

Birthing Dialogue:

Using *The First Part Last* in a Health Class

Applebee argues for a curriculum that emphasizes “ongoing conversations about things that matter, conversations that are themselves embedded within larger traditions of discourse that we have come to value (science, the arts, history, literature, and mathematics, among many others)” (3). Students across disciplines should not just study content but should participate in conversations that create that content. Writing across content areas is reasonably established in schools; I believe we now need to focus on reading across the curriculum, using literature, particularly young adult literature, to encourage the kinds of conversations Applebee calls for. Participating in such conversations, students will not only learn the content but also “the ways of thinking and doing that give that content life and vitality. They will learn to *do* science, for example, not just learn about its history and accomplishments; they will learn to solve problems and take action on their own” (127). I present this classroom study as modest evidence that integrating young adult literature in content area curriculum can raise relevant life issues through which content area teachers can address critical concepts, while also igniting the kind of authentic discussion that should be a more common experience in every classroom.

Choosing a Novel for Health Class

Every semester, students in my young adult literature class contend that McCormick’s *Sold* would be a perfect fit for a high school Government class, the narrative a backdrop to the study of what government on an international scale can and cannot do to solve

the problem of child sex slavery so indelibly depicted in the novel. They insist Anderson’s *Speak* would be the perfect centerpiece for a junior high sex education unit, especially making explicit to adolescent males how females experience unwanted sexual advances. Their implied challenge: how can we as English teachers get novels like these included in other content area classes? This past year, I took up the gauntlet and brought, as they suggested, Angela Johnson’s *The First Part Last* into a high school Health class.

The First Part Last boldly addresses teen pregnancy and parenting. An extraordinary story of a young man who decides to raise the child he fathered, the novel chips away at many stereotypes. Deeply attached to his daughter, Feather, Bobby belies the belief that adolescent males lack the emotional, cognitive, or social programming to care for children. The book also dispels a racial stereotype often portrayed in popular media: young black males do not take responsibility for the children they father. Countering that negative image, Bobby shoulders significant responsibilities, including moving out of New York to find a better place to raise his daughter.

In this study, I hoped to determine whether attitudes about teen pregnancy had changed since I began teaching in 1990 when, to my dismay, I heard males comment on several occasions that if a girl gets

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pregnant, she should be the one to deal with the baby. At the time, I could not think of any books—fiction or nonfiction—that might have offered these males an alternative world view, a narrative about how a teenage boy aids the mother during the duration of the pregnancy and in parenting the newborn. *The First Part Last* is a book I wish I'd had available then.

Surveying Attitudes about Teen Pregnancy

Situated in a small college town with one public high school, the Health class met during the final period each day. Providing students with information on health issues to support analysis of personal and societal health decisions, the curriculum alternates

between two weeks of physical activity and two weeks of classroom study. The class, gender-balanced with seven males and seven females, was spread across the high school's three grade levels. On the first meeting, all but one of the girls

segregated themselves on one side of the class circle and all the boys on the other. In later class meetings, this division added tension to discussions.

In conceiving this two-week unit, the Health teacher, Ms. Barnes, and I predicted that studying *The First Part Last* would change attitudes about teen pregnancy and parenting across genders, so we administered pre-reading and post-reading surveys. To serve as both an anticipation guide for the students and as a marker of student attitudes about pregnancy issues before reading and discussing the novel, we sought and found a student-friendly survey, developed by KQED Youth Media Corps. The pre-reading survey showed agreement across genders on the majority of the statements (see Appendix A) but showed sharp disagreement along gender lines on three particular statements. Almost all the males disagreed with the statement, "Teen mothers are able to take care of their babies well," while the majority of females agreed. On the third statement, "Teen mothers should go to school and take care of their babies at the same time," there was also disagreement between genders. Almost all males disagreed while the majority of females agreed. On the fifth statement, "Teen fathers do not

take care of their babies," there was disagreement between genders. All but one female disagreed with the statement, and all but one male agreed. After the lively conversations (described below) around the issues raised by the novel, however, virtually all males and females disagreed with the statement.

The post-reading survey (see Appendix B) expressed the positive outcomes of the unit. Though there was no difference from the pre-reading survey on seven of the statements, there were major differences on the three mentioned above. More males now agreed that teen mothers could take care of their babies. The total agreement across genders grew from 41% to 75%. On the statement that "Teen mothers should go to school and take care of their babies at the same time," there was also major change, with more males now agreeing. Total agreement rose from 45% to 69%. More students now disagreed with the statement most addressed by the novel—"Teen fathers do not take care of their babies." Perhaps persuaded by Bobby's efforts, more females disagreed, raising the percentage of those who disagreed from 50% to 86%.

