

ENGLISH LEADERSHIP Quarterly



Conference on English Leadership

▶ IN THIS ISSUE

Young Adult Literature in Today's Classroom

Lisa Scherff and Susan Groenke, editors

Young adult literature, the genre considered “still in its own adolescence” by Robert Carlsen in the 1980s, seems to be coming of age in the 21st century. Sales of young adult novels are up, and some claim the genre is experiencing its “second golden age” due to its “increasing sophistication” (Reno, 2008). That ties in with young adult author David Levithan’s explanation: teenagers are more “emotionally mature,” so librarians and booksellers have finally separated the teen book section from children’s book sections. Pam Cole, author of *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century*, cites an exploding teenage population as reason. Others attribute the genre’s success to content: “everything, from meth addiction to sexual abuse to the war in Iraq” (Reno, 2008).

Yet, as long-time adolescent literature advocates Virginia Monseau and Gary Salvner (2000) contend, “Despite the quality of many young adult books, their acceptance in classrooms has remained limited, partly because of misconceptions about the genre. . .” (p. ix). One misconception English teachers may have is that young adult literature is for struggling, reluctant readers *only*, rather than sophisti-

cated, already-motivated readers. Perhaps this is due to the increasing quantity of professional reading that emphasizes young adult literature’s usefulness in engaging struggling and/or reluctant readers (Allen, 1995; Reynolds, 2004). In addition, some English teachers might not consider young adult literature good literature that has staying power (Bigler & Collins, 1995). Thus, some teachers might not choose to use young adult literature in the classroom because they see its use as “lowering the bar” and accommodating students’ need for entertainment (Applebee, 1992).

Perhaps due to these misconceptions, when young adult literature can be found in schools, it is usually in remedial reading classes, the school library, or on teachers’ personal classroom library shelves, where students can check out young adult novels for independent, silent reading. Some teachers might use excerpts from young adult novels as a “bridge” or “complement” to the classics (Kaywell, 1993), but rarely is a contemporary young adult novel centered as the core text for whole-class instruction (Applebee, 1993; Stover, 2001).

Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber’s

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(2006) recent research shows that the novels high school English teachers use for whole-class instruction tend to be the same classic, canonical works Applebee (1993) found in his research over a decade ago—texts like *The Scarlet Letter*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Great Gatsby*. As Applebee (1993) explains, “These are the texts at the heart of the English curriculum and

thus [they] receive the most time and attention . . . [and] other selections are often organized and introduced [around them]" (p. 234).

We're fans of classic texts, and think *all* students—and not just those in Honors or AP classes—should have opportunities to read them. But we also believe, as Teri Lesesne (2008) exhorts in her "Young Adult Reader's Bill of Rights," that adolescents have the "right to demand changes in the literary canon for the 21st century." We think for teachers, respecting this right should include centering high-quality young adult literature at the *heart* of the English curriculum, because we know from decades of classroom-based reading research that:

- adolescent engagement with reading and motivation to read *increases* when adolescents read young adult novels (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Pflaum & Bishop, 2004; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999)
- adolescent literature has the potential to broaden adolescents' vi-

sion of self and the world, providing an avenue for reflection and a means for personal development (Bean & Harper, 2006; Glasgow, 2001; Landt, 2006)

- adolescents choose to read adolescent novels over more canonical works when given opportunities to choose (Cole, 2008)

We know that adolescents like young adult novels because, unlike classical, canonical works, they have been written *about* adolescents, *with adolescent readers in mind*. We know, too, that when teachers define good literature as only those books that fit into the Western canon, they risk "disadvantag[ing] particular groups" of people (Bigler & Collins, 1995, p. 1), and promoting a Eurocentric and patriarchal bias (Stallworth et al., 2006).

Speaking at the ALAN conference at the 2007 NCTE convention, young adult author Chris Crutcher suggested that when we omit young adult literature from our classrooms, we say to students that the kids in those books, and their lives, don't mat-

ter. Teenagers' reading habits and their out-of-school lives *must* matter in today's classrooms if we don't want to foster the disconnect many adolescents associate with school. Until young adult novels become the "curriculum heart" of secondary English programs, the genre—like adolescents' lives and adolescent literacies—will continue to remain at the margins of school curriculum (Cole, 2008).

We're fortunate because much of the young adult literature being published today is high-quality literature that deserves teachers' attention and consideration for use in English classrooms. Jago (2004) insists that "good" literature is literature requiring careful study, often guided by a teacher; we think quality young adult literature fits this description. As Hipple (2000) explains that like great literature, good young adult novels have meritorious themes and are worthy of study and commentary; Moore (1997) and Scherff (2007) have shown that young adult literature can be used to teach literary theory, and Salvner (2000) attests "many . . . course objectives about literary elements and devices can be achieved . . . with a [young adult novel]" (p. 89). As the authors in this issue show, young adult literature also has the potential to help adolescents think critically about our world. That's a whole lot of result for an "adolescent" genre. ●

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Making Meaning Out of the 9/11 Tragedy: Teaching Cormier's *After the First Death*

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Rethinking My Curriculum after 9/11

On September 11, 2001, I was a beginning English teacher in upstate New York, busy starting off the year with a whole new set of students. Those of us who experienced this moment in history have our own tales of its impact—the people we knew who lived in New York, the lives that were lost, the feelings and struggles in the days and months to follow. No American went untouched by the tragedy of 9/11—not me and not my students. I realized I had an opportunity to make meaning out of the tragedy with my 10th-graders, while also meeting their needs as struggling readers.

