

# Comparing Middle Grade Teachers' and Middle Grade Students' Reader Responses to Newbery Award Winners:

A True Teacher's Lounge Story and the Question It Raised

I was recently having lunch in a middle school teachers' lounge with an English teacher, and we were talking about our favorite works of children's and adolescent literature. As we discussed a number of wonderful pieces of literature that were published over the last decade for young people, our conversation was punctuated with exclamations such as, "That was such a beautiful story," or "I absolutely loved that book!" A math teacher who happened to be sitting in the room where we were lunching commented that we, adults, certainly seemed to have a passion about books that were written for "teeny-boppers." The tone of her voice (and the use of the word teeny-boppers) indicated that she thought that despite our chronological age, perhaps we had a "childish" taste in books. Another teacher in the room defended us, suggesting that we should be commended for keeping up with the "trash that the kids nowadays like to read," even though "there is no way that adults can relate to the books in the same way that the children do."

My language arts colleague suggested to the teachers in the lounge that they should all read Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, which she stated to be "one of my favorite books of all time, adult or adolescent literature, and one that *all* of my students love." Her statement led me to remember a confidential

comment made to me by one of the students in her sixth grade class who was studying *The Giver* at the time, that she "hated" the book and that she wanted to read books that she could relate to.

Later than week, during our monthly faculty-student book club, I paid careful attention to the comments of the participants, comparing those of the adults in the group with those of the young adolescents. It struck me that while the students and the teachers concurred that they did not care for the particular book (*The View from Saturday* by E.L. Konigsburg), there was one point on which they did not agree: the believability of the young adolescent characters in the book. The adults in the group indicated that they felt the author had created characters that were, as one teacher put it, "just like the kids I see every day." The students in the group immediately (and unanimously) objected, asserting that, "They were totally unbelievable. Kids don't act and talk that way, at least none of the ones [we] know." When I reflected on the lunch conversation in the teachers' lounge and on this book club discussion about the believability of the young characters in *The View from Saturday*, I had a question that I could not shake: How do the responses and reactions of young people to adolescent novels compare to those of adults?

---

**How do the responses and reactions of young people to adolescent novels compare to those of adults?**

---

In an attempt to address this question, I decided to revisit (and add to) the vast amount of data I had collected during my four years of researching faculty-student book clubs and classroom discussions of literature in middle schools in New York City. In this article, I will discuss what I found in that data related to this question, triggered by the two incidents described above, and what I think my findings mean for teachers of young adolescents.

## Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky (1978) asserts that children's cultural development occurs on two levels: "First, *between* children (*interpsychological*) and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*)" (p. 57). Thus, it is often through social interactions with others that children learn best. Harste & Short (1986) suggest that, "Talking about a

piece of literature with others gives readers time to explore half-formed ideas, to expand their understandings of literature through hearing others' interpretations, and to become readers who think critically and deeply about what they read." (p. 191). In a sociocultural view of learning, there is always a person who is the "more knowledgeable other," who has a better understanding of a concept, task, context, or process. (Brown & Palinscar, 1989; Raphael & Goatley, 1994; Wells, 1990). Adolescent literature has been defined as "books written specifically for and about youth . . . about the

lives, experiences, aspirations, and problems of young people" (Brown & Stephens, 1995 p. 6). Therefore, when adolescents and adults discuss adolescent literature, it stands to reason that adolescent students may become the "more knowledgeable," especially when discussing the experiences of the young adult characters in the works that are read.

Louise Rosenblatt (1995) theorized that reading is a transaction between a reader, an author, and a text.

She suggested that readers sometimes take an *efferent* stance, in which they focus on what they can take away from an encounter with text, but may also take an *aesthetic* stance, in which they "live through" and experience the text through images and memories that are evoked and emotional responses that they feel. Probst (1998) states that, "If efferent reading is purposeful and directed, working toward a defined end, then aesthetic reading is exploratory and responsive, alert to unforeseen possibilities, curious about detours and digressions, playful and experimental. Above all it acknowledges the experience of the reader" (p. 128). Probst and Rosenblatt call for teachers to provide students with opportunities to share and develop both aesthetic and efferent responses to what they read. Virginia Monseau (1992) suggests that teachers should see themselves and their students as a "community of readers," in which teachers refrain from imposing their own ideas and interpretations, as well as those of literary scholars on their students. The ideas of these scholars informed the research described below.

