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In Defense of Young Adult Literature

Marc C. Driscoll

Abstract: English language arts teachers have forever relied on the English literature canon for their selection of text to use in the classroom. This article asks the question if this method is the most effective way to choose classroom texts based on the interest level of the students. It is argued that young adult literature, or literature that is written about characters that are the same age as students facing similar issues, can capture the interest of students and motivate them to be engaged in the English language arts lessons.

Introduction

Traveling Mexico to find a buyer for the largest pearl in the world, struggling to maintain a love affair amidst a long-standing family quarrel, facing shame of the community due to an adulterous red letter; these are the events that middle school students face today. If you feel that this is off base consult the curriculum or pacing guide of a typical English language arts classroom in the middle school setting. The events listed above can be found in the various novels and stories that students are asked to read in their middle school English language arts (ELA) classrooms. The problem is, just as you were unable to believe that these were the events that middle school students are facing today, middle school students also struggle to make connections with characters, plots, and settings that do not reflect their surroundings and who they are. When middle school teachers rely too heavily on the works of the English literary canon like *The Pearl*, *Romeo and Juliet*, or *The Scarlet Letter* that students cannot relate to, the interest in literature is lost. So then, what needs to be done? It is time for these educators to begin embracing texts that reflect the student experience, texts that paint a picture of what it means to be a middle school student today.

ELA teachers need look no further than young adult literature. That is, literature that is written for the specific audience of pre-teen to teenage audience, literature in which the main characters are teenagers who are experiencing many of the same trials and tribulations that young adults do today. It can be readily argued that young adult literature can be used effectively to engage students in the middle grades in the lessons of the ELA classroom.

Why the English Literacy Canon

Teachers of the ELA rely on the English literary canon for their selection of texts to use in the classroom because these texts are texts that have stood the test of time. Scholars and critics have praised these texts for their high level of literary merit and quality. The texts of the English canon have created a standard for judgment of what valuable reading is, and therefore many believe that this valuable reading must be invoked in the classroom. Because these texts have been traditionally taught in the English classroom, they can be relied upon to effectively teach the nuances, structure, themes and lessons of text that students must learn in the classroom. That is to say, there is no question as to their value in lesson planning (Landow, 1989). It is not difficult to name texts that are included in the English canon. It includes such familiar readings as: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Hamlet*, and *Of Mice and Men*. The worth of these works is heralded at the instant that their name is invoked, the trouble is that the stories that each of these novels tell simply does not grab the attention of students who are not interested in reading.

Young Adult Literature as Relevant Literature

As easy as it is to name the works in the English literary canon, it is equally difficult for an author or a text to be accepted in to the canon. Works are rejected simply for their genre, their subject matter, their audience, and their age. And so, many educators exclude using various works in the classroom because previous scholars and critics have determined that these works are not fit to be included in the list of the greatest works of all time. This exclusionary process of classroom text selection is done at the expense of young adult literature.

When looking for a basis from which to select young adult literature it can be said that young adult literature includes, “texts in which teenagers are the main characters dealing with issues to which teens can relate” (Glaus, 2014, p. 408). It is important to understand this definition because it highlights what is missing from many of the classics of the canon. Young adult literature speaks to middle school students because the characters reflect the personalities and characteristics of the students, the settings reflect the world in which students live, and the plot reflects the issues that pre-teens and teenagers are struggling with today. This is something that the English literary canon falls short of accomplishing.

Young adult literature’s strength in the classroom setting lies in its relevance to the student experience. The characters in these texts are working through issues that most teenagers face today such as emerging identities, cultural acceptance, and cognitive development. For example, the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007) challenges young adults to think about the effects of bullying of students their age. It asks students to consider how deeply people can be hurt by words, and what it means for a young student to commit suicide.

Young adult literature is also more relevant to students because most pieces of young adult literature have been written about time periods that students have either lived through or are familiar with. Glaus (2014) surveyed the suggested reading list of the National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers (largely influenced by the canon) and found that the median publication date of the texts was 1915, nearly 100 years removed from today. Naturally, students can connect with young adult literature more readily because it is written about events with which they are familiar (Glaus, 2014; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Students are disconnected to stories about history to which they are not related such as in the writings of Shakespeare. Instead, students prefer to read about characters who are living in their time period.

Engagement with Young Adult Literature

The relevance of young adult literature to the student experience is important because it has been noted that students find the elements of these texts to be particularly engaging (Henderson & Buskist 2011). Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) explain that engaged readers are those who are, "motivated to read, strategic in their approaches to comprehending what they read knowledgeable in their construction of meaning and socially interactive while reading" (p. 602). Guthrie, Wigfield, and You (2012) continue to explain that engagement in reading is crucial to developing reading comprehension skills and furthering reading achievement.