Prior to 9/11, I had struggled with the traditional curriculum used by the

previous 10th-grade English teachers. I was teaching two sections of 10 Small Group, our name for classes populated by sophomores who expe-

My greatest desire as an English teacher was to create a lifelong love of reading in my students.

rienced difficulties with reading and writing. Many of these students had learning disabilities, and most could be classified as reluctant readers. I wanted to find texts that would spark

these students' interest in reading. Ultimately, beyond any standardized tests to be passed or classic works to be taught, my greatest desire as an English teacher was to create a lifelong love of reading in my students. I believed that exposing my students to literature they would be interested in was an important step toward accomplishing this.

Choosing to Teach a Young Adult Novel

During the first week of school, I administered a modified version of Nancie Atwell's (1988) reading interest survey to all of my English classes in order to get a feel for their backgrounds, attitudes, and interests regarding reading. In response to a question about what kinds of books

they liked to read, an overwhelming majority of students wrote that they preferred horror/suspense/mystery novels and action/adventure novels.

Based on my students' responses, I chose to teach the young adult novel *After the First Death* by Robert Cormier (1991). Cormier is a well-known author of young adult literature, and *After the First Death* fit well with the genres my classes had expressed interest in through the survey. The plot of the novel, however, was built around an act of terrorism committed by a group of men from an unspecified country in the Middle East.

In the story, a busload of children is hijacked by terrorists, one of which is a teenage boy named Miro. Kate, a high school student, has filled in for her uncle as bus driver that day, and becomes a hostage along with the children. In addition, alternating chapters are told from the perspective of a young man named Ben, whose father is an American general. Ben frequently refers to the "Bus and Bridge" incident, though readers are not made aware of his involvement in the ordeal until late in the story.

While the novel in no way promotes terrorism, it is also not a black-and-white tale of good and evil. Throughout the story, Cormier challenges American ideals of patriotism and questions the American way of life. He offers the perspective of the young teenage terrorist, Miro, and questions the motives of an American general. The plot is full of suspense, and the psychological twist at the end is sure to keep students motivated to read and to think about the book long after they are finished reading.

Although I was excited to introduce *After the First Death* to my students, and I was confident that it would

catch their interest, I was concerned about raising sensitive issues in a time of fresh wounds and high emotions. I worried that my students might struggle too much with the topic or that parents would be upset about the novel's content. And I worried that the school board or administration would soon be in my classroom, dissecting my curriculum for other controversial materials.

Just as in the past, voices of the opponents of the use of controversial young adult literature in the classroom are still strong today, arguing that such literature condones immoral activities or teaches topics that students are not yet mature enough to handle (Enriquez, 2006). Others believe that introducing literature that is outside of the traditional canon dilutes the curriculum and lowers the bar by accommodating students' need for entertainment (Applebee, 1992). Was I prepared to defend my literature choice? I had strayed from the traditional curriculum and stepped into the unknown world of potentially controversial, contemporary young adult literature.

Defending My Choice

Controversy and Conflict Engage Teen Readers

Bushman and Haas (2001) describe the literature that is written for today's young adults as having many common characteristics: "Conflicts are often consistent with the young adult's experience, themes are of interest to young people, protagonists and most characters are young adults, and the language parallels that of young people" (p. 2). Because young adult literature often seeks to address issues that are pertinent to the lives of today's students, many of the

topics brought up are considered to be controversial. In other words, these works are likely to be considered offensive, thus triggering debate over their value in the curriculum.

On the other hand, supporters of the use of young adult literature in the classroom agree that the primary benefit of teaching a novel like *After the First Death*, even during a time of great tragedy when the novel could be perceived as controversial, is that students will actually read it. This relates directly to my stated goal as an English teacher—I wanted my students to read, and I needed to find works of literature that could capture their interest and motivate them. I knew that lifelong readers begin by reading literature they *want* to read.

While today's children enjoy reading as much as students in any other era, we simply need a different approach to hooking them on a story and helping them settle into reading (Crowe, 1999). Chris Crowe, a widely published advocate for young adult literature, claims, "Once these students get caught up in the narrative of a good story, they'll begin to overcome both the inertia of non-reading and their negative attitude about books. Once they get some momentum as readers, we hope they'll want to continue reading long after they graduate from school" (p. 114).

YA Lit Meets the Needs of YA Readers

I also felt it was imperative to help students access literature that could meet their needs on many different levels. While traditional, canonical literature was written for the "educated adult community" (Bushman, 1997, p. 35), contemporary young adult literature is written for teenaged readers at a wide range of ability levels.

Search for New Editor of *English Leadership Quarterly*

In April 2011, the term of the present editors (Lisa Scherff and Susan L. Groenke) will end. Interested persons should apply no later than August 14, 2009. The applicant appointed by the CEL Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in August 2011. The initial appointment is for four years, renewable for three years. See the *ELQ* website (www.ncte.org/journals/elq) for full submission information. Questions should be directed to Kurt Austin, Publications Division Director: kaustin@ncte.org.

In addition, Bushman (1997) believes that young adult literature can be used to meet important developmental needs that are unique to this stage of adolescence. He argues that “in order to help young adults through the difficult time of being adolescents, teachers must provide literature that speaks to the issues facing our students: problems in their physical, intellectual, moral, and reading development” (p. 35). By offering this literature to students, we open a window to topics that challenge both societal norms and our own comfort level, and we promote honest examination of the needs of today’s adolescent population.

Teaching *After the First Death*

In 2001, I saw in my students a great need to cope with the events that were shaking our country. Cormier’s novel was a vehicle for us to discuss these sensitive issues. Before actually beginning the novel, students were asked to write their own thoughts and feelings about topics such as patriotism and heroism, which we then discussed. In addition, students filled out “Think-Link” charts as we read. The chart provided a place for students to record their thinking as they made observations, asked questions, and created connections. Predictably, all students made connections to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as they started to fill out their Think-Link charts.