## Data Sources and Analysis

Over the course of four years, I facilitated faculty-student book clubs in two New York City middle schools as well as served as a literacy coach in a number of English language arts teachers' classrooms. During this time I collected qualitative data, including field notes of classroom observations and audio recordings (which were transcribed) of the faculty-student book club meetings. In order to look for answers to the question, "How do the responses and opinions of young people to adolescent novels compare to those of adults?" I identified seven novels, all Newbery Award winners from 1994 to 2000. Each had been discussed in faculty-student book clubs and/or read and discussed by students and teachers in English language arts classes in the two middle schools. I made and analyzed field notes from eleven classroom literature discussions of the novels as well as transcriptions of the audio recordings made during the student-teacher book club discussions. These served as the major source of data.

Following the data analysis strategies described by qualitative researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Huberman & Miles, 1994) I first engaged in a general review of the classroom field notes and transcriptions

---

**Virginia Monseau (1992) suggests that teachers should see themselves and their students as a "community of readers," in which teachers refrain from imposing their own ideas and interpretations, as well as those of literary scholars on their students.**

---

of the book club meetings, making notes in the margins of the transcripts and field notes. I then coded each of the transcripts and field notes. At first, this task proved to be somewhat difficult. Bleich (1980) has suggested that a common problem facing researchers studying literature discussion and reader response has to do with the difficulty of developing and applying specific categories of responses that accurately fit the data collected. Because the literature discussions I was examining focused on Newbery Award winners, I decided to create a coding scheme based on the criteria used by the Newbery Committee in order to determine how the young people and adults in this community responded to the various literary elements of the books.

This coding of the transcripts and field notes of literature discussions enabled me to make generalizations about the way that adults and young people responded to specific aspects of the literature in their discussions, and about their overall evaluations of the books. When the data from student responses were compared to those of adult responses, a number of clear patterns emerged.

## Students' and Teachers' Responses and Evaluations

In general, teachers in the study most often engaged in textual analysis in their discussions, evaluating the literary quality of each novel or focused on the themes of the texts; students, on the other hand, consistently sought to make personal connections with the actions of the plot, the characters, and the adolescent issues explored in the literature. For example, teachers were more likely to evaluate character development or textual features in the novel, while students reacted to the authenticity of the characters and the believability of the behaviors of those characters. In a book club discussion of *Holes*, the line of discussion pursued by three teachers for over ten minutes surrounded their admiration for the intricacy of Sachar's interwoven plot lines, and his effective use of symbolism. When the students became involved in the discussion, they centered their comments on the boys at camp and compared them to classmates with similar qualities. They were impressed that, although exotic, the characters in the novel were quite believable, embodying the behaviors and

personalities of their own classmates. This dichotomy played out many times, both in classroom discussions and faculty-student book club conversations.

Following is a comparative summary of specific responses that middle school students and teachers had to each of the winners of the Newbery Medal between the years 1994 to 2000. For each book, I include a brief synopsis, followed by examples of typical reader comments about the book, taken directly from the transcripts of the book clubs meetings and field notes from classroom discussions.

