

Challenging Rebellious Adolescent Aliteracy

Teachers of adolescents know the power of rebellion. Middle and high school students choose to place themselves on opposing ends of a success versus rebellion spectrum and choose to alienate themselves from socially present authorities (Beers, 2003; Stinchcombe, 1964). Socrates implored students to think, to challenge, long before the publication of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner, 1971). “These kids today,” as some may call them, are just like they have always been, and great teachers harness adolescent rebellion through young adult literature (Atwell, 2007; Lesesne, 2010).

The Fault in Our Stars (Green, 2012), *Wonder* (Palacio, 2011), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* (Alexie, 2009), and *I am a Genius of Unspeakable Evil and I Want to Be Your Class President* (Lieb, 2009) are books that rock for rebellious adolescents. When teachers allow titles such as these in their classrooms, passion for reading and the discussion ignites teacher joy; student talk about books read for pleasure is too rare in many secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms.

In contrast to class as usual, these may not be whole class novels, these may not be books that the teachers choose; this is NOT English class as usual.

Adolescents are intrigued by content that some find objectionable.

What are seen as taboo topics are realistic to today’s youth (Lesesne, 2008). The world has changed, but the reality that adults only get a glimpse into the lives of adolescents is not new. Lesesne contrasts selection, the decision to include books, with censorship, the decision to exclude them (Lesesne, 2008). Teachers are often bound by limited selection—a slim district approved list or inadequate school libraries. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (Smith, 1943), a perennial favorite of adolescent girls is still considered a classic, but has objectionable content: Francie’s Aunt Sissy is promiscuous, her father is an alcoholic, and her mother expresses bigoted views.

On the American Library Association’s (ALA) list of Top 100 Banned / Challenged Books from 2000-2009, *Harry Potter (series)*, a student favorite, ranks as the #1 most challenged book, for its

themes of witchcraft (American Library Association, 2013). School board members in Georgia defeated one challenge and stated, “The books are good tools to encourage children to read and to spark creativity and imagination” (Doyle, 2008). The ALA is on to something when they advertise banned books to adolescents just to entice students to read. Great teachers of adolescents know to allow a little rebellion, to give students the sweet taste of forbidden fruit. When middle school students were asked to review the Potter series, Kyle Freeman, a 5th grader wrote that he never liked reading until this book came out (Ford, 2008). Eighth grader Issa Basco loves that Harry is “angry, temperamental, and dark in [*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*], and his angst as a 15-year-old is similar to ours” (Ford, 2008, p.51). Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* was recently challenged but retained on a summer reading list in Illinois (Doyle, 2010). Instead of imagining that our students need to come to middle and high school as capable readers of all text, we need to consider reading as a skill that continues to develop in all people.

Teachers can motivate and encourage reading, and can provide supports for new text. These supports allow for reading growth.

Reading begets better reading.

Aliteracy, the decision *not* to read when capable (Harris and Hodges, 1995), is the ultimate rebellion in the English classroom. The Matthew Effect in reading is based on the parable, “For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” We know that as reading skills improve, greater learning results. As these skills atrophy, adolescents’ subsequent “cognitive, behavioral, and motivational consequences” (Stanovich, 1986) delay academic progress. We have to think hard about the consequences when we regulate reading like we may regulate TV, movies, and song lyrics. Motivation and literacy are inextricably linked; adolescents won’t read when not motivated to do so. Some believe that as students become more aware of extrinsic rewards for reading, like grades, the less they enjoy reading for pleasure (Sweet & Guthrie, 1996). “A low-cost way to increase the interest of students in what they like to read is to permit them to choose for themselves what they will read” (Pressley, 1998, p. 246). Even the best readers are less inclined to read with each subsequent year in school (McKenna, Ellsworth, & Kear, 1995). If keeping students reading is our goal as it should be, luring rebellious readers to great books with themes that may be objectionable is certainly better than allowing for aliteracy.

When parents and teachers use

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the rating systems offered by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to censor visual and auditory media, they aren’t risking that student’s rebel and never watch TV or listen to music again. They are suggesting that a student, still a child, isn’t ready *at this time*. We may question whether a seventh grader should watch *Law & Order* (Wolf, 2008), but we accept that as each child matures, and grows into adulthood, he or she will make personal choices. When we regulate TV and movies, we allow adolescents to give us signals as to when they are ready for a more mature rating.

