Critiquing and Constructing Canons in Middle Grade English Language Arts Classrooms

When preservice language arts teachers begin courses on teaching literature, the first question they ask is often What pieces of literature should we teach to our middle grade students? Many preservice teachers hope to be provided with a list of texts that are high quality, engaging, sanctioned by schools and parents, and appropriate for meeting their many curricular requirements.

However, teachers quickly recognize that text selection is not as simple as drawing from one universal list or a single “canon” of literary texts. Instead, middle grade teachers can expect to encounter an array of “canonizing” forces as they navigate their instructional choices. In this article, we outline some of those forces and offer an alternative framework for selecting texts—one that challenges teachers to work with their students to critique the narratives in the most common canons and to construct their own classroom canons that recognize students’ particular interests and identity needs.

How Are Canons Constructed and Why Do They Matter to Middle Grade Teachers?

The phrase literary canon often evokes notions of one static, monolithic list of the best literature, with works agreed on by everyone who’s anyone. This notion of a fixed canon is typically associated with courses offered in high school and college, and it often calls to mind “classic” literary texts such as Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Scarlet Letter, The Great Gatsby, To Kill a Mockingbird, and Hamlet (Applebee, 1996). Although this “classic” literary canon certainly does exist, it is not the only canon of literature teachers will encounter, nor does it (or any other canon) endure simply because those books are somehow the best or most valuable. Instead, this canon, like all others, has been and continues to be constructed by certain interest groups or critics who judge texts based on their own agendas or critical perspectives.

For instance, one force that perpetuates the classic literary canon is the College Board through its AP (Advanced Placement) English Literature and Composition exam prompts. Analysis of 17 prompts from this exam from 1999–2008 revealed that while there were 216 titles students could choose to write about, ten appeared on the list seven or more times, including The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Crime and Punishment, Great Expectations, The Great Gatsby, Heart of Darkness, Jane Eyre, King Lear, The Scarlet Letter, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Wuthering Heights—texts that for the most part were written by white, male authors from the 19th century (Miller & Slifkin, 2010). The repetition of those texts implies to teachers that those and similar texts are the most valuable—and therefore the best—choices for their AP students.

While the classic literary canon is a force more often encountered by high school teachers, middle grade teachers must frequently confront numerous other canonizing forces. For instance, literary-recognition programs such as the Newbery Medal and the Printz Award are particularly
influential in determining which children’s and young adult texts come to be valued and taught in the classroom. Although those awards certainly recognize many high-quality books, those who select the winners are not without particular biases or agendas. Research has demonstrated that the Newbery awards, for example, favor historical fiction and often include characters that are disproportionately white and typically abled (Leininger, Dyches, Prater, & Heath, 2010). Textbook and testing companies are among other canonizing forces encountered by middle grade teachers. Some of those companies, which hold significant sway in shaping content and instruction, make content choices for financial reasons and based on teacher familiarity with certain texts.

In addition, and as with the AP English examination, the list of exemplar texts offered by the Common Core State Standards has the potential to become a canonizing force in language arts classrooms. A more detailed look at the exemplar list for grades six through eight provides a useful illustration of how that canonizing force might work. Of the novels listed in the “stories” section of the exemplar list for those grades, two could be considered “classics” in the sense that they were written by well-known authors and have been taught for generations (Alcott’s *Little Women* and Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*). Four others are Newbery Award winners or honor books (L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*, Yep’s *Dragonwings*, Cooper’s *The Dark Is Rising*, and Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*). None of those six novels could be considered contemporary, given that all were written prior to 1976. It is also notable that the two of those novels that were written by authors of color and grapple with issues of racial inequality (*Dragonwings* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*) are historical works rather than pieces that explore contemporary issues of race. Although the writers of the CCSS insist that the standards are neither content standards nor mandates for the use of particular instructional methods, they do appear to value a particular canon of texts—that is, historical, win high-profile awards, and include little emphasis on contemporary issues or problems.

With all of those canonizing forces and agendas at play, whom should a middle grade teacher listen to when selecting texts for the classroom? As we have stated, we suggest that teachers first recognize that canons are constructed by groups, organizations, and critics with particular agendas—groups who generally make selections based on the aesthetic, literary quality of a text—rather than by adolescents who are more likely to prefer texts that engage them with characters and plot development (George, 2008). As a result, we believe that student voices are typically not loud enough in teachers’ considerations of texts. In the sections that follow, we offer a model for including students’ voices by engaging students in the critique of common canons and the construction of new classroom canons.

**Critiquing Canons with Students**

If other groups can construct canons, there’s no reason students can’t apply their own knowledge and experiences to critique traditional canon constructions and to develop their own “classroom canons.” In addition, we argue that the process of critiquing and constructing canons is one that aligns with a number of the Common Core State Standards for reading literature in the middle grades—particularly those that relate to “craft and structure” and “key ideas and details.” For instance, the standards ask for students to “cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” and to “analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.” Here, we suggest a number of critique and construction activities that meet those standards while also helping students consider related questions, such as *What kinds of texts do various groups of people think adolescents ought to read?* and *How do these texts position adolescents in terms of develop-
ment, gender, race, and other factors?