### Lois Lowry. *The Giver*. Houghton-Mifflin. (1994 Newbery Award)

*Set in a futuristic utopian society where sameness is celebrated, in which no one is poor, no one gets sick, and where every family is happy, a 12-year-old boy named Jonas is chosen for the important job of being the "Receiver of Memories." As he suffers with the weight of receiving memories of the past (which his fellow citizens cannot remember) from an old man known as the Giver, Jonas discovers the disturbing truth about his seemingly utopian world and struggles to decide whether he should keep the memories to himself or open them up to his fellow citizens.*

Reactions of both students and teachers to this book focused primarily on elements of plot, character, theme and setting. A common plot-related response to this work had to do with the ending of the novel. A number of students responded to the ambiguous ending with frustration. One student railed, "I liked it right up till the end but was so mad at how she ended it. I don't get why she didn't tell what happened." Another commented that, "the end ruined it for me." Several teachers also indicated a dislike for the ambiguous ending to the novel. "It would have been perfect, if I had only understood what happened at the end," one math teacher moaned. However, a couple of teachers suggested that the author's decision to leave questions unanswered at the end of the book is what made it such a strong ending. One teacher stated, "What a great ending—it's made us sit here and debate whether Jonas died or

---

**A number of students responded to the ambiguous ending with frustration.**

---

whether he arrived in a better place. That's what makes [Lowry] a brilliant writer." Her comment certainly caused the group to think more critically about the author's intentions.

While student responses related to setting were mostly general ("I would hate to live in a society like that one."), a number of teachers specifically con-

connected the setting to communist Cold War-era nations. "I couldn't stop thinking about my trip to East Germany back in '86," commented one teacher, to which a Cuban-American teacher responded by sharing her thoughts on Castro's Cuba. This is an example where two readers' knowledge and experience helped to expand the understanding of the book for other readers.

In their spoken comments and written responses, several students suggested that although they recognized that there was "a lot to the book," they found it "boring." In contrast, the teachers' reactions to the book were overwhelmingly positive, and they went into deep discussions of themes such as utopias, individuality, revisionist history, culture, and the ethics of euthanasia and genetic altering. During these portions of the faculty-student book club meeting, student participants were notably quiet, perhaps suggesting that some of these issues were beyond their realm of knowledge and experience. These topics rarely came up in classroom discussions, unless raised by the teacher.

In general, the data suggest that the adult readers of *The Giver* had a more favorable reaction to this novel and seemed to appreciate the complexities of the multiple themes explored by the author. This would seem to indicate that in these two literary communities, the teachers were the "more knowledgeable others," and had more to bring to their reading of a "beautiful, yet complex book for young people" than did the middle school students who read it.

**Sharon Creech. *Walk Two Moons*. Harper-Collins. (1995 Newbery Award)**

*This is the story of thirteen-year-old Salamanca Hiddle, a young woman searching for answers. To pass the time on a cross-country journey with her zany grandparents, Sal tells the humorous story of her friend Phoebe, whose mother has also disappeared. As Sal shares the outlandish story of her friend's experience, the reader learns about Sal's own life and her struggle to come to terms with the loss of her mother.*

Again, student reactions to this book were primarily related to plot and character. The most common response of the students related to the humorous episodes in the book. "I thought the part about Phoebe and the "lunatic was so funny—the best part." In contrast, few of the adults mentioned the humorous aspects of the story. Rather, they focused on the theme of personal loss, with several remembering the feelings they experiences at the deaths of their own parents. While only one teacher commented that she could relate to the characters of the grandparents in the story, a number of students made a connection with them. During one classroom discussion one student commented, "I thought her grandparents were so funny. They totally reminded me of mine." Reacting with surprise, her teacher asked, "Really? I thought they were totally unbelievable—too 'hokey. Very cliché." This sentiment was echoed during book club conversations, with several teachers calling the grandparents "over the top," "just a little *too* cute," and "nothing like my grandparents." Another character-related observation that seemed to show contrasting views between students and teachers was related to the "believability" of the young characters. Three students in the group concurred that both Sal and Phoebe were unbelievable as young adolescents. "Nobody that I know who is my age acts that way," responded one young girl after an adult at the table suggested that the interactions between the two young girls accurately portrayed "pre-teen behavior." In this instance, it seems to me that the students serve as the "more knowledgeable others" in the group, and their comments during the discussion provided insights to the adults.