However, as the story progressed, students moved beyond this link to more personal connections about heroism and family, love and sexuality, relationships and identity, and many others. They explored each teenage character’s perspective and grappled with the questions raised by Cormier regarding American patriotism and acts of terror. And they saw themselves in each teenage character—Kate, Ben, and Miro—in different ways. In short, *After the First Death* provided them with “a window to the world and a mirror to the self” (Freedman & Johnson, 2001, p. 356).

In the end, I believe I made the right choice in introducing my classes

to *After the First Death*. Students were engaged in the story throughout and the discussions that surrounded the themes and events of the novel were invaluable. Students became interested in Robert Cormier as a writer, and they sought to read more of his works. I soon found myself filling my classroom library with more works of this nature, trying to fulfill my students’ requests.

In addition, the Think-Link charts showed students’ insightful questioning and connections as they engaged with the text. In comparing these charts with the ones students had completed on a traditional novel, I found they had made more connections and higher-quality connections after reading *After the First Death*. For instance, in one class, 12 of the 14 students showed an increase in connections, and the connections provided were far more personal and thoughtful.

As Don Gallo said, “Although most teenagers appear to be self-absorbed, they are searching for answers, about the meaning of life and their place in the wider world” (2005, p. 128). If we can, as teachers, provide our students with a catalyst to discuss these issues, if we can provide them with a means to gain insight into the world around them, and if we can open their eyes to different perspectives and ways of thinking, then we have accomplished something great. Sometimes, the topics that adolescents need to talk about and read about and discuss are the things that are most controversial and make us the most uncomfortable. “However, often the things that make us the most uncomfortable are the things that are the most important for us to teach about” (Jackett, 2007, p. 102). My students brought home this very valuable lesson in the midst of tragedy in 2001.

Additional YA Books of Interest to Teens

The works listed are titles I have taught or titles that were taught by trusted colleagues.

- Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (1974) – teenage bullying and harassment
- Judy Blume’s *Forever* (1975) – a teen’s first sexual encounter and teen pregnancy
- Shelley Stoehr’s *Crosses* (1991) – self-mutilation
- Chris Crutcher’s *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993) – religion, peer pressure, child abuse, abortion
- Zlata Filipovic’s *Zlata’s Diary* (1994) – graphic depiction of war
- Rob Thomas’s *Rats Saw God* (1996) – drugs, sex
- Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999) – rape
- Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) – suicide, teenage sexuality, drug use, and abusive relationships
- Sarah Dessen’s *Dreamland* (2000) – emotionally, mentally, and physically abusive relationships
- Alex Flinn’s *Breathing Underwater* (2001) – emotionally, mentally, and physically abusive relationships
- Patricia McCormick’s *Cut* (2001) – self-mutilation
- Alice Hoffman’s *Green Angel* (2003) – self-mutilation
- Angela Johnson’s *The First Part Last* (2003) – teen fatherhood
- Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna* (2004) – a girl whose older brother is transsexual
- Steve Berman’s *Vintage, A Ghost Story* (2007) – depression, homosexuality, suicidal feelings

Figure 1.

Conclusion

Today I am an assistant principal in a high school (grades 7–12), and I spend a lot of time working with my English teachers on their curriculum choices. Although I support the use of traditional canonical works in the classroom, I also encourage teachers to explore the world of contemporary young adult literature (see Figure 1 for titles of interest). When teachers express concern over the content of some of these works, I remind them that many of the works in the traditional literary canon were also once considered controversial and were frequently banned in schools.

In dealing with potentially controversial situations in a school, my compass is whatever is best for students. If we are creating classrooms where students can connect to literature and develop a lifelong love of reading, or if a story can address and even provide answers to a teenager's personal and potentially painful feeling or experi-

ence, then we are truly doing what is best for our students.

After the First Death was the novel I chose in 2001 to meet the needs of my students. Though many years have passed since I first began teaching *After the First Death*, the issues raised through the novel are still relevant to the world our students live in today. Now more than ever, our society is grappling with notions of patriotism, national pride, fear of terrorism, and our country's place in this world. Kids today still search for their own identity and struggle with relationships. They still question their own ability to handle tough situations and wonder about the things that are important in life. Though the events of September 11th have faded into our memories, teaching a novel like *After the First Death* is still just as powerful in a classroom today. ●

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From Fiction to Reality: Using Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks* to Develop Classroom Community

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As a former middle school teacher and longtime advocate of young adult literature in the classroom, I can attest to the genre's usefulness in helping me achieve three of my educational goals: 1) building a sense of classroom community; 2) encouraging authentic classroom talk about literature; and 3) developing my students' critical stances toward literature.

Discussing literature can be a difficult and personal experience, especially when interacting with other peers who may challenge or criticize one's views. David Bloome (1986) suggests that such interaction, however, is an important part of literacy: "Reading and writing are not unitary skills, nor are they reducible to sets of component skills falling neatly under

discrete categories (linguistic, cognitive); rather, they are complex human activities taking place in complex human relationships" (p.71). Bloome

Discussing literature can be a difficult and personal experience, especially when interacting with other peers who may challenge or criticize one's views.

argues that reading and writing are inherently social practices and, as such, should be considered in terms

of community. Students use a common language to talk about books, and they form authentic relationships through this type of communication. He explains that literacy is dependent upon community because students interpret text and construct meaning within the context of the surrounding classroom community.

