

Why Are We Reading?

Merry Boggs, Texas A&M University-Commerce

"I wanted to thank you for everything that you helped me with; also for being a good teacher and helping me with all the stuff you taught me about English. I appreciate you spending time at the junior high so I could learn from you; you are such a great teacher. Thank you and bye. Mike" (pseudonym used here)

Introduction

The introductory quote was from Mike, a student enrolled in an eighth grade reading class that I voluntarily taught. Even though my career has taken me to the university level, I believe in working closely with local public schools by taking preservice teachers to tutor students or providing workshops for classroom teachers. Two years ago, through this commitment, I met a frustrated junior high teacher who was beginning her teaching career. Over the spring semester, our relationship evolved. We shared a common concern for disengaged adolescent readers. I prefer being a proactive part of the solution instead of just telling someone what to do, so I volunteered to mentor this teacher by teaching her first period eighth grade reading class for the next school year.

In this article, I examine some prominent authors' concerns about adolescent readers. I share the three phases of my eighth grade reading teacher development. These three phases emerged from re-reading and reflecting on my personal journals, which I kept during that year teaching eighth grade reading. The first phase discusses the preparation I did over the summer for the first day of class. The second phase is one of self-discovery, where I share my frustrations and eventual solutions. I describe the solutions through the label *reading together differently*, a phrase that explains my approach to building an authentic reading class where students were highly engaged in reading and discussing books. Finally, I conclude with specific examples of how I used adolescent literature to invite my students into reading.

Current Context of Adolescent Literacy

State and federal agencies have concentrated resources into early literacy, while adolescent readers are often relegated to the fringes of research. Adolescent readers are regularly challenged with unique concerns by trying to expand and gain control of their literacy; furthermore, this is an age at which many young people are lost from the community of readers. Many authors share my concerns regarding adolescent readers. Specifically Erickson (2003), Conley and Hinchman (2004), Williams (2004/2005), and Gee (1999) found that the reading achievement of junior high students declined and that their attitude towards reading signaled concerns for all teacher educators. Cavazos-Kottke (2005) revealed that boys become disengaged readers because they have little or no choice in reading material. Wilhelm (2000) stated that junior high students

feel reading is stupid when it is meaningless. When junior high students can experience literacy and recognize how it directly relates to their lives through explaining the why, what, and how, then involvement and motivation will increase.

Phase I: Preparation for Eighth Grade Reading

In my university office, I hastily sat skimming the titles of my professional library. As I prepared for this journey, the emotions I experienced during my first year of teaching twenty-five years ago returned and engulfed me; my stomach turned and fluttered, and I began to question my ability, “Can I really pull this off?” I wondered. The only difference was that now I had confidence and experience. I prepared diligently by reading and re-reading every junior high book that I owned, and I spent hours reflecting upon all of my teaching and professional experiences. Through this self-reflection, my preparation phase centered on my work with children (including my own), and my professional and textbook knowledge. My literacy goal emerged simply: I would build a classroom of highly motivated, engaged, and interactive middle level students.

My work with children started as a kindergarten teacher, where I learned the importance of active and hands-on learning. (Trust me here—you do not lecture to five-year-olds.) Even now as a college professor, I can be seen wheeling my carts of interactive activities to class. I feel like a kindergarten teacher at heart, lost in the academic world of Power Points, rote memory, individual student desks, and lectures. My varied experiences working with children range from teaching swimming lessons to coaching high school swimming to being an elementary school librarian to teaching international students in Cairo, Egypt. These experiences gave me the confidence to think that I could successfully teach adolescent students. Over the years I found that students of all ages want the same things: They want to be challenged, involved, and successful in their learning, regardless on the contexts—school or extracurricular activities.

From textbooks and academic preparation, many authors influenced my teaching and thinking. In particular, Harvey and Goudvis (2000) furnished me with a book full of specific comprehension strategies to help students improve their comprehension. Smith (1998) reminded me that learning is innately a social process that can be harnessed to create classrooms where students will enjoy reading without a plethora of worksheets to complete. Ken Goodman (1994a, 1994b, 1998), Yetta Goodman (1995), and Ken and Yetta Goodman (1981) through several books and articles, constantly grounded me in the importance of watching and observing children no matter the age, and more importantly, perfection is not a literacy goal. (See <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~kgoodman/>) Furthermore, through reflecting on our miscues, we continue to grow and learn.