One way to begin to answer those questions and to critique canons with students is to question conceptions of “adolescence” itself, as well as how those conceptions are reflected in young adult literature. Young adult literature scholars have expressed concern that adolescents are often assumed to have monolithic identity needs (Petrone & Lewis, 2012; Sarigianides, 2012). Sarigianides points out that many “realistic” young adult novels treat adolescent characters as being consistently and universally in the midst of some social, psychological, or biological identity crisis. Teachers might ask students to survey the current canon of young adult literary texts in their school library, critiquing those that make stereotyped assumptions about adolescence as a continual state of crisis while also highlighting texts that break from the canon by treating issues that matter to young adults with nuance and authenticity.

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As students develop skills in critiquing the construction of adolescence in the young adult literary canon, teachers might then challenge them to consider both classic and contemporary canons for stereotypes through the use of narrative analysis to examine value assumptions inherent in storyline development.

Teachers can explain to students that narratives typically involve a protagonist who engages in an action leading to some consequence and, ultimately, resolution. The “crime drama” formula that appears in print and in TV and film provides a useful example that is likely to be familiar to students. In a typical crime story, the white detective hero solves a crime committed by a person of color. Once students discover this narrative, they can unpack the value assumptions behind these actions: 1) that detectives are typically white, 2) that criminals are typically people of color, and 3) that crime doesn’t pay (and criminals are always caught). These value assumptions ignore the forces of institutional racism operating in America.

Once familiar with the basic tenets of narrative analysis, students can examine stereotypes that are perpetuated through other canons. Studying narratives in the traditional fairy tale canon, for instance, will illuminate gender stereotypes that also run through contemporary canons. With guidance, students will quickly notice that female protagonists in tales such as Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, and Sleeping Beauty are depicted as having a sense of agency derived from male appreciation of their external beauty.

Examining narratives in the early American literary canon taught in middle and high schools can help students pinpoint stereotyped storylines related to race—what Nasir and Shah (2011) connect...
refer to as “racialized narratives.” For instance, controversies surrounding the use of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in the classroom often center on its depiction of African American men through deficit perspectives.

In the process of critiquing narratives forwarded by various canons, students may begin to notice how some of those narratives influence their own perceptions of themselves and others. For example, Jeremiah, an African American male student who participated in a study, contrasted his actions on a basketball court and in a math classroom (Nasir & Hand, 2008). When playing basketball, Jeremiah assumed the role of a leader who taught his peers by modeling certain actions and who learned from his peers by listening and collaborating with them. On his basketball team, Jeremiah was providing and acquiring a range of resources associated with narratives of young black men as successful, highly active basketball players. In contrast, Jeremiah demonstrated little or no participation in his math class. In that context, he may have been influenced by narratives that position African American adolescents as unintelligent or “in danger” (Nasir & Hand, 2008). One way of disrupting these racialized narratives is to begin to construct new canons of texts that challenge these canonical storylines.

Constructing Alternative Classroom Canons

Having unpacked the value assumptions constituting stereotypical narratives of gender, race, and class, students can read alternative versions of the common narratives they have located in various canons. For example, in counteracting the fairy tale canon’s narratives of gender, Peggy Rice (2000) shared feminist fairy tales with sixth-grade students, leading some—particularly females—to adopt critical stances on gender representations. Similarly, students may enjoy viewing texts such as the Disney film Shrek (Adamson et al., 2006), which deconstructs a number of typical fairy tale narratives, including that of the passive princess.

Reading counter-canonical narratives can lead students to write their own stories for inclusion in their classroom canon—stories that challenge and complicate underlying value assumptions constituting prototypical character traits and actions. For example, they may create alternative versions of the Cinderella story that portray Cinderella as a person of color (Asian Society, 2008) or as a person embodying alternative gender roles (Newfields, 2004). Students can also create multimedia parodies or fan-fiction versions of what have become popular fiction canonical texts. As context for doing so, they can study examples of fan fiction at the fanfiction.net (http://www.fanfiction.net) site that occasionally include parodies of canonical texts. For some examples based on Harry Potter and The Hunger Games, which have become contemporary canonical texts, see Henry, Tirotta-Esposito, & Smith-Carlucci (2012) at http://tinyurl.com/ayv9g9y.

Conclusion

As middle grade teachers contemplate which texts to teach in their language arts classrooms, there is much to consider. We have argued not only for teachers to become aware of forces of canonization but also for teachers and students alike to become active participants in canon critique and construction. This collaborative approach to critique and construction has the potential to empower rather than limit students as they select and engage with literary texts.

References


education/resources-schools/elementary-lesson-plans/twice-upon-time-multi-cultural-cinderella.


**Literary Texts Referenced**


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*Voices from the Middle, Volume 21 Number 1, September 2013*