One novel that has helped me create a classroom community where students feel that their voices, and often their differing ideas, are welcomed and respected is Paul Fleischman's (1997) young adult novel, *Seedfolks*. This multi-voiced novel presents 13 diverse characters who live in close proximity to each other, but never interact. In the first chapter, Kim, a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl who mourns her deceased father,

plants some lima beans in a junk-strewn city lot in his honor. Kim's seemingly simple, humble act serves as a catalyst for others to plant their own storied seeds in what ultimately becomes a community garden. As an eighth-grade teacher for many years, I taught *Seedfolks* at the beginning of the school year because the book defines and inspires community development.

From Fleischman's Community to Our Own Classroom Community

The novel is short, and we usually read it in 1-2 days. After reading the novel, my students and I would talk about the different kinds of communities to which we belong (e.g., neighborhood, online, church, athletic, etc.), paying special attention to our own classroom. *Seedfolks* pushes readers to consider the fact that even though differences exist between people, so, too, do commonalities. As a class, we considered how all of us, despite our differences, were in one common place—my classroom—and how the eighth-grade students were experiencing similar, universal adolescent growing pains (e.g., first love, forming new friendships, outgrowing old friends). After discussions about our differences and commonalities, students participated in two activities to further develop our classroom community for the year.

The Classroom Garden Plot

As a way for my students to get to know one another, differences and all, I created a gardening "plot" on the classroom wall in which to "grow" our classroom garden. Just as each character in *Seedfolks* has a specific reason for planting seeds in the garden, I told my students to fill their plot with images or words that represented them. The entire classroom wall eventually became covered with pictures of favorite bands, family members, sports pictures, ticket stubs, original poetry, etc. As students added to the wall, they explained the importance behind the

items and how the item symbolized who they were. The subsequent visual representation showed a commonality that made our bond stronger; through this activity, my students realized, as those in the story did, the things they had in common with one another. Our garden represented our values, loves, and symbols of ourselves. As a result of this activity, the students began to see each other in new ways.

An Intertextual Connection: Spoon River Anthology

To accentuate the concept of community, I also shared excerpts of Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* with the students. Another multi-voiced novel, *Spoon River* is comprised of first person epitaphs

Our garden represented our values, loves, and symbols of ourselves. As a result of this activity, the students began to see each other in new ways.

that describe the lives of 212 separate deceased characters who once lived in the community of Spoon River, Illinois. Each community member describes his or her life, shares losses, relives memories, explains life turning points, gives advice or observations about life, remembers special days, and describes how others treated them. My students and I discussed how the characters' lives are woven together through common personal experiences and memories.

After reading several excerpts, the students wrote their own epitaphs, similar to those from *Spoon River Anthology*. As a prewriting exercise, I asked them to recall salient memories or think about advice they would want to give others if their lives were

suddenly taken away. Some of the writing prompts were: 1) describe a time when you laughed the most; 2) describe your best birthday; 3) describe your saddest memory; 4) describe your best holiday; 5) what advice would you give next year's eighth-graders about life and school? 6) describe your most embarrassing moment; and 7) describe your proudest moment.

When students had responded to each prompt, they selected one that they felt would provide the most vivid description and would be most comfortable to share. After they completed their final drafts, they read their epitaphs aloud. Fashioned as a performance, students stood in a v-shaped formation and shared their writing. The result was a compilation of diverse voices—some sad, some happy, some funny, and some offering advice on how to live one's life. It was a very moving experience for me and for all the students in the class.

After the performance, we discussed what the students had learned about one another, and described the communities we'd read about in the two novels. We compared and contrasted how Fleischman and Masters described communities: Fleischman's community is made through a co-created garden, whereas Masters's community is established through sharing one's individual story. As a result of our activities, our classroom community became an integration of both.

Conclusion

I worry about the classroom casualties caused by No Child Left Behind. Scripted reading programs encourage a return to a modernist-inspired mode of instruction that locates textual authority in texts and teachers solely, silences students' voices, and encourages passive reading (Jordan, 2005). As a classroom teacher, I was asked to "voluntarily" implement a scripted reading pilot program with struggling readers, but I resisted. I simply could not champion words that were not my own—words that were formulaic,

words that were “one size fits all,” words that did not know my students and would never meet them, words that often included uninteresting reading excerpts that were rarely relevant to my students’ lives.

In addition, my experiences have taught me that, with scripted reading programs and skill-and-drill instruction, the kind of classroom community that respects and celebrates students’ voices and ideas about literature may become extinct. I fear we may be returning to the individualistic classroom community model. In this type of community, teachers favor the individual over the group, going against the very notion of what a community should represent. Thayer-Bacon and Bacon (1998) describe the teacher and students in this type of classroom community in the following manner:

A good teacher in an individualistic model is someone who is able to control the class, keep the students quiet and

in line, and get as many students as possible to pass the tests and move on to the next grade. Students most often work by themselves at their own desks and are not allowed to talk to each other (that would be cheating). The aim is to help each student obtain the most knowledge possible. The teacher is viewed as the model of authority and wisdom and as an instrument to help the individual child obtain success. (p. 9)

In my current position as a teacher educator, I show my students how young adult literature can create the kind of learning community in which there is “a sense that everyone belongs, is valued, has something to contribute, and has rights but also responsibilities for the welfare of others in the class and school” (Korinek, Walther-Thomas, McLaughlin, & Williams, 1999, p. 3). It is my hope that these future teachers will resist the pressures of high-stakes testing

so that their classroom communities may flourish rather than wilt. ●

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Facilitating Inclusion: Young Adult Literature as a Tool

Judith A. Hayn, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Lisa A. Hazlett, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, and William J. Sweeney, University of South Dakota, Vermillion

Disabled students and/or those with various congenital or temporary illnesses and conditions increasingly populate general education classrooms. Many educators are concerned about the potential for social rejection among peers that can affect these students (e.g., Fox, 1989; Hollinger, 1987; Noland, McLaughlin, Howard, & Sweeney, 1993; Sabornie, Marshall, & Ellis, 1990). Peer rejection has profound effects on an individual’s ability to assimilate and function successfully later in life (Heron & Harris, 1992). Bruininks (1978) and Bryan (1976) examined peer attitudes toward students with disabilities and found that both their actual and perceived status, as well as their popularity ratings among peers, was lower than their same-age and grade peers. Noland et al. (1993) suggest, however, that when general education stu-

dents and students with disabilities learn in the same classroom, general education students’ attitudes toward individuals with disabilities improves significantly.