A few students suggested that the intricately interwoven subplots in the story "confused" them or

---

**Several students suggested that although they recognized that there was "a lot to the book," they found it "boring." In contrast, the teachers' reactions to the book were overwhelmingly positive.**

---

made it “hard to follow.” In contrast, several teachers cited the parallel story lines as “the highlight of the book.” One teacher stated, “I was blown away at how naturally the plot lines came together in the end.” This serves as a reminder that it takes a mature reader to be able to keep intricate plot lines straight, and that many younger readers need for teachers to provide support when reading such works of literature.

When setting came up in classroom discussion, one teacher reminisced about cross-country driving trips her family had made during her youth. She commented, “it makes me want to take my kids out west next summer.” However, none of the students referred to the setting during their discussions. Again, given the breadth of life experiences of the adult readers, perhaps they had more insight to offer into the discussion of this aspect of the book. On the other hand, the young people in the group had more insight into an adolescent’s view of grandparents, giving them the role of “more knowledgeable other” during that portion of the discussion.

**Karen Cushman. *The Midwife’s Apprentice*. HarperTrophy. (1996 Newbery Award)**

*Alyce, a young homeless girl in Medieval England, makes her way from a dung heap to serve as an apprentice to an ornery, mean, snaggle-toothed midwife. When Alyce is not successful as a midwife’s apprentice, she gives up and runs away. However, after spending time cleaning the house of a kind woman, Alyce realizes that she wants more independence and decides return to the more rewarding world of midwifery.*

This book was the most difficult to gather data on. Few teachers chose to teach it in their classrooms, and response to the book in the faculty-student book clubs was lukewarm. A couple of teachers felt the book was “trite” and “not true to the time period.” Students in the group were quiet during the discussion and felt that the book was “just ok.” Interestingly, students in one class discussion seemed more interested in the adult character of the midwife than in young Alyce. One student commented that the midwife “seemed so mean to Alyce, but she praises her when she doesn’t know that Alyce is listening. I think she is sort of jealous of Alyce but she is also proud of her.” This insight into an adult character was unusual among the

discussions I recorded. Two teachers, on the other hand, were captivated by Alyce’s persistence and insight as she thought about her future. One commented, “It was as if

[Alyce] understood that her life as a housewife or cleaning woman would be comfortable, but that she would not have any freedom. Despite her humble beginnings, she had high aspirations for her life. Even after she is immature in running away, she makes a very mature decision to return

to the midwife.” It was interesting to me that the teachers seemed to be more drawn to the young character, while the students focused more on the adult in the novel.

*The Midwife’s Apprentice* did lead to some animated discussions among students about the treatment of the homeless in today’s society. This was a good demonstration of the students’ ability to see beyond the plot of a story set in Medieval England and to make connections to the world in which they live. The discussion of homelessness was generated by a student with the comment, “This morning on the way to school I saw a homeless woman and her little girl on the subway asking for money. Because I’m reading [this book] I looked at her different than I usually do when I see [homeless people]. I imagined what it would be like to be homeless. I mean at least that little girl [on the subway] has a mother to take care of her.” The teacher was moved by the student’s thoughts and suggested that the class consider a fund raiser to provide money or food for a nearby homeless shelter. In this case, the voice of the student motivated the teacher to take action.

**E.L. Konigsburg. *The View from Saturday*. Antheneum. (1997 Newbery Award)**

*This book tells the story of a diverse group of unpopular sixth-graders who are chosen by their teacher to be on the Academic Bowl team. It is filled with surprises as the reader learns about each of them, their families, and their teacher. The excitement builds as the big day of the competition nears, and the*

---

***The Midwife’s Apprentice* did lead to some animated discussions among students about the treatment of the homeless in today’s society.**

---

---

**Probably the most common comment from the students was similar to the following, made by Paulette: “I just couldn’t identify with the characters. Nobody seemed real to me. Sixth graders don’t act and talk like that.”**

**In contrast, several teachers cited the “believability of the young characters” as a strong point of the book.**

---

KNOW they are not like that in real life!” [Emphasis added.] Probably the most common comment from the students was similar to the following, made by Paulette: “I just couldn’t identify with the characters. Nobody seemed real to me. Sixth graders don’t act and talk like that.”