Knowing that building an effective literacy classroom required active participants, I envisioned my junior high students actively reading, discussing,

and sharing. The first day of school quickly approached, but I was ready: independent reading, paired-reading, lively discussion of books, sticky-notes, sharing books, journaling, read alouds, and choosing books became my reading tools to start the year. I was completely oblivious to the challenges that faced me.

Phase II: Discovery Learning for the Teacher

Discovery came slowly, but I continued to reflect by re-examining my daily journal and exhaustive notes, which were key to re-visiting my experiences. As a literacy educator, I was frustrated by the limited literacy events these eighth graders experienced. From my eighth grade students' previous school experiences, they had come to define school literacy work as worksheets, Accelerated Reading tests, reading tests, spelling tests, and state-mandated test preparation. Every day for the first semester of school, a student would ask, "Why are we reading?" and, "Where are the spelling tests and worksheets?" Throughout the school year, students would occasionally return to these inquiries. I never really understood these questions. I consistently replied, "This is a reading class; shouldn't we read?"

As I was bombarded with these students' limited experiences with reading, I learned that fifty minutes challenged my instructional management skills. Every day, I sacrificed some important learning for other important learning, never including all reading components (i.e. read alouds, independent reading, vocabulary work, comprehension strategies, word work) within the confines of a fifty-minute time frame. I was forced to spread necessary reading components over a one- or two-week period. Learning from my mistakes took on a whole new meaning for me.

Fortunately, for my students and myself, I discovered Serfani's (2001) text, *Reading Workshop*. Serfani began each year with blank walls, boxes of books to be unpacked, students' desks stacked against the wall. *Living together differently* was his classroom theme. The students and the teacher actively created and built the learning landscape they shared over the next nine months. As I read this his material, my insomnia set in. How could the students and I change our eighth grade reading class to focus on authentic reading, thinking, and discussing? Finally, after weeks of this internal strife, my frustrations came to a close: *Reading together differently* helped me reform my approach to teaching. Accordingly, the next day we moved our desks to form a circle, and simply began to discuss reading, writing, and thinking. I explained that reading and writing is much more than completing worksheets and tests. Reading is only one component of literacy, which also includes writing, speaking, and thinking. Furthermore, a reading class needs to include time for reading and discussing books that we enjoy and want to read. We did not have to share similar opinions and ideas, but we had to respect each other and learn to share our thoughts. I told my students that I believed that reading demands practice and class time

spent reading was a crucial aspect of reading. At this point, real reading began, and then discussion followed. Real literacy had begun.

Phase III: Reading Together Differently

Reading together differently was created from two separate, yet interacting contexts: the reading environment and the reading landscape. Reading environment defines the feel the classroom acquired as the students entered through the classroom doors. Reading landscape illustrated the literacy events that defined the daily reading period.

Reading environment

I employed four important qualities that defined the reading environment of this eighth grade classroom:

- Excitement for every book shared.
- Persistence in never quitting to match a book with a student
- Refraining from bully tactics to coerce a student into reading.
- Continual exploration of self and student literature interest.

These four qualities evolved through these eighth grade students sharing their school experiences. Reading from a predetermined list defined their independent reading experiences. Their interest and motivation was never considered or fostered. Sadly, we teach in a time of *reading for prizes* programs. I, too, at different times in my teaching career supported these reading programs. As a result of my year teaching middle level students, I discovered that this system is the easy way out. Educators, including myself, thought we were doing our job by forcing students to read. We justified our actions by saying, "At least they are reading," leaving vacant the more important job of teaching students the love of reading.

Once I found books that young adolescent students enjoyed, I no longer had to coerce them into reading. Although not all texts that I listed here in this article might work in the literacy landscape that you and your students will construct, perhaps this list will provide a starting place. I found success in several common themes and texts. Before sharing specific book titles, I will discuss the reading events that shaped and defined our reading landscape.

Reading Landscape

Reading together differently consisted of these reading formats:

- Reading aloud to students
- Varying the reading formats
- Starting small
- Modeling reading
- Choosing books to read, and
- Living with a fifty minute time period for junior high reading.

I was pleasantly surprised by the enjoyment that junior high students derived from daily read alouds. Because of the fifty-minute time constraints, I could only plan read alouds sparingly. When I did read aloud, I learned to use this time to scaffold new minilessons. During these sessions, I would introduce new novels to students. I worked hard to share books that I thought they might enjoy, but might not ever choose to read without a gentle push.