Admittedly, creating comfortable classroom climates that emphasize respect for all students can be difficult. A national survey of educators (Parsad, Lewis, & Farris, 2001) reported that while 96% of general education teachers were currently teaching students with disabilities or had previously taught such students, fewer than a third believed they were adequately prepared or possessed adequate resources to teach students exhibiting various disabilities.

Adolescent maturation adds more barriers to classroom openness. This is a chaotic time for all teens, especially disabled ones, as their cognitive and physical maturation may differ widely from peers’, setting them fur-

ther apart and often closing previous social opportunities. A disabled teen may have had close friendships with elementary classmates, but is not invited to social activities in secondary school—a confusing and hurtful change.

Talking openly about disabilities, conditions, and illnesses in secondary schools is thus difficult and unevenly unaddressed. Regardless, disabled students are increasingly in classrooms with the non-disabled. How can secondary educators continue (or begin) integrating older disabled teens with their non-disabled peers in authentic and meaningful ways without creating or exacerbating stigmas?

Andrews (1998) asserted that reading literature about disabilities, and subsequently discussing it, is particularly influential in helping non-disabled students to develop awareness, understanding, and compassion for

those with conditions and illnesses, and even leads to a more positive perspective toward such students. This position has been supported and echoed by many (e.g., Blasingame, 2007; Christenbury, 2006; Donelson & Nilsen, 2005; Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005; Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2007).

In *Necessary Noise*, Cart (2003) stated that everyone is aware of disabled students, but schools are unsure about what to do with them. A standard response is to incorporate new policies and procedures, but many disabled students are still ignored, patronized, bullied, or otherwise stigmatized by classmates. It is thus crucial that non-disabled adolescents begin to understand the often extreme differences that characterize the lives of their peers. "Kids need to learn empathy. They need to learn how the *other* can become *us*" (Cart, p. x). Cart suggests one way for kids to learn empathy is "through reading fiction that captures—artfully, authentically, and unsparingly—the circumstances of kids" (p. xiii) who are in such situations.

The inclusion of literature where individuals with disabilities, conditions, and/or illnesses are portrayed as functional, independent, and proactive role models in realistic settings is one positive approach to achieving these desired goals; in so doing, we promote awareness, sensitivity, and tolerance of individual differences, while combating many of the issues related to peer and social rejection. Such titles abound in contemporary young adult literature. What follows is our description of some that we have used successfully with disabled and non-disabled students alike to develop awareness and empathy.

Titles We Like

A contemporary author who is a trailblazer in the field of young adult literature featuring disabilities is Jack Gantos. Joey Pigza, who has ADHD and attempts to handle it without medication, first appeared in 1998 in *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*. This funny, yet heartbreaking, hyperactive kid must cope with parental separation, an alcoholic father, and misguided grandmotherly intervention, yet the irrepressible hero wins the hearts of young teen readers. Joey's saga continues in *Joey Pigza Loses Control* (2001), *What Would Joey Do?* (2002), and *I Am Not Joey Pigza* (2007). In

Admittedly, creating comfortable classroom climates that emphasize respect for all students can be difficult.

the final volume, Joey's mom returns to his father (again) and is pregnant, while his beloved grandmother dies from emphysema. The difficulties Joey faces in adjusting to his disability and to his fractured family life make riveting reading, making Gantos a must for classrooms.

Another young adult novel younger readers might like is Kimberly Newton Fusco's (2004) *Tending to Grace*, which tells the story of teenager Cornelia, a stutterer who is abandoned by her mother. Changes begin once

Cornelia goes to live with a caring aunt and finds support through an accepting friend.

Terry Trueman has also emerged as a powerful new contemporary voice in young adult fiction, tackling the problems of deeply disabled older teens. In his first novel, *Stuck in Neutral* (2000), the main character, Shawn, is an extraordinary, intelligent, witty 14-year-old, who lives in Seattle with his mother, brother Paul, and sister Cindy. Like many teens, he loves rock music and junk food, plus has a crush on Becky, an aide in his classroom at school. Shawn, like Trueman's own son, has cerebral palsy, and the disease has eradicated his muscle control. He can think and read, but cannot tell anyone what is going on inside his brain. Shawn's father is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author of a poem about Shawn and a famous media personality. Shawn knows that despite his parents' divorce, his father loves him; however, he is convinced his father wants to kill him and is helpless to prevent it. A sequel, *Cruise Control* (2004), features Shawn's brother Paul, who is an overachiever with straight A's and the top athlete in school.

Pete Hautman's *Invisible* (2005) provides an alternative look at mental illness. Dougie, 17, has no social skills, interprets everything literally, and is essentially a loner. Befriended only by popular Andy Morrow, Dougie refuses both his psychiatrist's help and his medication. He is abused by classmates and eventually beaten, exacerbating his obsession and isolation. This novel features a heartbreaking protagonist with a troubled mind that is often insightful. The ending is chilling in its ambiguity, as the friendship

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with Andy becomes pivotal.

