THE ALAN REVIEW

The Research Connection

Literature-Based Instruction for Middle School Readers: Harry Potter and More

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The most basic educational skill is reading. The most basic obligation of any school is to teach reading. Yet, earlier this year, we found that almost two-thirds of African American children in the 4th grade cannot read at basic grade level. For white children, that figure is 27 percent. The gap is wide and troubling, and it's not getting any better. That gap leads to personal tragedy and social injustice. In America, literacy is liberation, and we must set all our children free.

(President George W. Bush, speech to 2001 National Urban League Conference, August 1, 2001).

Above all, make this the golden rule, the equivalent of the Hippocratic oath: everything we ask a child to do should be worth doing.

(Award-winning writer Philip Pullman, from the Isis Lecture given during the Oxford Literary Festival, Oxford University, England, April 1, 2003.)

Personal knowledge, knowledge based in one's own experience and practice, is an irreplaceable source of wisdom....But personal knowledge is also a limited source of wisdom...It must be compared to knowledge from other sources, connected with knowledge based in research, and interwoven with knowledge derived from a theoretical perspective to be made useful.

(Catherine Snow, literacy researcher, in her address as President of the American Educational Research Association, 2001, p. 8)

I like to read because when you read, you are in a world of you. With movies you don't get to live in a world of you.

(Female middle school student, age 12, discussing her view of literary experiences, 2000.)

In today's educational environment, attention has turned from a concentration on the art of literature to a narrow focus on the skills of reading. Many of the teachers of middle and high school English language arts with whom we work are concerned that they have little specific knowledge about how to teach reading skills. These teachers' concerns are tinted with anxieties that arise when their students' reading scores on standardized tests are scrutinized by school boards, students' parents, community members, local newspapers, and politicians. Their concerns are also laced with fears that time devoted to reading instruction will necessarily steal time from the major components of contemporary secondary English language arts curriculum: literature, composition, language, and media studies.

These are legitimate concerns about significant problems related to the need for reading instruction in today's secondary schools. But we have good news: middle school teachers can find ways to use literature that appeals to students' interests while emphasizing the development of critical reading skills. Middle school students themselves have pointed us toward solutions.

Books That Appeal to Today's Young Adolescent Readers

Harry Potter's Footprints

In the year 2000, we surveyed secondary school students, interested in how they would describe themselves as readers at the turn of the 21st century. Responses—2,070 of them—poured in from middle school students from Washington and Oregon, Arizona and North Dakota, Wisconsin and Illinois, Ohio and Kentucky, Connecticut, New York, and Florida. Among other questions, we asked them, "What is your favorite book?" and "Why?" The overwhelming response to the first question, across 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, and among both male and female readers, was one of the Harry Potter titles. That response was no real surprise. With the publication of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1998), the young wizard's name became part of the lexicon of today's young adolescent. The popularity of the Harry Potter books— each of which is quite long by young adult novel standards, and each of which has unusual names and unfamiliar settings that increase the chances that readers will have some difficulty moving through the pages—attests to the fact that kids are willing to work to read books they like. Adolescent readers who are interested in the wizard will find ways to get inside Harry's magical world. The attraction of the books continues to grow, and is enhanced by the movie versions of the first two books of the series; the feature film version of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was released by Warner in 2001, and the feature film version of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* was released in 2003. The June, 2003, publication of the much-anticipated fifth novel, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, will create a new wave of enthusiasm and publicity for Harry.

The positive impact that the young wizard has had on encouraging young adolescents to read is undeniable. Author T.A. Barron, who himself has a fine series of novels that chronicle the early life of another famous wizard, Merlin, acknowledges Rowling's gift to readers: "All of us who write books for young people are grateful to Harry Potter. He has reminded a lot of people, of all ages, just how much fun reading books can be!" (Carroll with Barron, 23).

Young adolescents themselves provide persuasive and in-

formative explanations of the Harry Potter phenomenon for themselves. Eighth grade males told us the following about why they like the Harry Potter books:

"All kids dream about having powers and all the creativity in the magical world makes it interesting."
"[It's about a] kid like me who is always in trouble."
"[It is] interesting, funny, mysterious, and it has many many many twists, plus it's not real."
"[It] gives you something to imagine."