Changing Attitudes about Teen Pregnancy through Authentic Discussion

The novel took five class periods to read; half of each 71-minute class period was devoted to reading and the other half to discussion of characters, events, and issues that were raised by the reading. To generate contributions from every student, I implemented three discussion strategies: an exit slip, a four-corner debate, and a silent discussion.

In an exit slip, students write questions or comments about activities that occurred in class that day and turn them in as they leave. When discussion lagged near the end of the third meeting, I had students write an exit slip about the issues we had discussed. I started discussion for the next class by reading these slips. The four-corner debate is a useful strategy to get all students involved in a discussion. Students are expected to get out of their desks and declare their position on the debate topic, either agreeing with, somewhat agreeing with, somewhat disagreeing with, or disagreeing with the statement. In the four-corner debate during our fourth meeting, students placed themselves in the four corners of the room according to their position on the statement, "Positive

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images of teen pregnancy—in the media/movies, on television shows, associated with coverage of celebrities—will increase teen pregnancy.” One of the goals of the four-corner debate is to persuade other students to agree with your position and move to your corner.

Silent discussions are a particularly effective strategy to ensure all students are “heard.” To promote a variety of responses after finishing the novel, I had students answer questions that revolved around the book; I asked them to draw from previous discussions and to include points that reflected the larger issues addressed in the novel. In addition to answering the questions I posed, I also asked them to comment on what others had written. This was accomplished by circulating student responses around the room and jotting down comments. Each question garnered from four to six written responses.

Ms. Barnes creates a classroom community in which students are comfortable in taking both physical and intellectual risks. From the outset, then, with but a minor complaint or two that class would be held in a classroom rather than the gym, students exhibited a willingness to read this novel in this content area class. Discussions were energetic, exploring diverse topics from multiple points of view. Three threads emerged from the conversations: a rich thread dealing with details and issues from the novel, one about parents and parenting, and another that pulled issues from the book into local and national perspectives. The thickest conversational thread wove through characters and plot, students making personal connections with the characters and measuring their behavior against students’ own experiences and understanding of their culture.

Students are intimately familiar with having their decisions analyzed and critiqued by those in authority—relatives, teachers, administrators—and they brought that experience to bear in vigorously evaluating Bobby’s actions and decisions. Though Bobby was essentially responsible, he made mistakes, such as skipping school, losing track of time, and spray painting a wall. One student, writing in the silent discussion, differentiated between the types of decisions Bobby had to make, concluding that “he has selective decision-making skills. When it comes to his baby, he has good skills, but taking care of himself they aren’t as good. Like the spray painting was a bad idea and he didn’t really think about it.” Another student add-

ed, “I think Bobby made a good decision to keep his baby because it was something he needed to do for himself & as long as he’s being responsible & realistic about it, I don’t see any harm in him keeping it.”

Students respected Bobby’s decision to keep the baby. One wrote, “If I was Nia, there is no way I would ever have an abortion. I wouldn’t put the baby up for adoption and I think Bobby did the right thing.” One particularly electric moment occurred the first day when the only senior (and a female) said, “16-year-olds in Moscow wouldn’t have Bobby’s responsibility.” Her comment constituted a challenge to the males in the room and set the tension between the genders, at least for the day.

One male retorted, “If I had a kid, I’d take care of it.” “You say that now,” another female interjected, “but if you ended up getting someone pregnant, what would you do? Oh, like get an abortion or put it up for adoption where [Bobby] doesn’t even consider putting it out for adoption.” By the end of the novel, students did not question Bobby’s fitness as a father. For all students, as evidenced by the post-reading survey, he countered the stereotype that teenage males are incapable of being responsible parents.

Throughout the reading, students appreciated the stance the novel took on teen parenting. On an exit slip, one girl wrote, “I like how the book avoids stereotypes regarding teen parenthood; it might be generally thought that the father isn’t often involved in the baby’s life, but Bobby is more involved than Nia. I also like how Bobby and Nia’s relationship seems to be portrayed in a positive light, rather than suggesting that it’s something bad or wrong.” I

asked what message or messages the novel had about teen pregnancy, which generated this response: “The story regards teen pregnancy realistically, neither as something terrible nor glamorous. It sends a message of hope that mistakes can be dealt with positively

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and that teenagers can display a lot of maturity.” This comment was reinforced by another student who wrote, “Things can work out, even if it wasn’t what was planned.”

We discussed conversations teens could have with parents about being sexually active and about parenting. On the first day, the necessity for the availability of condoms surfaced. But more relevant for these students was their awareness that Bobby had a strong support structure at home. When asked if they had had candid conversations with their own parents about sex, only 4 in 14 raised their hands. That Bobby’s parents were open with him about sexuality provided evidence for at least one student to conclude that “Bobby’s parents are doing all they can.” Stu-

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dents acknowledged that Bobby’s mistakes were his and not the result of neglectful parenting. Students also believed that because his parents did not shy away from frank dialogue (which they saw as a parent’s responsibility), their example helped Bobby accept his own responsibilities as a parent.