In this same vein, Elizabeth Fensham's *Helicopter Man* (2005) tackles a younger teen's difficulties in dealing with a schizophrenic parent. Pete has long questioned his father's paranoid concept of reality, as they are essentially homeless and in hiding. In a journal, the 12-year-old reveals the uncertainty of his life and the desire to protect his father. Hospitalization and treatment offer hope for the future as this text presents a thoughtful look at mental illness addressed through the strength of family bonds.

In *Trigger* (2006), Susan Vaught tells Jersey Hatch's story of dealing with brain damage as a result of a self-inflicted gunshot. After a year in a rehabilitation center, he returns to a broken home and friends who despise him. In a notebook, Jersey records his fractured thoughts about what he can no longer remember while struggling with the physical challenges and vocal difficulties resulting from the injury. The text is sometimes difficult to decipher with Jersey's decidedly abstract narration, but the climax emerges as a redemptive story of healing for those who persevere through the layers of complexity.

Conclusion

Young adult authors who focus on the tumultuous adolescent years offer a venue for those with and without disabilities to realize what they share in common. However, it is the educator who must choose to get these texts into the hands of students, both those with disabilities and those without. As Andrews reminds us:

Through the use of quality literature about disabilities, classroom teachers can help create positive attitudes toward persons with disabilities and facilitate the successful inclusion of students with special needs into the regular classroom. By reading about characters with disabilities and vicariously experiencing their life struggles, students without disabilities can come to a better understanding and accep-

tance of people who happen to have a disability. Eventually, society as a whole will benefit through teachers' efforts to shape positive attitudes toward persons with disabilities. (p. 24)

Literature about students with disabilities can be a powerful tool for integrating these students into the classroom while at the same time affecting general education students' attitudes and feelings about their classmates. Well-chosen texts can be useful in helping ease fears and anxieties caused by ignorance, thus replacing negative stereotypes with knowledge. ●

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February 2010 *ELQ* Call for Manuscripts: Race and Literacy

The recent election of the first African American president has the country poised to consider race and racism—something many scholars and educators say is still alive and well in the U.S. Critical race scholars describe the continued inequities in public schools that exist for students of color, including lack of access to and availability of Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors courses; tracking students of color into remedial and/or special education classes; and closing public schools in high minority areas when students of color fail to pass White-normed standardized tests. President Obama's pick for secretary of education, Arne Duncan, has said student achievement is the "Civil Rights issue of our time." What does he mean by that? What would equitable literacy education look like if policy makers and school leaders took race and racism more seriously? How does institutional racism play out in your classroom, school, and/or school community? What print and nonprint texts do you use in your classroom to combat racism? What "counter-stories," or narratives of resistance, can you (or your students) tell about students of color that value their ways of knowing; see their cultures and diversity as assets in schools, rather than deficits; and show them resisting dominant stories that mark them as "lazy," "uneducable," or "at-risk"?

Deadline: November 1, 2009.

Disabilities, Attitudes, and Young Adult Literature: Teaching *Freak the Mighty* in a Regular Education Language Arts Class

Jill Henderson, Northview Middle School, Kodak, Tennessee

Choices of literary texts to teach in the language arts classroom can be limited by testing demands (e.g., competition for curricular time) and lack of resources. However, with the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) prioritizing inclusion in regular education classrooms, the time might be ripe for us to consider raising awareness of disabilities and inclusion in the classroom.

Disabilities represent differences, and differences among groups of people fill history books and contemporary newspapers with accounts of conflict and confusion. Struggles to accept differences of color, culture, religion, and ability occur in the classroom, too, and come from deep places that need to be explored in order to be understood. In the light of personal scrutiny, attitudes can evolve.

Young adult literature may be able to help in this evolution. Because young adult literature features adolescent protagonists experiencing adolescent issues, many teachers who use young adult literature believe the genre encourages empathy and critical thinking among readers. As Glasgow (2001) explains, young adult literature can provide a “context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations” (p. 54). Numerous titles are available that explore a range of disabilities across a wide range of reading and emotional maturity levels (see Resource List: Books on Disabilities, p. 13).

This year I taught a disabilities awareness unit to my eighth-graders that centered on Rodman Philbrick’s (1993) young adult novel, *Freak the Mighty*. This contemporary fictional story draws two eighth-grade boys

into an unlikely friendship. The story is told through the eyes of a physically oversized, underachieving Max Kane as he lives a troubled life. Having a convicted killer for a father, Max is convinced, like everyone else, that he’s a loser at life. Even the maternal grandparents raising him appear to be afraid of who he will become.

Max is alone and hiding in the “down under” of his grandparents’ home when he becomes reacquainted with Kevin—a frail, physically undersized body carrying around a giant intellect. With Max’s body and Kevin’s

fear, or a need to distance themselves. So I first prepared a PowerPoint presentation that showed artwork by individuals with disabilities. Many students remarked positively on the skill of the artists and expressed interest or approval before I told them the art was created by someone with a disability. I asked students to attempt to recreate a relatively simplistic drawing by Joni Eareckson Tada, who became a quadriplegic at a young age due to a diving accident.

Their mixed results led to an overall consensus that the model was much better than most of their attempts. This was our introduction to the unit and to the idea of individuals as “differently-abled” rather than merely “disabled.” I also presented a list of famous individuals, both historic and contemporary, who have been labeled with some sort of disability, such as Helen Keller, Tom Cruise, Whoopi Goldberg, and Robert David Hall, who plays Dr. Robbins, the coroner on the popular TV show, CSI (Zuiker, 2000). Learning that famous and successful people are among the disabled served to diminish some resistance.

