

# Children's Literature and the Grades 4-6 Curriculum

Literature shapes conceptions of the world and is an unlimited resource for insights into what it is to be human. Through literature, children vicariously experience times, places, cultures, situations and values vastly different from their own. They take on other roles, lose themselves in other identities, live through strange adventures, wander roads long vanished, and enter worlds that never were. In doing so, children are able to see reflections of themselves, their times, their country, their concerns. Reading and responding to children's literature help give shape to children's own lives as they tell their own stories and participate in conversations about those of others. Such conversations help children to discover, for example, how their own ideas—of friendship, love, hate, jealousy, loyalty, honesty, dishonesty, hope, despair—are similar to or different from those of others. Identifying and assessing the ideas and values inherent in children's literature helps them to explore, clarify, and defend their own ideas and values. Wide reading of children's literature provides exemplary models for language development. As children internalize the structures and conventions of particular genres, obtain ideas for themes and topics, and notice interesting techniques, they are building their ability to read, view, write, and speak.

In English Language Arts, grades 4-6, children are expected to select, read, and view with understanding a range of literature, information, media, and visual texts. As well, they are expected to respond personally and critically to a range of texts, applying their understanding of language, form, and genre. These general outcomes are the work of all English Language Arts students. By the end of elementary (grade 6), for example, children are expected to be able to

- select, independently, texts appropriate to their range of interests and learning needs
- read widely and experience a variety of children's literature with an emphasis on genre and authors
- use and integrate the various cueing systems and a variety of strategies with increasing independence to construct meaning
- explain why a particular text matters to them and demonstrate an increasing ability to make connections among texts
- reflect on and give reasons for their interpretations of an increasing variety of texts
- identify the conventions and structure of a variety of print and media texts and genres, and make connections with the purpose of each text or genre
- respond critically to texts by
  - applying a growing range of strategies to analyze and evaluate a text
  - demonstrating growing awareness that all texts reflect a purpose and a perspective

These curriculum outcomes demonstrate an emphasis on literature as a means of acquiring vicarious experiences, building reading strategies, and enhancing their abilities to respond both personally and critically to the books they read and view. As students respond personally and critically to novels and other genre books, they simultaneously turn attention to their curriculum outcomes for speaking, listening, writing, and other ways of representing. In short, reading and responding to children's literature provides opportunity for children in grades 4-6 to address curriculum outcomes that span all the language arts processes.

In the elementary English Language Arts curriculum, children are invited to experience and participate in literature, allowing it to stimulate images, associations, feelings, and thoughts, so that the literature becomes personally significant to them. Literature is offered as a series of experiences that children can enter into and explore, rather than as a fixed body of information about specific texts, authors, and terminology. Meaning is central to literature study. Knowledge of genre, for example, develops from and supports the search for meaning. While exploring the features of various genres, teachers should keep in mind that their purpose is not to teach the technicalities of genre analysis but to bring students and texts together in intellectually and emotionally productive ways. Knowledge about the features of various types of texts becomes important to the degree that such knowledge enables students to recognize the effectiveness of the use of a particular technique, to deepen their understanding as they think and talk about their interactions with texts, and to grow increasingly confident in their ability to make critical and aesthetic judgements.

While it is important that children study some works in detail, a key aspect of the English Language Arts curriculum, grades 4-6, is that children select and explore diverse works independently. Children need opportunities to read and reflect on the issues and messages of literature, both to give them pleasure and to extend their understanding. Small-group discussions, such as those that occur within literature circles, can foster children's capacity to respond personally and critically to literature. Children should be encouraged to talk to each other about their readings and viewing.

**English Language Arts: A Curriculum Guide, Grades 4-6** makes clear that reading in all genres of literature as well as exposure to information and media text is essential to the development of a flexible, fluent reader. However, in an age when many texts, particularly media texts, offer more visuals and less print, the novel has an increasingly important place in children's lives. The novel offers an opportunity for sustained reading; it provides an environment that becomes part of the children's experience in a way that shorter selections do not, simply because they are shorter and readers do not live in them very long. The novel offers children extended time to identify with characters and thereby grow in understanding of themselves and others. They can identify with and live through the exploits of fictitious characters. Novels can help them to broaden their horizons, develop their imagination, develop as readers, and enhance the quality of their recreational reading. Through reading and responding to novels, children can become aware of how authors use their talents and skills to create stories. They can note the development of plot and character, discover elements of successful writing (effective words, sentences, conversations, images, organization, etc.), and reflect on the emotions and opinions a novel arouses. Students gain reading power and develop awareness of literary elements through in-depth experiences with novels.