Their 8th grade female counterparts added explanations including these:

"It has so many twists and adventures and it's not just a one topic book. It has all topics, like horror, romance, fantasy, adventure, excitement."
"I read it for hours and hours without even noticing."
"It is about kids my age."
"It was fun to envision the story as I read it."

Seventh grade males told us they are drawn to Harry for reasons that include these:

"It is fun to read, it takes you to a cool world, and it makes you feel like him."
"I like fantasy, plus it's realistic."
"I barely wanted to put it down."
"Humorous and cool, keeps you locked."
"It's fun!"

Their female classmates added reasons including these:

"It is a story about a boy who lived with relatives who hated him."
"It is about good and evil."
"It is just wonderful, magical, and mysterious."
"I can relate."
"It is fun and never gets boring."

Sixth grade males told us that they are fans of Harry Potter because, among other reasons:

"It shows what I want to be like—full of adventure!"
"I like imagination."
"JK Rowling goes into great detail and has different ideas than other writers."
"[It is] really long and very fascinating"

Their young female classmates explain why they are fans, too:

"I wish we could stay at a school like that."
"I like the author."
"It is so fiction and really exciting."
"It is different from real life and I think magic is fun."
"It is fun and scary, kind of like a mystery."

Walking Behind Harry Potter

Through the 2000 survey, we found that a preference for fantasy does not begin and end with Harry Potter, though. Male and female middle school students also rated other fantasy choices high on their lists. Male readers identified J.R.R. Tolkien's neo-classic *The Hobbit* (1938/1951) as a favorite in grades 6,7,8,and also in grade 9. Reasons for their choice of Tolkien's books include these: "It gives you things to think about" (an 8th grade male); "It has a lot of magic, adventure, strange creatures, dense history, and a good plot" (a 7th grade male); and "I like fantasy" (a sixth grade male). The creatures of Middle Earth have enjoyed gains in popularity as a result of the release of the two feature-length movies based on the *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: The Fellowship of the Rings* (2001) and *The Two Towers* (2002), and the popularity will increase when the third movie of the trilogy, *The Return of the King*, is released in December, 2003. Ralph Bakashi's animated version of the trilogy, released on September 11, 2001, has not proven as popular as the newer version, yet it has its own following, as well.

Female readers demonstrated a leaning toward a fantasy that presents a female protagonist by selecting the contemporary Cinderella tale, *Ella Enchanted* (1997), as one of their favorite books in grades 6,7, and 8. Their reasons include these: "It shows how she struggles and beats her problems" (an 8th grade female); "...it has fantasy and romance all mixed into one" (a 7th grade female); "[It has] fantasy with an unusual ending" (a sixth grade female).

Different Footsteps

Fantasy is not the only genre that young adolescents show a preference for as readers. The other kinds of books that rated high on middle school students' lists of favorites were split across gender lines: male readers tended to like what some adults would view as the antithesis of fantasy books: realistic adventures. For example, Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* (1987) the compelling story of a boy's struggle as the sole survivor of a plane crash into the Canadian wilderness, was cited second to the Harry Potter books as a favorite among 6th, 7th, and 8th grade boys. Another popular choice for those readers was Louis Sachar's *Holes* (1998), the quirky tale of a boy's misadventures in, and odd family connections to, a juvenile detention camp, also now a feature film.

Females stepped away from fantasy in their runner-up choices, too. They identified Lois Lowry's thought-provoking Holocaust novel, *Number the Stars* (1989) as a favorite. They also named as a favorite series the widely marketed personal/self-esteem readers, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* (vol. 1, 1997) edited by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and Kimberly Kirberger (a book that approximately 330 readers in grades 9, 10, and 11 also ranked first among their favorites). Middle school females added a non-fiction selection, David Pelzer's wrenching true account of child abuse, *A Child Called It* (1995) among their favorites, as well.