A potpourri of reading events, which included reading aloud, guided reading for some, paired reading, reading alone, reading workshop, and whole-group reading worked best for my junior high students. Reading alone is always a valid reading event because, occasionally, students prefer reading by themselves. I respected this choice. Implementing a variety of reading events provided junior high students opportunities to get involved. Consistently, I found that mixing my reading events kept students engaged. I implemented paired reading activities from the first day of school. I thought that if I had each student share with another student this would facilitate a safe environment. Furthermore, the students would become engaged and excited. However, since these students were accustomed to mainly traditional classroom formats, they were intimidated by having to share with another student. Therefore I had to first teach the students to practice sharing with themselves before they were ready to share with each other. That was the first lesson learned.

When possible, teaching is best done by example; therefore, I read every minute that the students read. If an individual walked into the room during reading time, I would tell that person to come back another time because this was our reading time. I discovered junior high students responded to the teacher reading. I recognized that when I made the decision to read I was giving up time to meet with students one-on-one. However, I felt that it was more important to reformulate their schema of literacy work, which included modeling every day effective reading habits. Often times during silent reading, I could see a student watching me, making sure I was reading. This silent reading time became valuable, because the reading habit allowed me to stay in touch with current adolescent books, and I could converse with my students on books that they read. We shared all books—even those we did not like. Classroom discourse gradually embraced varying opinions. After several months, students felt free to express dislike, like, and excitement.

To further encourage this excitement, I determined that student choice in reading material is critical. I found that junior high students are more likely to read when given a choice in selecting the book and genre. I learned not to say “You should read this book!” but instead, “You might want to consider this book (or this author).” I spent time introducing my students to adolescent literature with the purpose of getting junior high students interested in reading.

Although block scheduling, which allows for large increments of instructional time, has come and gone in most junior high schools. I found that fifty-minutes were not long enough to give students all the literacy experiences they needed. By the time I read aloud, facilitated discussion, taught a minilesson, and allowed for students' reading time, the class period was over. Perhaps blending block scheduling with fifty-minute class periods would result in the best time frames for the content required of junior high students. Speaking personally, as a classroom teacher, I felt guilty every day for leaving out some necessary components of literacy.

Texts to Invite Young Adolescent Students into Reading

From my experiences, all junior high students identified with ghost and animals stories. I started our reading together differently phase with two texts. Each is a collection of short stories, *Every Living Thing* by Cynthia Rylant (1988) and *Haunted Schools: True Ghost Stories* (1996) by Allan Zullo.

Every Living Thing is a collection of animal stories that tugs at the reader's heart and activates personal memories of animals. I read several of these stories aloud, and we discussed each of them. Then the students paired themselves up, and chose other stories to read and discuss. Like the previous story, *Haunted Schools: True Ghost Stories* provided another high interest means to get junior high students excited and discussing literature. We read the ghost stories by turning off all lights, except a small lamp. Again, after I read aloud, students paired themselves up and read other ghost stories of their choice. This collection of short stories continued to generate student interest and discussion. Then I moved onto another read aloud, *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake (1998). This text made an excellent read aloud especially for a class that did not want to participate in whole group discussion. It wasn't possible to read this book without generating some opinion. Through this read aloud, my eighth graders started sharing their thoughts. After finishing *The Skin I'm In* as a read aloud, I followed-up this lesson by having the entire class read *Surviving the Applewhites* by Stephanie Tolan (2002). In this adolescent novel, the main character is an outsider struggling with identity, just as in *The Skin I'm In*, which allowed for a smooth transition into student initiated text-to-text connections.

Individual Interest Books

Unexpectedly, one of my major teaching goals became connecting middle level students with books they might be interested in reading. For the past seven years, these students' book reading schema focused on reading books from an approved booklist, so that they would earn enough points to obtain a passing reading grade and also earn points for prizes. At first glance my goal seemed simple. However, the junior high library was not organized around the Dewey Decimal System, where books of similar content stood side-by-side. Instead, in this library, books stood by each other according to their point value as assigned

by the Accelerated Reading Program. Forcing unrelated books to stand side-by-side and made an almost impossible task of searching for books of similar content that might peak a students' interest.