But we do the opposite when it comes to books. As soon as students master a level of difficulty, we are anxious to push them to the next level. If capable readers still love the *Sweet Valley High* series (Paschal, 2008), perhaps we should not ask them to move beyond their comfort level too quickly. Maybe matching readers to text is most successful when erring on the side of the reader’s comfort; it’s part of loving our students. But we must strike a balance between mandated reading content and student individual preferences. This leaves parents and teachers in a position where they feel that they must weigh the benefits of encouraging reading against the risks of stu-

dents discovering the questionable content that is found in some of the texts that students like to read. This quandary is clearly painted at the young adult level in Glenn’s (2008) study of three popular novels marketed to adolescents. The researcher examined the themes of entitlement, disparity of class and race, empty relationships, and conspicuous consumption, and contextualized her analysis that these texts are written and marketed for the purpose of making money, and not for the purpose of creating better citizens nor better readers. They are alluring to adolescents, and we know that discretionary spending of this age group is a market worth tapping (Alhabeeb, 1996). Glenn argues that students *should* read these texts, despite questionable themes, because they may engage adolescents in “discussions that encourage the development of a critical stance” p. 40. Schanoes (2003) would agree, stating that the *Harry Potter* novels challenge readers to think critically, especially when text purports to “contain truth” p. 144. We know that text choice can foster motivation (Allington, 2007; Alvermann, 2002; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Lesesne, 2003; Moje, 2006).

Still, an educated guide in the form of a mentor or teacher in literary criticism is necessary for most students to come away with these deeper layers of thinking. Teachers fear that when students read individually, without guidance, that there is no mechanism for assessment of learning, assessment that is valuable for suggesting further reading and later instruction. Many teachers require paired reading at times. Local and global community members via online chats can act

as reading mentors. When teacher's instructional objectives are that students acquire the reading **skills** instead of text content, matching readers to text is imperative. Maya Angelou said, "Any book that helps a child to form a habit of reading, to make reading one of his deep and continuing needs, is good for him" (as quoted in Mesmer, 2008, p. viii). The key is finding the right book at the right time.

Expanding students' reading choices.

Students can't read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* forever; we want students to be competent readers of college-level material some day. Like a young athlete in a gymnastics class, who, with overt prodding from her coaches and more subtle pressure from her parents and peers, progresses to a higher class in competition, readers need support to venture into more difficult text. Certainly, there are many child athletes who do rebel and refuse the competition, despite their talents. Most good coaches know when to push and when to back off, constantly negotiating with the adolescent in reaching a common goal. Teachers, as coaches of reading, create a shared goal of improved reading competency, and guide student choices with various texts and motivations to reach that goal.

Teacher Identity in Adolescent Centered Reading Classrooms

When teachers identify as coaches in developing students' reading skills, skills that are multifaceted, layered, nuanced, and individual, they continue to be experts of the great literature that is dear to their profession. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and

Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines literacy as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society" ("Literacy," 2008, Definition). Surely all teachers today recognize that our charge is far greater

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than familiarizing our students with the lessons of our culture's favorite stories.

Elementary school teachers have effectively balanced multiple texts for decades (Smith, 1963), with Vacca and Vacca (1974) suggesting individualized reading stations in middle schools more than thirty years ago. Still, teachers ask: What is it that makes a novel drive the instruction for all students in a classroom? The argument from middle and high school teachers is that the content of novels such as *The Yearling*, *The Giver*, and *Wuthering Heights* may be too difficult for students to read without substantial teacher support. We know that, with peer conversa-

tion and teacher support in the areas of vocabulary, text structure, and comprehension strategies like summarizing and questioning (Billman, Hillden, & Halliday, 2008), students do a better job of navigating text that is at the high end of their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). When the whole class novel is well above this zone, it frustrates reluctant readers. Teacher support, even in the best of situations, will not be enough for a student in this case. This support is usually delivered to students during whole-class novel lessons. While this is a common approach in English classrooms, it does not differentiate between the many types of readers, and leaves too many adolescent students attempting to read books that are not appropriate for them. Some readers then draw the conclusion that "reading isn't for me." Others may, more rebelliously, exercise the only power they feel that they have; they simply refuse to read.

Another argument for whole class novels seems to be that, unless it is assigned, students will not choose it, and will never be exposed to the traditional canon. Teachers want to expose students to literature that offers students a window into a world different than their own instead of just a mirror into their own narrow existence. Nancy Schnog, an English teacher and parent, was disappointed when her 14 year-old son did not complete his summer reading text, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (Alvarez, 2005). She explained that he could not relate to "four culturally displaced sisters who search for identity through therapists and mental illness, men and sex, drugs

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and alcohol” (Schnog, 2008). The tension between what students want to read and what we think they should read is exemplified in this example. We want reading to broaden the minds of students. We want books to show them how others live. Literature has the great potential to teach about humanity, to teach the great lesson that one can’t judge another, as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) teaches, until he or she has walked miles in his or her shoes (Muse, 1997; Wilhelm, 2006). We can introduce students to these texts by striking a balance between full student autonomy in text choice, offering limited choice (Dredger, 2008) within each teacher’s comfort level, and using literature circles (Daniels, 2006).