Matching Literary Interests with Reading Skills Instruction

As we thought about approximately 2,100 middle school students' answers to the two questions, "What is your favorite book?" and "Why?" we began to question several of our assumptions about young adolescents' habits and preferences as readers. We began to wonder, too, how those habits and preferences can be effectively incorporated in literature-based reading instruction in the middle grades. One assumption that we have had to examine has to do with the kinds of books young adolescents will choose when given the freedom to do so. While we are convinced of the value of allowing students to choose at least some of the material that they read for school, we were surprised to find that their choices included long books with challenging levels of detail, with the Harry Potter novels as the prime example. We were surprised, too, with the sophistication in subject matter and themes for which many young readers indicated a preference. Books like David Pelzer's non-fiction account of child abuse, *A Child Called It* (1995) and Gary Paulsen's survival adventure, *Hatchet* (1987), can be described as "heavy," in contrast with the light, even fluffy, choices that we anticipated middle school readers would make. Our understanding of the preferences of middle school readers, now in-

formed by middle school students' own words, caused us to think about what we know about teaching reading to middle school students. We found it instructive to consider the results of our survey through the lenses provided by two secondary reading specialists, Richard Allington and Kylene Beers. The key principles in Allington's research-based, informative *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* (2001), and Beers' teacher-friendly, convincing, practical *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do* (2003), considered within the context of adolescents' comments about their reading habits and preferences, provide us with solid suggestions for how—and why—to combine literature and reading skills instruction.

Reading Skills and Literature Instruction

Give Adolescent Readers Choice and Time

When we asked readers to tell us if they enjoy what they are asked to read in their English/language arts classes, one teenage student surprised us by writing, in *November*, "We haven't read yet." We suspect that he had probably been assigned some kind of reading in the fall months, but that none of the required reading was memorable or meaningful to him. Another reader reported, "I like the books but most of the time hate the activities that go along with them, which take away from my enjoyment of the books." Both comments remind us that we have to demonstrate that we believe "just reading" is of value by building time for it into our curricula.

Allington insists that the first need of readers is opportunities to read—often and much. Understandably, in today's schools—ones that are driven by accountability measures and standardized testing—many teachers have grown skeptical about the value of sacrificing instructional time to give students time to "just read". Yet, as Allington explains, it is likely to take an average 6th grader approximately eight hours to read the 50,000 words of Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* (1987), *if* the reader is interested in the novel, and is left alone and allowed to read silently (Allington, 37). But how often are teachers able to give students eight successive hours of class time for "just reading"? How often do we interrupt classroom time that is set aside for the reading of literature with assignments that test students' comprehension, require them to sketch scenes, or demand that they summarize the plot in a line graph?

Beers (2003) offers one simple and effective practice for increasing reading time in middle school classrooms: read aloud to students as they follow along. Beers claims that reading aloud serves as motivation for reading, and points out that the practice has significant cognitive benefits, too, including these:

Builds background knowledge—an essential ingredient for comprehension
Improves listening comprehension—a precursor to reading comprehension
Improves listening vocabulary—this store of words informs your speaking vocabulary and reading vocabulary
Builds common vocabulary—of both common and rare words
Creates interest in reading
Improves students' understanding of sentence structure and usage
Improves students' ability to visualize the text

(197-198)

Give Readers Books that They *CAN* Read and *WANT TO* Read

Beers insists that "When reluctant readers tell us they don't want to read, they mean they don't want to read the novel we've chosen for them" (288). Teachers of secondary reading and English need to accept an obligation to match readers with books that interest them. The match can depend on many variables, including these: topic, style, temporal and geographic setting, genre, author, or theme. The important idea is that we need to know what our students' interests are in order to recommend appropriate matches. Young adolescent readers have shown us, in the survey, that they are drawn to fantasy novels and to realistic adventures and painful non-fiction. They have shown us, too, that many are drawn to essays and short stories like the pieces they find in the life-confirming *Chicken Soup* books. The adolescents who responded to our survey have given adults—especially their teachers and media specialists—advice and direction. Not only should we provide time for students to read, in school, but we should allow students to choose their own books, and encourage them to read—without the pressure of a test or formal book report response—at least occasionally. Titles like those named by the young adolescents who completed our survey, including *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Hatchet, Ella Enchanted*, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, *Number the Stars*, *The Hobbit*, *Holes* and all other readers' favorites, should be welcomed into middle school reading and language arts classrooms, and across subjects. We strongly recommend that every teacher ask his or her students to identify the books that are meaningful for them, as a place to begin building a classroom library that will be appealing to student readers.