Consequently, my sources for adolescent literature came from my eighth graders, colleagues, journals, my daily reading, scholastic book order forms, and my own children. During the course of the year, we went through many more texts than I will share here, but the ones I will share are texts that actually prompted an emotional response from these junior high students and they even continued to read when it was not even required. Series books are still a major motivator for adolescent readers. Popular series books are: Lemony Snicket, the Seventh Tower, Charlie Bone, Artemis Fowl, Cornelia Funke, and any series with a dragon as a main character.

Booklist to Get Started with Adolescent Readers

Whole class books

- Flake, S. G. (1998). *The skin I'm in*. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books.
- Hamilton, B. (2004). *Soul surfer*. New York: Pocket Books.
 - See <http://www.bethanyhamilton.com/>
- Rylant, C. (1985). *Every living thing*. New York: Aladdin Publishing.
 - See <http://www.eduplace.com/kids/hmr/mtai/rylant.html>
- Tolan, S. S. (2002). *Surviving the applewhites*. New York: Scholastic.
- Zullo, A. (1996). *Haunted schools: True ghost stories*. New York: Scholastic.

Several single copies

- Brashares, A. (2003). *Sisterhood of the traveling pants*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Brashares, A. (2003). *The second summer of the sisterhood*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- De Saint Exupery, A. (1943). *The little prince*. New York: Scholastic.
- Denenberg, B. (1990). *Stealing home: The story of Jackie Robinson*. New York: Scholastic.
- Haddix, M. P. (1999). *Just Ella*. New York: Aladdin.
- Matas, C. (2002). *The war within: A novel of the civil war*. New York: Aladdin.
- Sacher, L. (1998). *Holes*. New York: Scholastic.

The Seventh Tower series

(See <http://www.scholastic.com/titles/seventhtower/index2.htm>)

- Nix, G. (2000). *The fall*. New York: Scholastic.
- Nix, G. (2000). *Castle*. New York: Scholastic.
- Nix, G. (2001). *Renir*. New York: Scholastic.
- Nix, G. (2001). *Above the veil*. New York: Scholastic.

- Nix, G. (2001) *Into battle*. New York: Scholastic.
- Nix, G. (2001). *The violet keystone*. New York: Scholastic.

Charlie Bone (See <http://www.scholastic.com/charliebone/>)

- Nimmo, J. (2004). *Charlie bone and the time twister*. New York: Scholastic.
- Nimmo, J. (2000). *Charlie bone and the invisible boy*. New York: Scholastic.
- Nimmo, J. (2002). *Midnight for Charlie bone*. New York: Scholastic.

Artemis Fowl (See <http://www.artemisfowl.co.uk/>)

- Colfer, E. (2001). *Artemis fowl: Eoin Colfer*. New York: Scholastic.
- Colfer, E. (2002). *Artemis fowl: The arctic incident*. New York: Scholastic.
- Colfer, E. (2003). *Artemis fowl: The eternity code*. New York: Scholastic.

Cornelia Funke (See <http://www.corneliafunke.de/en/>)

- Funke, C. (2003). *Inkheart*. New York: Scholastic.
- Funke, C. (2000). *The thief lord*. New York: Scholastic.
- Funke, C. (2004). *Dragonrider*. New York: Scholastic.
- Funke, C. (2005). *Inkspell*. New York: Scholastic.

Lemony Snicket series (See <http://www.lemonysnicket.com/>)

- 11 books in this series...all published by Scholastic

Several Dragon series

- Rodda, E. (2003). *Dragon nest*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rodda, E. (2004). *Isle of the dead*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rodda, E. (2003). *The sister of the south*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rodda, E. (2003). *Shadow gate*. New York: Scholastic.
- D'Lacey, C. (2001). *The fire within*. New York: Scholastic.
- D'Lacey, C. (2003). *Icefire*. New York: Scholastic.
- Wrede, P. C. (1991). *Searching for dragons*. San Diego, CA: Magic Carpet Books.
- Wrede, P. C. (2002). *Dealing with dragons*. San Diego, CA: Magic Carpet Books.
- Wrede, P. C. (2003). *Calling for dragons*. San Diego, CA: Magic Carpet Books.
- Wrede, P. C. (2003). *Talking with dragons*. San Diego, CA: Magic Carpet Books.

