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Advancing Excellence in the Middle-Grades



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CONTENDING WITH THE CANON: WHAT COUNTS AS EXCELLENCE IN MIDDLE-GRADES LITERACY

Heather Cato & Katie Walker, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This practitioner-focused article examines a current debate in middle grades literacy education. The discussion over what counts as excellence in middle grades literacy – teaching texts or teaching literacy skills. The authors offer practical solutions for finding a middle-ground in which to best support adolescent literacy development in the middle grades.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and Schools to Watch Focus: Academic Excellence

The debate over what counts as excellence in literacy education has recently revived old divisions within the field. While the debate is currently raging over comprehensive literacy instruction versus phonics in the early grades, the quieter debate between teaching texts versus teaching literacy is alive and well among secondary literacy stakeholders.

As part of my work in literacy education, I often engage in and lead educational chats via Twitter. While checking my Twitter account, I came across a tweet from a secondary English language arts teacher, “Old stories r still relevant. @HeatherCato How do we strike a balance 4 our Ss? Will they move to old stories on their own? #educatecity” (Harrell, 2015). The question of balancing teaching the literary classics with allowing students choice in their reading continues to trouble educators. Many teachers believe that teaching classic literature is imperative in developing cultural capital and understanding. These teachers fear that if they do not teach the classics, that their students will miss out on this important knowledge.

The alternative perspective is that the role of English language arts teachers is to support students in developing literacy skills, rather than teaching the content of specific texts. In many cases, this argument is supported to an extent by the current English language arts standards. Some researchers, such as Street, argue that instead of an autonomous approach to literacy we should look to an ideological model that, “offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another,” (2006, p. 2). This stance would provide educators with the opportunity to help learners explore the social contexts of the things they are reading in class, but also would encourage educators to explore the social context in which their learners live. “It’s not as if young people, including struggling readers, aren’t reading, writing, and using literacy to accomplish things that have relevance

for them,” (Christenbury, Bomer & Smagorinsky, 2009, p. 25). When we begin to understand the ways in which learners are communicating we will gain the critical insight we need to better help approach instruction (Christenbury, Bomer & Smagorinsky, 2009).

It seems as times that the two sides of this argument may never see eye-to-eye, it is, in fact, possible to provide authentic and meaningful literacy instruction by striking a balance between introducing the classics and encouraging student choice.

- Variety of texts for a variety of purposes: Real readers and writers engage in literacy practices for a variety of purposes. One way to strike a balance between the classics and student choice is to go back to the Standard. What skills or concepts are at the heart of the learning target? What texts may be the best fit for supporting students in mastering those skills or concepts? While The Poet X may be an excellent text for supporting understanding of how the structure of a stanza can support overall text meaning, The Jabberwocky may be a better text for supporting mastery of figurative language, and Jack Kerouac’s haikus may better support descriptive language or humor. Providing students with a variety of texts for a variety of purposes will help them to develop as well-rounded readers and writers.
- Focus on skills and concepts: As student populations in the United States grow increasingly diverse, educators have struggled to comprehend how to develop literacy skills when students have varying levels of background knowledge and English language proficiency. It is important to remember that differing knowledge and language proficiencies are differences, not deficiencies. By focusing on the literacy skills and concepts that

students are mastering, educators are freed to provide tools and resources that give students access to instruction that may have been too challenging when constrained to one text.

- A word on choice: It is often assumed that students will only select texts that are “easy” or “trendy,” leaving English language arts educators with the concern that students are not engaging with high-quality texts. However, what we know about healthy literacy classrooms in the middle grades is that they house a community of readers and writers. When teachers model good reading and writing practices and set-up structures that support access to, engagement with, and discussion about texts, students will explore a wide-variety of literature and media.

In order to better engage with our students and to empower them to engage with the literacies of their world we should consider if requiring learners to read “old texts” is best suited for the context and experiences our learners need. While there definitely could be times where classics such as, *To Kill A Mockingbird* are appropriate, the first question that we should be asking when considering what counts as excellence in middle grades literacy is what our learners need in order to better understand the world in which they live.

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