My overarching goals for the unit were to help students understand bias in regard to disabilities, and thus raise awareness of how people develop and reveal their own bias toward individuals with disabilities. I understood the connection between language and its powers of representation; words create realities, and words can hurt. As Johnson and Freedman (2005) explain, “Knowing that language is used not only to represent people but also to reveal thoughts and assumptions about others is an element of language that . . . students need to learn to become more efficient and effective readers and citizens” (p. 61). As

I understood the connection between language and its powers of representation; words create realities, and words can hurt.

brain power, the two become “Freak the Mighty,” as they take on local bullies and have local adventures (Kevin, a King Arthur buff, might call them “quests”). Max and Kevin ultimately form a bond of friendship and face Max’s fears and Kevin’s life-threatening condition together.

As a former special education teacher, now turned general language arts teacher, I worried about how my students would react to the idea of a disabilities unit. I wanted the students to avoid the usual knee-jerk reactions people have when encountering disability issues: sympathy,

a result, many of the activities I did with the students prior to and during reading involved looking closely at the language used in the text.

As an example, I identified excerpts throughout the novel that highlighted language used by non-disabled persons to represent disabled persons. Some of these excerpts are presented below:

“Freak”– (p. 1) (no other name provided for Kevin until p. 77)

“She’s a remarkable young woman, you know. Raising that poor boy all on her own.”

“He’s not a poor boy,” I say. “You should hear him talk. I think the rest of him is so small because his brain is so big.” (p. 24)

“Hey you! Frankenstein and Igor! Don’t look around, I’m talkin’ to you, boneheads. What is this, a freak show?” (p. 29)

“You! The freak! You and that giant retard, I’ll cut you down to size. Dice and slice, baby! Freak show time!” (p. 35)

“. . . but the cops made out like I was a hero or something, rescuing the poor crippled midget kid.” (p. 41)

“Hey, who’s the midget? And there goes Mad Max; and, excuse me while I barf; and, look what escaped from the freak show; and, oh, my gawd that’s disgusting.” (p. 76)

“Ask him to count, he can paw the ground!”

“Killer Kane! Killer Kane! Had a kid who got no brain!” (p. 76)

My students and I discussed the impressions they formed of Max and Freak as they read these words, and we talked about how the words affected them as they learned more about the characters. I juxtaposed these excerpts with excerpts that highlighted Max’s perspectives of his disabilities, which manifested in dyslexic and emotional symptoms:

Yeah, right. Easy for a genius to use the dictionary, since he already knows how to spell the words. And R’s never look like backward E’s to

Freak, which is the way they look to me sometimes, unless I really squint and think about it. (p. 46)

My reading skills tutor, Mr. Meehan, he says stuff like, “Max, the tests have always shown that you’re not dyslexic or disabled, and this proves it. As you know, heh heh, my personal opinion has always been that you’re lazy and stubborn and you didn’t want to learn.” (p. 81)

This is dumb because what does it matter if I know the answer? If I don’t know, then Freak will tell me and he’ll say it in a way I can understand, which is a lot better than Mrs. Donelli can do. So what I do, I just shrug and smile and wait, because I know she’ll get tired of asking and move on to the next. . . . she gave up on trying to make me talk in class, and instead she waits until study hall, where she asks me the same questions alone and I tell her the answers. (p. 81)

In discussing these excerpts, I posed questions such as: How does Max see his disability and himself as a result of his disability? How do others view him because of his disability? How many of these examples remind you of something you have witnessed in your classes? Did the book help you to look at these experiences any differently?

Another focus of the unit was to help students understand “inclusion” and “exclusion.” I saw reading *Freak the Mighty* with my students as a way to encourage them to consider the impact of being left out of a regular education classroom because of a disability. Again, I highlighted excerpts from the text that raised the issue of inclusion, such as:

“First, let me say we’re all very pleased with your progress. It’s nothing short of miraculous, and it almost convinces me you knew how to read at your level all along and were for some reason keeping it a secret.”

I’m not really hearing what she’s saying because there’s like this little bird fluttering around inside my

chest, and it makes me blurt out: “You’re putting me back in L.D., right? . . . Because if I have to go back in the L.D. class, I won’t. I just won’t. I’ll run away. I will. I will.” (p. 84)

I facilitated discussion about the quotes I highlighted with questions such as: Do you think inclusion is a good thing for students with disabilities? Do you think inclusion is a good thing for non-disabled students? Why or why not? If students are not in-

Resource List: Books on Disabilities

Children’s Books

The Door in the Wall, by Marguerite de Angeli

Thank You, Mr. Falker, by Patricia Polacco

The Deaf Musicians, by Pete Seeger and Paul DuBois Jacobs

Dad, Jackie, and Me, by Myron Uhlberg

My Pal Victor/Mi amigo, Victor, by Diane Gonzales

Looking Out for Sarah, by Glenna Lang

Books for Middle School Readers

Memories of Summer, by Ruth White

Rules, by Cynthia Lord

A Mango-Shaped Space, by Wendy Mass

Becoming Naomi Leon, by Pam Muñoz Ryan

Probably Still Nick Swanson, by Virginia Euwer Wolff

Flowers for Algernon, by Daniel Keyes

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime, by Mark Haddon

Books for High School Readers

Small Steps, by Louis Sachar

Under the Wolf, Under the Dog, by Adam Rapp

My Thirteenth Winter: A Memoir, by Samantha Abeel

Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger’s, by John Elder Robison

Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant, by Daniel Tammet

cluded, what are they missing? Do the things that are missed rank as important socially? Academically? Would you want to be excluded because of a physical or learning disability? Would you still be the same person if you became disabled in a manner similar to Max or Freak?