The need to fill classrooms with books that kids can and will read is particularly acute in the schools that serve low-income neighborhoods. Allington cites Smith, Constantino, and Krashen's study of the print environments for children in families in Beverly Hills (a middle to high-income area), Compton (a low-income area) and Watts (a very low-income area). The study reveals that the poorer the child, the less likely he or she is to have access to books at home and even at school: children in middle or high income families had access to approximately 199 books at home and 392 books in a classroom library. Students in low-income families had only 2.6 books at home and 54 to choose from in the classroom library. Students in the poorest families had, on average, less than one-half of a single book available at home, and fewer than 50 in classroom libraries (Smith, Constantino, and Krashen, 1997, in Allington, p. 57). We propose that teachers gather money and resources from county and statewide grants, the school's Parent Teacher Organizations, civic partners, and any available resources and stock their classroom libraries with the kinds of books adolescent readers have identified as the ones they not only *can* read, but also ones that they *will* read. Community standards may dictate some restrictions, but readers' interests should be a paramount consideration when teachers and media specialists make choices about the books that fill classroom and school library shelves.

Beers makes a practical, low-tech suggestion for helping students connect with books that are likely to appeal: Stock a "Good Books" box in middle school classrooms. To create a "Good Books Box," the teacher can use the classroom library, or work with the school media specialist, to choose several popular books that are deposited in a box. Members of the class make their selections from the books in the box. This strategy works, according to Beers, because it narrows the potentially overwhelming set of choices that readers face when they search for a title in the media center. As she reminds us, "Until you are comfortable with authors, genres, and interests, it's hard to find a good book" (295).

Through the survey, adolescent readers have shown us that they want their teachers to become acquainted with popular contemporary and award-winning authors and to bring them into classrooms, where they can read like readers do outside of the classroom: without interference. In addition to the others authors we have named above, we recommend these from among our list of students' favorites: Chris Crutcher, John H. Ritter, M.E. Kerr, Christopher Paul Curtis, Lois Lowry, Chris Lynch, Carol Lynch Williams, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, Sharon Creech, Virginia Euwer Woolfe, Will Hobbs, David Lubar, James Howe, Jack Gantos, T.A. Barron, Anne C. LeMeiux, Walter Dean Myers, and Sue Ellen Bridgers. Writers and their books, if unfamiliar to teachers, are simply unlikely to make their way into reading and literature curricula. In order to serve our middle school students well, teachers must continually build our knowledge of those writers and books.

Give Readers Support as they Develop Reading Fluency

As Allington points out, the more time readers read, the more fluent they become. That means that books that an adolescent can read independently, without intervention from a teacher or other adult, contribute to the student's development as a reader. And yet when teaching, we almost always expect students to read texts that will challenge them, books that they may not find engaging, but that, in our opinion, will serve to nudge them to higher levels of comprehension and sophistication. Why? Some teachers argue that, given the limited time available for reading in our classrooms, we have to make every minute "count" by including in it "educational" reading material (i.e., literature that introduces new vocabulary, complex themes and imagery, complicated or archaic syntax, and so on). Yet like young children who beg to pour over the same picture book again and again and again, unaware that their familiarity with the text is contributing to the development of their emerging reading skills, young adolescents benefit from reading texts that they can move through, unimpeded. As Beers points out, readers who increase their fluency are less frustrated by reading situations, and are therefore more likely to develop a positive attitude toward reading—in and out of school. She suggests several strategies for addressing fluency development that we believe can be incorporated into literature study, including these: build students' knowledge of high-frequency and sight words (212-215); give students opportunities to hear test read by skilled readers who model intonation, phrasing, and pacing (215-216); provide direct instruction for phrasing and intonation when needed (216); encourage students to repeatedly reread selected texts (217); prompt students with words such as "'read that again'" when they need help decoding a print passage, but do not supply a correction for them, and do not allow their classmates to correct them (217-218).

Do we believe that teachers should avoid including books that students cannot read with fluency, upon the initial encounter, books that challenge students to move toward the use of more sophisticated reading skills? Not at all. And yet we advocate providing reading opportunities for students that mirror reading experiences that adults enjoy: Sometimes, adults need and want to read challenging material slowly and with great care toward our comprehension of it; at other times, we choose texts that entertain us and that we can finish without much effort. When we are perusing changes in our insurance company's policy, the latest short story in *Harper's*, or a poem in *The New Yorker*, we might choose to read carefully, deliberately. Yet when we go to the dentist and sit in the waiting room, aren't we as likely to read a *People* magazine or a John Grisham novel as we are to delve into a serious work of literature? Why is that? Because we know that when we occasionally read texts that are not high in intellectual demands, we can read for the pleasure of reading. Period. And at those times, we also read fluently: we are fast and accurate in our processing of the printed text.