The other pull is teachers’ desire to share the love of reading. Class novel choices focus on the teacher’s choice; individualized reading choices are more learner-centered. Differentiating novel choices may be one of the easiest ways to match readers to text that is appropriate in readability, length, concept, and affect (Curtis, 2008; Deschler, Palincsar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007; Mesmer, 2008). Teachers don’t have to give up the life lessons of great literature; they just have to trust that students are ready for different lessons at different times (Fisher & Ivey, 2007).

It shouldn’t just be about books that the teacher likes.

Teaching literature should be about loving the student more than the content we teach (Kindig, 2012). It is wonderful when we find the student who is as committed to reading as we are. It is fulfilling when past students honor our profession by joining it. We all know a librarian or English teacher who loves books more than kids. Without an understanding and acceptance that most students won’t love a certain text the way they do, those teachers are then in a place of perpetual frustration. This frustration is at times manifested in resentment toward students who do not respect the art that is great literature. This resentment is cancerous and makes for an unhealthy English classroom. This can lead to aliteracy—or, the student exercising the power they have in this situation: the power to refuse to read. Teachers may push kids even further away from doing something they may already resist by being rigid about specific mandated titles.

I love Jane Austen, but all of my students will not. Before my epiphany that students can thrive with multiple texts, I was teaching *Pride and Prejudice* to 12th graders as a whole class novel. A Socratic circle quickly escalated to near mutiny. Some boys began playfully throwing the great novel on the floor and began a mock burning. I felt proud that I had created an environment wherein students felt comfortable being honest, but I blamed myself (Had I been a better teacher, they would see the merits in the text!). I was relieved when some came to the text’s rescue. Nina challenged, “Just because no one’s arm or head gets ripped off, you don’t like it?” (We’d recently

read *Beowulf* and *Macbeth*.) Sean retorted, “No, I don’t like it because it’s just about a bunch of girls who want to get married.” Silence. We were proud of our strong feminist readings of texts. We’d passionately defended both Ophelia and the wife of Bath. So why **did** we love *Pride and Prejudice*? I asked myself, was I still a romantic looking for Mr. Darcy, despite my education and perceived personal bent toward feminism? Or was it the irony, humor, and character development that are Austen hallmarks? Letting students challenge texts may shake some of our own beliefs as well.

Not English class as usual.

Students engage when we break from mandated analysis. Readers should be free to NOT discuss themes, imagery, or characters’ motivations. Analysis and discussions happen; people want to talk about books that inspire them. Students reading *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* do not miss the symbol that Francie is a tree surviving, if not thriving, in the middle of oppressive urban poverty. Phillip’s original bigotry, like Huckleberry Finn’s, is mitigated by a close relationship with another in Taylor’s *The Cay*. The students love this message, and convince others to read. The palindrome that is Stanley Yelnats’ name in *Holes* (Sachar, 2000) rarely remains under students’ radar (Stanley himself explains it; we as teachers don’t have to as well). Still, this awareness can be directed and constructed by the students, distributing the expertise in classrooms beyond that of the teacher. If students are engaged in literature that is right for them, they may not ask, “Is there a test on this?” Students read when they

are able to choose books that fit their ability, maturity, and interest. Students don't dislike reading; they dislike books that are too hard or on topics of which they either cannot relate or about which they have little prior knowledge. They need to be intrinsically motivated to read.

Classrooms and libraries can be stocked with books of myriad levels. Students may struggle at first in a reading workshop environment, constantly attempting the first fifty pages of a new book. Remain patient and sincere. Work conscientiously with those struggling readers to find the right fit for them. Successful text to reader matching takes into account reader factors such as abilities, motivation, and knowledge, and text factors such as surface features, text concepts, and format (Alvermann, 2011; Miller, 2009). Making the attempt to find books that work for adolescent readers keeps them reading; together, this continued reading becomes classroom success.

Finding an effective balance between mandated texts and allowing for student choice is one that requires teachers to know each student as well as they know the symbols, characters, settings, and plots in a variety of appropriate novels. This delicate balance employs knowing the nature of the adolescents as rebellious, mercurial, and diverse. As teachers, we do not have to be expert on all texts, we do not have to lead each discussion; we do not have to see one certain text as the measure of a marking period. Instead, we need to search for a comfortable balance, one that may see personal compromise. Perhaps we cannot let go of *Hamlet*. Refusing to let go of Jen-

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nifer, Ricardo, Shakira, and Minstead as developing readers is our greater call.

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