Tapping in on a point made early in the unit about generational differences in attitudes concerning teen sexuality, I asked

students how they might approach their own children’s sexual education. Three respondents echoed what Bobby’s parents did in the novel. One wrote, “I will tell them how it is, blunt and unreserved.” Another chimed in, “I would tell them about it and about safe practices.” A third student wrote he would “Tell them if they’re going to do it, do it safely.” Several students also argued that it is especially important to make sure the girl understands the potential consequences, in part because of the drastic changes her body would undergo during pregnancy.

Building on the question above, I asked, “Compared to your parents, how are your views about teen sexuality different or similar?” One student responded, “I think it is indifferent because my parents don’t care and neither do I.” Being sexually active is not a critical

concern in his family. Another wrote that “our views are the same because my parents are pretty realistic about it & they remember what it’s like to be a teenager.” Another concurred with the first: “I think they are similar because we don’t really care and we know it will some day happen.” These parents appear to approach the volatile issue of teen sexuality with the fortitude of Bobby’s parents.

To help students connect with Bobby and Nia, I queried, “When do you know you’re ready to raise a child? How do you prepare?” One student wrote, “You are ready when both people in the relationship are ready, and your home is a place where a child can be raised safely. You can learn to prepare.” The novel showed this class that one can learn how to adjust to ever-changing relationships with one’s unexpected child, with one’s parents, and with one’s community. Throughout the unit, it was clear these adolescents see parents playing an essential role in sex education.

We not only talked in depth about the novel, we positioned its issues in a larger context. The second day’s reading, for example, included a conversation between Bobby and Nia about what to do with the child. In response to this exchange, one senior girl argued that “the girl gets the say, but a guy gets input.” A sophomore boy agreed: “The girl should get the say because she’s going through the work.” We talked about who gets custody in divorces, the class agreeing that currently in divorce courts mothers are favored. We also discussed what input parents have in decisions concerning teen pregnancy and how in some states, parents can deny consent for abortion.

In the four-corner debate on the influence of popular media, the strongest responses came from the somewhat agreeing corner. One girl said, “[The media] makes teen pregnancy look easy and somewhat fun for a teen, which it isn’t.” Another student said media has some affect “because there are dumb people out there and TV is a strong influence.” Yet another argued that “it can have some part to do with it, but there are many other things that can influence a decision.” One girl reasoned that “girls who want attention or love of some sort see people who are pregnant get a lot of attention and think that if they get pregnant they will get that positive attention as well. But that isn’t the only reason for teen pregnancies.” One male somewhat disagreed, arguing that a film such as *Juno* does not glamorize teen pregnancy

so much as it deals with a delicate subject with humor and optimism.

After finishing the novel, I asked students to describe the general attitude about teen sexuality in the United States. One student wrote that “Teen sexuality is accepted by intelligent new wave thinkers rather than ultra-conservative religious fanatics who would rather forcefully shelter their children and don’t provide a fair sense of life knowledge. So, positive for a fair share, but naïve for the rest.” Another student added, “I think it is accepted in the community. I mean even in school they allow gay & lesbian clubs, and I don’t know that many people who aren’t experimenting with the opposite sex. I think people are ok with it, but they are also naïve because they think they won’t get pregnant or get STDs.” Echoing discussion of a parent’s responsibility, another student generalized that “Some people are way overprotective and don’t really let their children know to be safe but then they just sneak off and do it unsafely.” In the whole class discussion that followed the silent discussion, I asked students whether this generalization was true. They provided examples from the community in which unnamed teenagers with strict parents engaged in unsafe sexual acts.

The First Part Last illustrated the physical challenges of pregnancy. Still, students wanted to know more. One respondent noted that “it’s usually unplanned & changes your whole life. I would like to know more of the problems that might occur during/ before the actual birth.” Another wrote, “I know it can happen to anyone even if you’re using a condom, and good things don’t always happen but you should make the best of it.” In discussion, the Health teacher emphasized that the Health curriculum prepares students to take care of their own health and, by extension, also take care of a baby’s health in the unexpected event of a pregnancy. When you take care of your own body, Ms. Barnes suggested, you take care of your future children. The Health curriculum is thus designed to help create lifelong healthy lifestyles.