In contrast, several teachers cited the “believability of the young characters” as a strong point of the book. A good bit of time during one discussion was focused on this issue of the believability of the young characters. One girl (demonstrating her comfort level at discussing the books with adults) suggested, “maybe that is how you would *like* for us to be, but I really do not think many of us are like that.” The ensuing conversation indicated that the adults in the group recognized that the young people were the “knowledgeable others” and the teacher who originally made the comment, demurred to the students’ point-of-view. One teacher actually said, “I guess you guys know more than we do about how kids act when they are outside of class.”

Both students and teachers reacted to the themes

*students face the intimidating seventh- and eighth-grade teams.*

Most of the students and the teachers who read this book did not respond favorably to it. The criticisms of both groups are exemplified by the following student comments. “It moved so slowly” and “BORING—nothing ever happened.” A number of the students indicated that they did not like the author’s writing style, suggesting that “she described everything and everybody to death.” The students had a great deal to say about the adolescent characters represented in the book. “Those kids were not at all real. I mean I’m not a nerd, but I

of community, friendship, and adolescent angst that form the “center of the book.” One student said that even though she did not like most of the book, she “admired the way the kids stuck together. I wish I had a tight group of friends like that.” This comment led her teacher to respond, “I guess we have the same issues—it is nice to see a group of peers who work together and stand up for each other. That doesn’t matter if you are twelve or thirty years old.”

**Karen Hesse. *Out of the Dust*. Scholastic. (1998 Newbery Award)**

*In her journal, using poetic free verse, Billie Jo tells of her life in Oklahoma during the Depression-years Dust Bowl. Her mother dies after a gruesome accident caused by her father’s leaving a bucket of kerosene near the stove. Billie Jo, who is partially responsible for the horrible accident, sustains injuries that seem to bring to an end her dreams of playing the piano. Life with her uncommunicative father after her mother’s death is not always easy, and she yearns for relief from the memories and from the ever-present dust which oppress her.*

When discussing or writing about *Out of the Dust*, students most often focused on the events that occur in the novel. Several wrote about the horror of reading the scene in which Billy Jo throws kerosene on her mother (thinking it is water). One boy said, “I don’t cry reading books, but when I read that—I got tears in my eyes. That must have hurt so bad.” Several students expressed their pathos for Billie Jo, suggesting, for example, that “it must have been horrible having a life like hers.” A couple of students indicated that although the beginning of the story did not interest them, they later “got into it.” One student stated, “it picked up toward the middle, and ended up being a book I could not put down.” Several of her fellow classmates concurred.

Likewise, teachers’ reactions to this book were overwhelmingly positive. However, unlike those of the students, the primary focus of their initial reactions was on the author’s style. A group of two students and four teachers agreed that when they first saw the poetic format of the book, they anticipated that they would not like it. However, three agreed that Hesse’s use of the poetic form of free verse was the aspect of the book they admired most after reading it. “It hardly

seemed like a novel, but it wasn't really like poetry either," observed one student. Agreeing strongly, her teacher stated, "I kept saying to myself, 'this is really amazing.' It's *both* poetry and novel and *neither* poetry nor novel at the same time."

Another aspect that both students and teachers agreed was "amazing" was the way that Hesse used language to capture reality of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl. One teacher commented, "I kept feeling like I had dust and dirt in my mouth. You could literally taste it. I've never read a book that captured the setting so vividly for me." Students, in contrast, suggested that this aspect was overwhelming: "I got tired of reading about dust. No place is that dusty." A social studies book club group served in the role of "knowledgeable other," and explained to the children (and an adult or two) about the geographic/climatic phenomenon of the dust bowl that coincided with the economic devastation of the Great Depression.

