



# Journal of Literary Education

## Editorial

### Teaching Children's Literature in the University: New Perspectives and Challenges for the Future

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Children's literature is an area of frequent scholarship, reflecting its influential position in telling stories, developing literacy, and sharing knowledge in many cultures. At its best, children's literature is transformative in the lives of children and their adult reading companions, and as such plays an important role in society. Indeed, in the last several decades, children's literature has become an important focus of teaching and research in centres for literature and literary criticism, education, and library/information sciences in universities across the world. Much has been written about the historical undervaluing of children's literature and research in this area (e.g., Nikolajeva, 2016). While there is considerable literature concerning the teaching of children's literature in primary and secondary classrooms (e.g., Bland & Lütge, 2012; Arizpe & Styles, 2016; Ommundsen et al., 2021), there has been relatively little scholarship on the pedagogy involved in teaching children's literature in a university setting with two notable exceptions. *Teaching Children's Fiction* edited by Robert Butler (2006) presents eight chapters by experienced children's literature teachers and scholars, mostly from

Britain, concerning intellectual and educational traditions in children's literature studies and teaching, sharing and discussion of teaching practices, and providing resources for teachers in this field. A *Master Class in Children's Literature*, edited by April Bedford and Lettie Albright (2011), offers chapters in which children's literature professors from across the United States of America share and reflect on their practice in relation to the structures of children's literature courses, the characteristics and elements of children's literature, and future trends and challenges in the teaching of children's literature.

## 1. Challenges in contemporary teaching with children's literature

In an essay published in 1959 entitled *Children's Literature and Children's Literacy*, L.S. Root stated, "To help children achieve literacy, children's literature must be removed from the position of splendid isolation which it now occupies in far too many classrooms" (p. 289). In order to reach this goal, she argues that three forces need to crucially interact--new programs of reading instruction based on appreciation and pleasure for what children read, recognition of the fundamental role of multimedia literacy, and broadened definitions of literacy and literature (p. 289). More than sixty years have passed but many aspects of this argument are still relevant today.

Nowadays literacy is still a crucial consideration in the teaching of children's literature at universities with many scholars creatively combining different theoretical frameworks and methods. From this perspective, one of the most compelling aspects is linked to the increasing linguistic and cultural diversities of university students in these courses. Engaging students with global and multicultural children's literature has become a fundamental element in building their intercultural understandings and abilities to successfully interact across cultures (Short, Day & Schroeder, 2016). This approach not only builds their literacy competence but also encourages their critical thinking and cross-cultural investigations. In addition, experiences with culturally diverse literature contributes to enlarging interdisciplinary content-area knowledge (social studies, arts, history, etc.) and supports a more engaged discussion about responsible and participative global citizenship (Johnson, Mathis & Short, 2017).

Other challenging features in contemporary teaching with children's literature can be traced to the rising sensitivity towards the protection and preservation of nature and the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals or Global Goals. New theoretical perspectives, such as ecocriticism, posthumanism and new materialism (Gaard, 2009; Goga et al., 2018; Duckworth & Guanio-Uluru, 2021), offer insightful tools to discuss these issues and engage with students in investigations that push their critical thinking in "more-than-human environments" (García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020, p. 47).

Many other complex topics challenge the theoretical frameworks and methods in teaching children's literature, such as the role of cross-disciplinary and cross-modality in children's and young adult literature, the current dominance of utilitarian uses of children's literature with a strong focus on bibliotherapy approaches, and the difficulties many of us have experienced at universities during the two-year period (2020-2021) of the pandemic, in trying to balance digital and on-line teaching with the lack of sensory elements in digital teaching environments due to the omission of the physical affordances of books.

Consequently, there is a compelling need to consider these aspects of teaching children's literature, including questioning problematic perspectives and sharing methodologies and educational practices that help scholars face present and future educational challenges of this discipline at the tertiary level.

## **2. Overview on the contributions to this issue**

In this special issue, our contributors build on the work of Butler (2006) and Bedford and Albright (2011) in sharing their approaches to teaching children's literature in universities across Europe, North America, Asia, and Australasia. The thirteen articles in the special issue are arranged into three sections: Connecting across Students and Courses; Opening Spaces for Dialogue of Children's Literature; and Encouraging Critical Reading of Picturebooks.