Students had several suggestions on how to make the Sex Ed curriculum more effective. One student argued that “schools should teach about birth control and condoms more, b/c kids are going to do IT no matter what you tell them, so prepare them to be as safe as possible.” One girl commented that the way it is taught isn’t effective, that pictures of genitals

misshapened by an STD do not deter kids. Another argued that curriculum should assume kids are sexually active and go from there. Again and again, this class argued for a proactive, not prohibitive, response to teen sexuality and its consequences.

Conclusion

Granted, this study draws from a small sample population; the results nevertheless suggest the potential value of this young adult novel—and perhaps of other novels that lend themselves to cross-disciplinary application—in classes other than English. Through the reading of *The First Part Last* and a variety of authentic discussions, this unit encouraged students to critically consider the issues of teen pregnancy and teen parenting. The class explored relevant topics, nudging students to think about what they would do in similar situations, about gender issues, and about the adult-teenager divide that still exists in relation to teen sexuality. One thing is clear: we are not yet communicating in ways that may lead to better decision making for both teenagers and parents.

In planning the unit, the Health teacher and I wondered whether reading a novel in Health class would contribute to or distract from the curriculum. In the end, we were convinced by our meaningful class discussions that *The First Part Last* was a valuable addition to the curriculum. One student agreed, writing that this novel was persuasive “by teaching us through a real person’s or a fake character’s mistakes.”

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Appendix A

Pre-reading Survey: Pregnant and Parenting Teens

(Discrepancies between number of respondents and number of students in class are the result of students leaving some questions unmarked.)

Gender: Male = 7 Female = 7
Grade: Sophomore = 4; Junior = 8; Senior = 1;
Unmarked = 1

1. Teen parents intend to get pregnant and have a baby.

Male : 1 Agree 5 Disagree
Female : 0 Agree 6 Disagree

2. Teen mothers are able to take care of their babies well.

Male : 1 Agree 5 Disagree
Female : 4 Agree 2 Disagree

3. Teen mothers should go to school and take care of their babies at the same time.

Male : 1 Agree 5 Disagree
Female : 4 Agree 1 Disagree

4. Parents of teen mothers should help their daughters out.

Male : 5 Agree 1 Disagree
Female : 5 Agree 1 Disagree

5. Teen fathers do not take care of their babies.

Male : 1 Agree 5 Disagree
Female : 5 Agree 1 Disagree

6. Men are older than the teenage girls they get pregnant.

Male : 5 Agree 2 Disagree
Female : 3 Agree 2 Disagree

7. Teen fathers should drop out of school to take care of their babies.

Male : 0 Agree 6 Disagree
Female : 0 Agree 6 Disagree

8. Teen mothers should drop out of school to take care of their babies

Male : 2 Agree 4 Disagree
Female : 0 Agree 6 Disagree

9. Parents of teen mothers should get full custody of their grandchildren.

Male : 0 Agree 6 Disagree
Female : 2 Agree 4 Disagree

10. High schools should provide day care for the children of teen parents.

Male : 3 Agree 3 Disagree
Female : 2 Agree 4 Disagree

From: KQED Youth Media Corps, <http://www.kqed.org/w/ymc/pregnancy/index.html>

Appendix B

Post-reading Survey: Pregnant and Parenting Teens

(Discrepancies between number of respondents and number of students in class are the result of students leaving some questions unmarked.)

Gender: Male = 7 Female = 6
Grade: Sophomore = 5; Junior = 8; Senior = 1

1*. Teen parents intend to get pregnant and have a baby.

Male : 2 Agree 7 Disagree
Female : 0 Agree 6 Disagree

2. Teen mothers are able to take care of their babies well.

Male : 4 Agree 3 Disagree
Female : 5 Agree 0 Disagree

3*. Teen mothers should go to school and take care of their babies at the same time.

Male : 4 Agree 4 Disagree
Female : 5 Agree 0 Disagree

4. Parents of teen mothers should help their daughters out.

Male : 5 Agree 3 Disagree
Female : 5 Agree 1 Disagree

5*. Teen fathers do not take care of their babies.

Male : 1 Agree 6 Disagree
Female : 1 Agree 6 Disagree

6. Men are older than the teenage girls they get pregnant.

Male : 5 Agree 2 Disagree
Female : 2 Agree 3 Disagree

7. Teen fathers should drop out of school to take care of their babies.

Male : 0 Agree 7 Disagree
Female : 0 Agree 6 Disagree

8. Teen mothers should drop out of school to take care of their babies

Male : 0 Agree 7 Disagree
Female : 0 Agree 5 Disagree

9. Parents of teen mothers should get full custody of their grandchildren.

Male : 0 Agree 7 Disagree
Female : 0 Agree 5 Disagree

10. High schools should provide day care for the children of teen parents.

Male : 3 Agree 4 Disagree
Female : 4 Agree 2 Disagree

*One respondent marked both agree and disagree for this statement.