teachers with little opportunity to teach literacy, in part, through children’s literature. Lehman makes the case for elementary teachers to offer children developmentally appropriate literary study, including recognition of narrative styles, literary themes, and literary language. She also promotes using children’s literature to teach academic content, such as history or science, and acknowledges that children’s literature can enhance the teaching of literacy skills and strategies, such as students’ self-monitoring of their comprehension.

The book begins with a discussion of the theoretical bases for elementary level literary study. The author pairs theories of literary study with theories of children’s cognitive and psychosocial development. One important theoretical correspondence is that Rosenblatt’s (1978) description of a reader’s transaction with text as a lived-through experience is harmonized with Jean Piaget’s premise that children actively construct their own knowledge by progressing through predictable stages of cognitive development. Expanding Rosenblatt’s distinction between aesthetic and efferent reading, Lehman describes how children’s responses can be personal or analytical and are communicated via their bodily movements, their reenactments of stories, and by borrowing story elements to use in their own writing. As children mature intellectually and their abstract thinking develops, they can be taught to recognize literary symbolism, themes, literary structure, and intertextual connections. When children reach this understanding, teachers can blend reader response with exposure to traditional literary criticism and archetypal theory.

Educators can monitor children’s developmental readiness for literary study by assessing how young readers are progressing through Erik Erikson’s proposed stages of psychosocial development. Children will respond to text in ways that are governed by their psychosocial maturity. Book discussions, for example, will reflect children’s psychosocial grasp of the events presented in a story. Further, Lehman asserts that engaging young children in an interpretive community where books are discussed is philosophically in line with Lev Vygotsky’s model of the social construction of knowledge. In this view, a reader’s interpretation of text is mediated by the reader’s social and cultural contexts and, ultimately, by the reader’s awareness of the influence of his or her perspectives on his or her interpretation of text.

Given this extensive theoretical base for literary study, Lehman provides instructional methods for literary teaching, such as book talks, literature circles, meaningful response activities, and enhanced use of teachers’ guides. Significantly, she discusses literary teaching and literacy skills instruction in terms of conceptual pairs, where she links elements of literary study with literacy instructional techniques. For example, sense of story, which is a literary experience, is likened to comprehension, which is a literacy outcome that may be fostered by the application of learning strategies. Lehman proposes many other conceptual pairs. Making intertextual connections relates to prior knowledge; themes arise from a text’s main ideas; plot has to do with sequence; and literary language is an aspect of vocabulary. The author notes that literary development and literacy instruction are reciprocal and complementary classroom goals, even where children’s literacy instructional needs are at the beginning level. Literature study can contribute to building early skills, such as concepts about print, alphabet knowledge, phonological and phonemic awareness, sight words, word study, and basic composition.

For the past two decades, proponents of literature-based reading have discussed the question of how to reconcile the need for literary study at the elementary school level with the necessity that children acquire literacy skills. Sorenson and Lehman’s (1995) comprehensive text marked the transitional period between traditional and holistic approaches to literacy instruction and offered a foundation for curricular and instructional change. In an early article on literature-based reading, McGee and Tompkins (1995) profiled four archetypal teachers who veered towards either teaching aesthetics or skills. Lehman (2007) shows that the field of elementary literacy education has progressed considerably since this quandary was first identified and describes a variety of solutions that minimize the need for teachers to polarize their approaches. By embedding literary study across the curriculum, teachers can teach academic content using a variety of literary formats, including nonfiction, poetry, and fiction. Interdisciplinary thematic units allow topics to be explored using a variety of discourse types and literary genres. The literary qualities of nonfiction can be examined, including authors’ use of metaphor, setting, point of view, and theme.

Educators' recognition of the applicability of literary study across the curriculum reflects an enhanced role for elementary teachers as "curators of literature" (p. 94) who work to attain an effective balance between influencing young readers' choices and attitudes and stepping back to allowing children's cognitive and psychosocial developmental perspectives to guide their book selections and response preferences. Lehman notes that both implicit and explicit instruction can build on what children know and can promote participation in social constructions of knowledge.

*Children's Literature and Learning: Literary Study Across the Curriculum* may be an elementary level companion book to Langer's (1995) description of high school classrooms that promote literary thought, create literate communities, and utilize literature across the curriculum, but where academic concepts and vocabulary are taught to students at a range of levels of success.

A portion of the book is dedicated to helping teachers articulate their own philosophy of literary study. The book has a glossary of literary terms, an appendix describing literary theories and child development theories, and an annotated list of children's books.

### References

Langer, J. (1995). *Envisioning literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction*. New York: Teachers College Press.

McGee, L. M., & Tompkins, G. E. (1995). Literature-based reading instruction: What's guiding the instruction? *Language Arts*, 72(6), 405-414.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Sorensen, M., & Lehman, B. (Eds.). (1995). *Teaching with children's books: Paths to literature-based instruction*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

**Cite This Article as:** *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: January 08, 2008  
<https://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 14869, Date Accessed: 3/15/2021 10:12:05 AM

[Purchase Reprint Rights for this article or review](#)