I took the role of facilitating this critical look at the text, because I didn't trust that my students could identify these issues on their own or that they could locate the relevant passages without my prompting. I think my guidance provided modeling the students needed—not just with reading and identifying key passages, but in respectfully considering societal characterizations of disabled persons (as seen in the literature) and alternative ways of viewing them. In discussions, I did not indicate there

were “right” or “wrong” answers, but attempted to lead students to uncover and discuss their own perspectives and beliefs. Overall, the unit was successful, as the design and delivery encouraged students to respectfully engage their potential discomfort (and bias) toward persons with disabilities and the topic of inclusion.

Inclusion opposes the idea of leaving someone out because of his or her disability. It is not just about a schedule change, staff change, or policy change; the underpinning of this concept presupposes that the child with a disability is *welcome*. Both teachers and students hold attitudes that affect the atmosphere of the classroom; thus, they both affect whether a classroom is *inclusive* or *exclusive*. Young adult literature like *Freak the Mighty* can play a role in helping students

(and teachers) hold their current attitudes up for inspection, even as they consider alternative attitudes that reach toward understanding and acceptance of “differently-abled” persons. ●

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Book Review

Reading Research in Action: A Teacher's Guide for Student Success

Peggy McCardle, Vinita Chhabra, and Barbara Kapinus, 2008. Paul H. Brookes. ISBN 978-1-55766-964-3. Paperback. 256 pp. US \$24.95.

Reviewed by Alan Brown, University of Alabama

Teaching children to read can feel like navigating them through an endless maze, one that only seems to get longer as the complexities of literacy in the 21st century continue to take form. At a time when approximately one in seven *adults* in the United States has low literacy skills, the challenges of classroom reading instruction have become more plentiful than ever.

Reading Research in Action: A Teacher's Guide for Student Success is an essential handbook for navigating the maze of literacy instruction. Inspired by the questions and struggles of real teachers, this text is a fundamental tool for understanding the research related to reading instruction

and how its findings are useful for K–8 educators, school leaders, teacher educators, educational researchers, and concerned parents.

The text is divided into four sections. Sections one and two lay the groundwork for the necessity of literacy research and provide background information about the cycle of scien-

form their classroom decision making.

Section three offers descriptions and analyses of the major research findings related to core reading components (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension) and other important abilities that enhance reading (spelling and writing). Each chapter in this section offers an overview of the research findings for the aforementioned individual components, as well as support for classroom teachers through specific instructional strategies and answers to commonly asked questions.

Section four further investigates the implementation of this evidence-based instruction by addressing approaches to the motivation, engagement, and assessment of students, all in hopes of “making the daily work of teachers easier and even more successful” (p. 6). It includes an extensive focus on the effectiveness of teachers, the methods that make them successful (including a discussion on the importance of Response to Intervention), and the means by which practitioners develop professionally.

Among the most beneficial aspects of this handbook, though, are the

At a time when approximately one in seven adults in the United States has low literacy skills, the challenges of classroom reading instruction have become more plentiful than ever.

tific research as a means of inquiry into successful classroom practices. Here the authors outline a number of relevant studies, including many prevalent national reports, relating to literacy. They also offer advice to teachers on using these studies to in-

thoughtful examples of how research might play out in classroom settings. Fictional characters, such as Mrs. Brown and Mr. James, guide readers through the content-related, pedagogical, and motivational decisions faced by teachers on a daily basis and the processes by which evidence-based instruction can be adapted to fit the needs of a particular educational environment. The authors have developed this text primarily as a resource for teachers to enable them to “do even better what most of them already do well—teach children

to read” (p. 5).

As more and more teachers immerse themselves in resources that may offer little confirmation of their actual effectiveness or efficiency, it is important for educators to understand the essential “bridge *between* research and practice since each should and frequently does inform the other” (p. 6). Yet, research and its connection to teaching are still needed in many areas. As the authors fully recognize, this handbook should not be considered a “comprehensive tutorial” for literacy research

methods (p. 53).

The strength of *Reading Research in Action* lies in its combination of selectively inclusive references to evidence-based studies, as well as sections for further reference, such as recommended and online readings. With this knowledge and these resources, teachers can begin to navigate their way, confidently and effectively, through that intimidating maze that is reading instruction. What lies ahead after all the twists and turns is the light of literacy. ●

Secondary Section High School Teacher of Excellence Award

Each NCTE affiliate is at liberty to select a person for this honor in the manner of its choice. An affiliate’s governing board might acknowledge someone who has previously won an award within the affiliate, thus moving that person’s recognition to a national level, or the affiliate might advertise for applications for nominations before choosing a winner.

Deadline: Documentation should be sent to the Secondary Section Steering Committee administrator/designee by **May 1** of each year. Materials should be sent to the address on the current nomination form. For more information, go to www.ncte.org/second.

The 2008 Winners of Teacher of Excellence Awards

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Call for Manuscripts/ Future Issues

The *English Leadership Quarterly*, a publication of the NCTE Conference on English Leadership (CEL), seeks articles of 500–5,000 words on topics of interest to those in positions of leadership in departments (elementary, secondary, or college) where English is taught. Informal, first-hand accounts of successful research, teaching, and learning activities related to themes of upcoming issues, are encouraged. Themes of upcoming issues include:

October 2009 (deadline June 15, 2009)
Leadership

February 2010 (deadline November 1, 2009)
Race and Literacy
(see call, p. 11)

Manuscripts should follow APA 5th edition guidelines and be sent via email as a Microsoft Word file. A decision about a manuscript will be reached within two months of submission. *ELQ* typically publishes one out of ten manuscripts it receives each year. Please send inquiries and manuscripts to Lisa Scherff at lscherff@bamaed.ua.edu and Susan Groenke at sgroenke@utk.edu; phone: (205) 348-5872. ●

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