According to Bull (2011) engagement in reading can be identified when students are able to make intertextual connections. Students show their comprehension of a text when they can relate the elements of text to other texts they have read, their personal experiences, the world around them, and the text itself. Intertextual connections allow students to connect "with text in meaningful and personal ways... to develop interest and comprehend at deeper levels" (Bull, 2011, p. 224). Intertextual connections allow for meaningful reading because these connections ask a reader to reflect upon their reading, question the ideas of the text, and draw on personal knowledge to make conclusions.

A key factor to engaging in learning using intertextual connections is using background knowledge and personal stories for example. This is where the success of young adult literature lies. Students are more apt to be engaged in the reading process through young adult literature because they are experiencing the same events and circumstances that the characters in these novels are. It is easier to believe that a student has dealt with or is dealing with bullying as Jerry Renault does in *The Chocolate War*, than to believe that a student is wondering who in his community is a witch as the characters do in *The Crucible*. Allowing students to enter discussion in the classroom about text using experiences from their lives means engaging them in more thoughtful reading practices (Bull, 2011).

Young Adult Literature and the Standards

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has published the standards that they feel must be met for students to achieve the highest level of ELA education. It is these standards that ELA teachers strive to achieve in the education of their students. These standards too, cite the importance of engagement with text and the ability for students to make intertextual connections in order to create deeper meaning of the reading that they are doing. Due to the fact that students are able to engage with young adult literature on a deeper level and more readily provide intertextual connections, teachers can rely on young adult literature for lesson planning toward meeting this standard (Henderson & Buskist, 2011).

NCTE reading standards also call for students to read a wide range of text in order to build a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. The easily relatable characters and plot in young adult literature help students form a more applicable sense of self while the modern nature of the writing of many young adult literature texts aids students in the development of understanding of their world (Glaus, 2014, p. 410). Finally, the reading standards call for the reading of a wide variety of texts from many different genres and time periods in order to build a greater understanding of the human experience. Limiting classroom text selection limits the student's scope of the human experience. In order to fully meet the reading standards, it is incumbent upon ELA instructors to find appropriate young adult texts for their students to learn and grow.

Bridging the Gap to English Literature Canon

Accepting young adult literature into the curriculum in the middle grades classroom does not mean a full rejection of the traditional works of the English literary canon. There is merit to the canon; the themes of its novels and the profound writing of many of its authors are bound to impact students' educational careers on multiple levels. It is for this reason that students must be given a vehicle to arrive at a reading level at which they are ready to approach the readings of the canon. There is no doubt that this vehicle can be young adult literature.

Motivating students to read is a key factor in engaging students in the reading process and the lessons of the English language arts classroom. In fact, motivation and engagement work in tandem. That is to say that if a student is engaged in the literature that he is reading

then he is apt to be motivated to perform the reading that is requested of him. This is one of the primary goals of using young adult literature in the classroom, motivating students to read, to enter into the community of readers. Once students find that they enjoy reading through the use of young adult literature, educators can ask them to progress to more traditional works of the canon. Glaus (2014) states, “young adult literature does not have to be seen as competition with the classics; rather it is an important tool for establishing reading lives of students and creating an appreciation for literature (p. 414).” This appreciation for literature allows students to begin to enter the realm of reading more challenging and complex texts in different genres.

Conclusion

Susan Ohanian (1981) posts in her writing that ELA teachers must think about why they want their students to read. She believes that it is our goal as English educators to excite our students about reading. She acknowledges the struggle with finding appropriate text in the classroom, but notes that there are “exciting choices in between John Travolta and William Wordsworth” (Ohanian, 1981, p. 30). Young adult literature can be that middle ground, it can be the literature that is used in the classroom that will excite young students about reading and encourage students to continue to engage in the reading process. The burden is evident, and it is one that teachers may be reluctant to face. It is our responsibility as educators to seek out these interesting texts instead of relying on the English literature canon to tell us what to teach in our classroom. There is no doubt that there are fine writers of young adult literature out there who are penning works that students will find relevant, engaging, and worthwhile. Thus, it is worthwhile for educators to use these texts for lessons in their classroom and for educators to encourage their districts to provide this literature. The time has come ELA educators to ask themselves the question, “Is it what my students are reading that matters most or that my students are reading that matters most?”

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