In general, teachers and students agreed that *Out of the Dust* was an excellent book. Two students suggested that they had never heard of the Dust Bowl, and had never read anything like *Out of the Dust*, but were glad they had the opportunity to read it. One teacher commented that, "Even though none of us lived through the Depression or Dust Bowl, we sure can get an accurate picture of what it was like during that time." A number of teachers associated the book with *The Grapes of Wrath*, a literary work that few of the students had ever heard of.

**Louis Sachar. *Holes*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux. (1999 Newbery Award)**

*When Stanley Yelnats is wrongfully convicted of theft and sentenced to time at Camp Green Lake Juvenile Correctional Facility, the camp warden forces him and his fellow inmates to dig holes under the hot Texas sun in order to, as she puts it, "build character." In reality, the evil warden is using the boys at the camp to uncover a Wild West outlaw's hidden treasure. As he matures and comes to be his own person, Stanley discovers his future and his past as he learns of a generations-old family curse.*

"I found myself really pulling for Stanley," one sixth-grader said. "He was such a likable character." Several teachers nodded in agreement. "I often find myself pulling for the underdog," commented one of the

teachers. Indeed, adults and young readers of *Holes* seem to have strong reactions to the protagonist of the novel, Stanley Yelnats. During the discussion, the book club participants focused on elements of character and theme as they lauded Sachar for developing a character so well and for showing how he grows and changes in the face of adversity. This happened time and again in classroom discussions of the novel, which is a popular core novel for the sixth grade.

"I thought the story was really exciting, from start to finish," said a sixth-grade boy who later said he identified with Stanley in his struggle to like himself.

Like *Walk Two Moons*, *Holes* has dual plots that come together only in the final pages of the book. Several students named *Holes* as their favorite book. The only negative comment made by one adult about the book was that, "it was a fun read, but did not seem to have much of a theme. I guess that is okay—some books are just for pleasure reading, but I don't think they should win the Newbery." In reply, Terry, a sixth-grader who proved to be one of the "more knowledgeable others" in the group, shared this story.

Two summers ago, I had to go to summer school because I didn't do any work during the regular year. It wasn't a juvenile jail, but it feel like it to me. One girl in my class wanted me to goof off and to never do any work and try to make the teacher mad. I wanted to pass so I wouldn't get held back. I think I was like Stanley, and because I hung in there, I passed. I did great in fifth grade last year, and now I'm in this book club. So I think the book did deserve to win, because it shows that hard work pays off.

The teacher "stood corrected."

**Christopher Paul Curtis. *Bud, Not Buddy*. Random House. (2000 Newbery Award)**

*Bud Caldwell has survived many challenges in his ten years—abusive foster parents, poverty-filled Hoovervilles that popped up during the Great Depres-*

---

**During the discussion, the book club participants focused on elements of character and theme as they lauded Sachar for developing a character so well and for showing how he grows and changes in the face of adversity.**

---

sion, and most devastating, the loss of his mother. Driven by his hunch that a famous musician, Herman E. Calloway, is his father, Bud goes on a mission to find this man in hopes of regaining a sense of family.

This novel appealed greatly to both adolescents and adults. After it was a book club selection in early 2001, the book became a core novel, read and discussed in many seventh-grade English classes in both middle schools. Adolescent readers felt a real bond with Bud Caldwell, even though most of them were unfamiliar

---

**Adolescent readers felt a real bond with Bud Caldwell, even though most of them were unfamiliar with the hardships of his life. . . . Teachers, on the other hand, reacted to Bud in somewhat patronizing ways.**

---

with the hardships of his life. "I want Bud to be my friend. I want to take him in and take care of him," one young reader commented in class. Another commented, "I totally get his sense of humor. Those sayings of his [the novel is filled with the philosophical musings of young Bud] crack me up. But they are so true. I mean that kid knows what he is talking about and he is only ten." Indeed, in over six classroom discussions I observed, students were eager to share their

thoughts on the protagonist of Curtis's second novel. Many connected with the young character on many levels. One young man opened up to his class about his own experience of losing his mother in South Carolina and having to move to New York to be with a father he didn't know very well. Teachers, on the other hand, reacted to Bud in somewhat patronizing ways. While most found him to be a likeable kid, they were critical of the literary character, convinced that he was "far too wise for a ten year old."

