Unpacking What’s “Novel” in Our Work with YA Texts

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As editors, we write the call for proposals for each issue almost two years before you hold an issue in your hands. A lot happens in two years. So, in the early spring of 2017, we wrote this particular call in the hopes of creating an issue marked with imagination, celebration of new and known voices in middle grades and YA literature, and where we had the opportunity to be immersed in great ideas about growing our students’ reading lives. Our play with the word “novel” was meant to spark innovation, creativity, and possibility. And, as we anticipated, these pages are full of rich ideas and classroom approaches.

But, given all that the past two years have brought us in our communities, our politics, and our schools, the articles and columns in this issue take us much further than we’d envisioned and into a space of even more important work.

If we listen carefully to the teachers, researchers, authors, and students whose voices fill these pages, this is an issue that does work that boldly challenges us as middle school English teachers. Yes, there is challenge in the invitation to create and imagine “novel” teaching, this issue poses a far higher and more necessary charge—pushing us to think hard about whose stories are told in the curricular and choice reading we ask students to engage in, how we support middle level readers in doing more and better because of what we read, and ensuring that the English classroom is a space in which every child is seen and valued.

In the two Leading the Call articles in this issue, we are presented with ideas for “novel” teaching that leads to necessary re-seeing and next steps of action. First, Robyn Seglem, Sarah Bonner, and Kirrstein Hays invite us to consider their work in pairing the reading of challenging middle grades and YA texts with student-inquiry projects focused on community change. And, scholar and author Ebony Elizabeth Thomas challenges us to recognize that in our separate and unequal literary landscape, there is power in our uses of retelling strategies where “we are challenged to re-see and critically consider current YA by using metaphor to shift the lenses through which we read” (14).

Several of the voices in this issue help us look closely at the current texts newly available to our readers. Young adult author Amy Reed shares her experiences with editing Our Stories, Our Voices, a collection of stories of resistance, resilience, and hope written by a diverse group of female authors who write for middle grades and YA readers. Katherine Cramer invites us to explore middle grades literature including queer and transgender characters, providing suggested titles and possible instructional ideas.

In considering the ways that text pairs allow us to juxtapose known and new texts, Brooke Boback Eisenbach, Caitlin Corrieri, Kenzie Moniz, and Robert Forrester speak to the rich opportunities open in exploring identity with middle level readers. Similarly, Teaching with YA columnist Jason Griffith reminds us of our need as teachers who read to “constantly curate from (our) own literary consumption, reflection and discussion to build rich and generative text sets around the required curricular and canonical novels (we) teach for the benefit of all students” (41).

Where she reminds us that steeping students in choice and making time for reading are “not so novel” ideas, we are struck by the wisdom of columnist Linda Rief’s student readers who share with us...
both their thoughts about what matters in the books they have recently read and what they are noticing in their own reading practices.

In deeper dives into what might be possible in “novel” lessons, we are guided by Luke Rodesiler to consider how a critical reading of All American Boys draws attention to issues of race, police violence, and athletes’ responsive activism. Stephanie Reid and Michelle Dyer take us through a study of Selznick’s The Marvels that includes lessons in remix and image analysis. And, Elizabeth Frye, Brooke Hardin, and Adrienne Stumb write with middle grade author Heather Bouwman about their students’ use of A Crack in the Sea to compose persona poems.

As much as “novel” teaching with middle grades and YA texts is taking us into brave and, in some cases, transformative spaces, it is also rooted in that which we have always known and valued in middle level teaching. We start by truly seeing each student who enters our classroom. It’s exciting to do that work in a landscape where the riches of new middle grades and YA texts are helping us to do that seeing in new ways. And, it’s essential that we do this work in a time where seeing, valuing, and honoring one another is possibly the most important thing we can teach our middle level students to do.

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Sarah Bonner is currently an eighth grade teacher for the Heyworth Community Unit School District in Heyworth, Illinois, and has taught for fifteen years. In addition, she is an Instructional Assistant Professor and current doctoral candidate at the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University. She has coauthored numerous articles about literacy teaching and learning, specifically connected to inquiry methods and media literacy. Sarah enjoys speaking, presenting, and working with teachers in her district, regionally, and nationally at the NCTE Annual Convention.

Kirrstein Hays is a ninth grader at Heyworth High School in Heyworth, Illinois. While in eighth grade, she met and worked with author Nic Stone as a mentor for her writing inquiry project. She serves as a class leader in student council, plays for the girls’ basketball team, and runs track. Kirrstein hopes to continue her interest in writing in high school and beyond.

Amy Reed is the award-winning author of several young adult novels, including Beautiful, Clean, and most recently, The Nowhere Girls, about three misfit girls who start a movement at their high school to fight rape culture and get justice for a classmate who was raped. She also edited the anthology Our Stories, Our Voices. Her new novel, The Boy and Girl Who Broke the World is forthcoming Summer 2019 from Simon Pulse. Amy is a feminist, mother, and quadruple Virgo who enjoys running, making lists, and wandering around the mountains of western North Carolina where she lives. You can find her online at www.amyreedfiction.com.

Robyn Seglem is an associate professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University, teaching content literacy, language arts methods, and educational technology. She has served as a codirector of the Flint Hills Writing Project, an affiliate with the National Writing Project, and is a nationally board certified teacher. Recently, Robyn worked with a team of ELA educators to revise and update the standards for English and Language Arts for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. She taught language arts for nine years in the middle school and high school classroom.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas is associate professor in the Literacy, Culture, and International Educational Division at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education. A former Detroit public schools teacher and National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, she was a member of the NCTE Cultivating New Voices Among Scholars of Color’s 2008–10 cohort, served on the NCTE Conference on English Education’s Executive Committee from 2013 until 2017, and is the immediate past chair of the NCTE Standing Committee on Research. Currently, she serves as coeditor of Research of the Teaching of English. She has been a member of NCTE since 2000.