The first section of the special issue, Connecting across Students and Courses, presents three perspectives from Scotland, Australia and Croatia on ways in which university students and courses connect with children's literature. Jennifer Farrar presents findings from a two-year survey of preservice teachers in Scotland, exploring their knowledge of children's literature and their attitudes towards reading, suggesting ways to create a literature-rich environment within a teacher education context. Alyson Simpson's article focuses on preservice teachers in an Australian context, describing a partnership between an initial teacher education course and local schools to create authentic interactions with children's literature. School children wrote letters to preservice teachers to describe their reading preferences and the preservice teachers made recommendations for further reading, in the process exploring their own reading identities. Lastly, Matea Butković and Ester Vidović explore representation of ethnic diversity in picturebooks used within six Croatian faculties of Teacher Education. Their findings indicate the need for teacher educators to expand their reading lists with more diverse voices.

Other issues on teaching children's literature are addressed in the section on Opening Spaces for Dialogue of Children's Literature with contributions by authors from Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Norway and Spain. Jeanette Hoffmann discusses the Didactic Research Labs where university students

read-aloud picturebooks to children and reflect on their learning processes using Key Incident Analysis. The results provide insights into both the processes of reflection by the primary school student teachers and the processes of children's literary learning. Marnie Campagnaro and Nina Goga problematize the notion of theoretical perspectives on ecocriticism, posthumanism and new materialism in children's literature with regards to the methodological tools and teaching practices necessary to prepare students to address these demanding issues. Based on a cross-disciplinary theoretical framework, the authors explore a pilot course which took place virtually to motivate students to fruitfully engage with nonfiction children's literature, aesthetic experiences, and environmental consciousness. Nicola Daly and Dianne Forbes describe their development of a four-week Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) focusing on picturebooks, using a sociocultural frame in partnership with a popular MOOC provider. Their work problematizes the relevant role of storytelling in achieving human connection and exploring social issues even in a virtual context. Inspired by the potential of Lifelong Education, Karla Fernández de Gamboa Vázquez and Xabier Etxaniz present a short-term project to teach children's literature to senior learners. The intergenerational classic tale of the Little Red Riding Hood and its contemporary retellings are used to encourage senior students to reflect on the moral discourse of children's literature and on their ideological responses to contemporary children's picturebooks.

The section on Encouraging Critical Reading of Picturebooks contains contributions from authors in the United States of America, France, Indonesia, Canada, Norway, Scotland and Turkey. Petros Panou's article describes supporting preservice teachers in the USA to read global literature radiantly, taking themselves outside their realities, and engaging their social imagination. Esa Christine Hartmann and Christine Hélot worked with preservice teachers in France to explore the use of multilingual picturebooks in bilingual educational contexts and the potential of multilingual picturebooks to foster the development of biliteracy and metalinguistic awareness. Nita Novianti's work in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting in Indonesia presents findings about developing critical literacy with EFL pre-service teachers using fairy tales. Danielle A. Morris-O'Connor shares her practice of using picturebooks in Canadian first year English Literature classes, exploring the potential of picturebooks in this setting and sharing assignment possibilities. The last two articles in this section involve film and LED technology. Berit Westergaard Bjørlo and Berit Westergaard Johnsrud discuss two films about picturebooks made by Norwegian in-service teachers during an in-service course on Norwegian language and literature. Their findings indicate that the making of film fostered high engagement and supported in-depth knowledge about children's literature. Lastly, Betül Gaye Dinç, Birce Özkan and Ilgim Veryeri Alaca share the experiences of students in an undergraduate/graduate course in children's literature who incorporated circuit-based technology into a picturebook they were creating,

building on the Maker Movement and Human Computer Interaction (HCI). Students commented on the playfulness and teamwork involved in this task and identified additional literacies they used.

In all three sections, the articles by contributors highlight the range of ways in which children's literature is being taught and the potential of children's literature for creating deep engagement among adult university students across a range of different and rich thematic, methodological and geographical contexts.

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