Discussion

Throughout the nation, the standardized high-stakes testing craze has taken control of too many American schools. Testing pressure has forced teachers, students, and learning into unnatural learning situations, resulting in

classrooms that narrowly focus and prepare for one day or one week of testing; leaving behind important lessons like life-long learning, love of reading, and critical thinking. Esquith (2007) shared the same sentiment. He said, “The testing obsession that has swept our nation’s schools is detrimental to helping children reach their potential as students and human beings” (p. 73). Can you imagine the National Football League announcing that the only football game to be played is the Super Bowl? Each player’s salary and status would be determined by his performance in one game on one day. If a player received an injury in the opening minutes of a game, too bad—maybe next year he would have another chance. If a football player played a bad game, too bad, he would be cut from the team. Fans, players, coaches, and businesses would be in an uproar. Changes would definitely be made.

By the time students reach middle level, they will have been subjected to many years of intense high-stakes testing environments and reading for prizes programs. Along the way they will have forgotten reading for pleasure. Classrooms should refocus to accentuate authentic reading and learning and still have passing test scores. All of my eighth grade students passed their reading Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test; we spent only two thirty-minute timeframes specifically preparing for the TAKS reading test. The students found the test easy after spending everyday reading, thinking, and discussing real text. It is a mystery why some teachers have filed away their pedagogical knowledge for singularly focusing on test preparation. But the time has come for each teacher to make an effort to refocus on authentic learning. United, teachers have a powerful influence—not with money, but with voting power. Maybe it is time we flexed our combined voting muscle.

Mike, the student from the opening quote, was a Hispanic, male student. He followed the path that many males do—quietly attending school and hoping not to be noticed. But I noticed Mike, mainly because I felt that he was an underachieving student; his eyes reflected interest, but his learning was left underdeveloped. In this rural and predominantly Anglo community, being Hispanic and male were two strikes against him. Mike was in my eighth grade reading class and responded well to the teaching methods of daily reading, discussion, and learning. It was a delight to discover that the next school year, Mike successfully completed 9th grade pre AP-English. He struggled some, but unless we challenge our Hispanic students, and all our students for that matter, they will never find their potential. In the end, Mike succeeded.

References

Cavazos-Kottke, S. (2005). Tuned out but turned on: Boys (dis)engaged reading in and out of school. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 40, 180-183.

- Conley, M. W. and Hinchman, K. A. (2004). No Child Left Behind: What it means for U.S. adolescents and what we can do about it. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48, 42-50.
- Erickson, L. G. (2003). *Applied literacy in the middle grades: Introducing children to authentic inquiry*. Boston, MA: Allyn-Bacon.
- Esquith, R. (2007). *Teach like your hair's on fire*. New York: Viking Press.
- Gee, J. (1999). Reading versus reading something: A critique of the National Academy of Science Report on Reading. In R. Telfer, (Ed.), *Literacy conversations: Family, school, community*. Nineteenth Yearbook of the American Reading Forum (pp.1-12). Whitewater, WI: University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Publisher.
- Goodman, K. (1994a). *Phonics phacts*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Goodman, K. (1994b). Reading, writing and written texts: A transactional sociopsycholinguistic view, In R. B. Ruddell, M. R. Ruddell, & H. Singer, (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading, (4th ed.)*, (pp. 1093-1202). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Goodman, K. (Ed.). (1998). *In defense of good teaching*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Goodman, Y. (1995). Miscue analysis for classroom teachers: Some history and some procedures. *Primary Voices*, 3(4), 2-9.
- Goodman, Y., & Goodman, K.S. (1981). To Err Is Human. *New York University Education Quarterly*, 12 (4), 14-19.
- Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A. (2000). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension to enhance understanding*. Portland, MA: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Serfani, F. (2001). *Reading workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Smith, F. (1998). *The book of forgetting and learning*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Wilhelm, J, D. (2000). When reading is stupid: The why, how, what to do about it. In Z. Close, & K. D. Ramsey, (Eds.) *A middle mosaic: A celebration of reading, writing, and reflective practice at the middle level*, (pp.3-10). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Williams, B. T. (2004, Dec/2005, Jan). Are we having fun, yet? Students, social class, and the pleasures of literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 48, 338-342.

About the author - Merry Boggs has spent 25 years as an elementary school teacher, administrator, and a librarian in Texas, Florida, and Egypt. She has been a swimming coach and volunteer teacher in middle schools. Currently she works as associate professor and assistant department chair at Texas A&M–Commerce.