We believe that instruction in literature and reading should include, but not be limited to, texts that students can read quickly, without intellectual barriers or challenges. The simple truth is that we impede students' reading achievement when we do not allow them access to texts that they can read fluently, because the more words per minute they read, the more likely they are to improve their reading.

Give Readers Opportunities to Increase Critical Literacy through Literature-Based Reading Instruction

When answering the survey question that asked them to explain *why X is their favorite book*, many wrote a brief synopsis of a book. Very few articulated a personal opinion or response. One 6th grade male wrote, for example, that Paulsen's *Brian's Winter* is his favorite, "because it is about the survival of a young kid." That answer provides information about the book, but not about *why* it is the reader's favorite. A 7th grade female wrote that David Pelzer's *A Child Called It* is her favorite, "Because a lot of kids get abused." We assume that this reader intends to say that the book is good because it offers insights into a serious problem, but we are left to try to second-guess the reason that it is her "favorite book". We interpret these kinds of responses as evidence that many adolescents have failed to learn to generate their own ideas about texts, or to construct their own meanings as readers and thinkers, with confidence and authority. We wonder if they have been taught how to develop these kind of critical responses. Perhaps in our rush to check comprehension by asking students what they *think the book is about*, we too seldom ask students what they *think about a book*.

Allington insists that we extend reading instruction from a focus on the acquisition of discreet skills to learn to make what Keene and Zimmerman describe as the text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections that promote thoughtful literacy (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997, in Allington, 107). We must also help students understand that reading skills are among the basic literacy skills that can provide the foundation for development of critical literacies that are essential for successfully making sense of the infinite kinds of print and non-print messages that they, and adults too, are recipients of in today's multi-media, world. We must teach adolescents to use reading skills and broader literacies in order to differentiate between important and unimportant ideas, helpful and harmful information, reasonable and unreasonable conclusions, humane and inhumane recommendations, and uplifting and damaging credos—all of which might be found in both print and non-print messages that they, and we, experience when participating in today's world. Those students who are able to make these distinctions, who can read the world with critical eyes, are able to achieve a balance between the personal responses that they can trust, with broader perspectives that they may have gained from another source. We believe that the 8th grade male who gave this explanation for why the books in Brian Jacques' *Redwall* series are his favorite demonstrates the be-

ginning of translation/critical literacies that can be grounded in thoughtful print literacy:

> It was a story about peaceful creatures in a famous abbey and a heinous band of destructive creatures whose purpose was to conquer. It provided adventure and excitement and a very descriptive story, which made me interested in reading it and seeing what would happen next.

Adolescent Readers, Literature Study, and Reading Instruction

Our advice for teachers and media specialists in middle schools, based on the combined look at the results of our survey of almost 2,100 middle school readers, and the principles for reading instruction outlined by Richard Allington and by Kylene Beers, can be summarized in these points: (1) Fill spaces with books, and allow all students easy access to them. Allow students to leave the classroom or media center with books as often as possible. Have them "just read" as a regular part of the curriculum. (2) Be sure to include books for which today's young adolescent readers have indicated a preference. Middle school readers have told us that their favorite types of books are fantasy, realistic adventure, nonfiction, and collections of shorter works that promote positive human values. Get to know several of these yourself, in order to make convincing pitches when students ask for suggestions. (3) Provide plenty of time for reading, and do not restrict students to serious texts that are difficult and challenging for them. Recognize that the more words students read, the more their fluency improves; therefore, balance the challenging texts with easier ones that appeal to readers because of subject matter or theme or escape or the potential for a fun literary experience. (4) Give student readers credit for making sense of texts themselves, for creating meaning with the authors, and teach them to have confidence in their own readings. Then use their thoughtfulness as a vehicle for extending lessons of reading to the non-print media that are so prevalent in their worlds, such as feature-length movies, television advertising, popular music and music videos, magazines targeted toward teens.

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Readers interested in receiving a list of the most popular books and topics, as identified by the approximately 1200 middle school readers whose surveys were returned in usable form, or those who would like a blank copy of our reader survey to use in their classroom or media center, are encouraged to contact Pamela Sissi Carroll at pcarroll@garnet.fsu.edu; she will happily send you electronic copies. *—psc and gpg*