A couple of teachers in the book club group were concerned that Christopher Paul Curtis made light of the Great Depression in the novel. "I'm not sure how I feel about the humorous tone he uses in a book that portrays such a devastating time in our history," one teacher complained. A student in the group piped in, "I don't know much about back then, but I sometimes make jokes when things are really [tense] to make

things not seem so bad. I think Bud had to be funny to get through all of the things he did in the book." After a moment of silence, I barely heard the teacher's murmured response to a colleague sitting next to her: "Out of the mouths of babes." Again, this was a clear case of an open discussion when both teachers and students held positions of authority in the discussion, but where students seemed to shine as "more knowledgeable" (and perhaps more wise) than the adults in the group.

## Lessons Learned

Louise Rosenblatt urges readers not to think of reading as a passive act but as an active one to which they bring their own personal prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs. Thus, *each* reader within a reading community, including adults and young people, responds to literature for young people in different ways at different times. Adults often have a very different set of life experiences to draw on when reading a text, giving them different insights into that text. Does this always make them the "more knowledgeable others" when discussing literature with young people? Not necessarily. For if children's and adolescent literature as genres are defined as literature written for and about young people, then young people may, indeed, serve as the "more knowledgeable others" when discussing the experiences of young characters in literature with the adults in the community of readers. My research suggests that sometimes adult and young readers have similar responses to a work of fiction, while at others their responses may be very different. With this in mind, teachers should consider the three lessons I learned from my examination of adolescent and adult responses to literature written for young people.

1. *Listen to the voices of students when selecting literature to read with adolescents.* When selecting literature to read with their students, teachers should recognize that what *they* value in a text may not always be in sync with what their young students value. Therefore, teachers should not only pick literature that *they* like to read, but also include works to which the reactions of the young people in their class (or prior classes) have been favorable. The number of students who volunteered to give up a lunch period to discuss these books

with a group of adults indicates that they can be motivated when reading adolescent literature. While some of the students in our groups were high achievers and indicated on the survey that they were voracious readers, others who struggled in school and said they “rarely read for pleasure” volunteered to participate when they heard that we were focusing on literature that they could relate to and about which they had something to say. With this in mind, teachers should regularly provide young people in their classrooms the opportunity to read and discuss literature that is written primarily for and about young people. This is not to say that works of classic literature should be ignored; rather, there is room for a literature from a wide range of genres in the curriculum.

Student response to these seven books suggests that literature that has been deemed “distinguished” by being named Newbery Award or Newbery Honor Books do seem, in general, to appeal to many young readers. However, teachers need to recognize that there is no book that *all* students, *all* teachers, indeed *all* readers will agree upon as being “the best book I have ever read.” When attempting to foster both efferent and aesthetic responses to literature, it behooves teachers to allow young adolescents to read books written for and about young people. While the Newbery Award is one benchmark for teachers to consider when selecting literature for classroom libraries, book clubs, or even books for whole class study, they should also seek out lists of outstanding books generated by young readers (e.g. reviews such as IRA Young Adults Choices, IRA Children’s Choices; State-by-state Awards as found in Children’s Book Council, 1996). In addition, teachers should remember that because non-linear plots, such as those in *Holes*, *The View from Saturday*, and *Walk Two Moons* may be difficult for some young readers, they may sometimes find it necessary to offer more scaffolding and support to readers as they make their way through such texts.

2. *Foster meaningful literature discussions through reader response pedagogy.* When using young adult or children’s literature in the classroom for reading and discussion, teachers should seek and value the opinions, responses, and insights of their students, who in some cases may be “the more knowledge-

able others.” By acknowledging that they have things to learn from their students, teachers can go a long way toward creating a real “community of readers” in their classrooms. When students first joined the faculty book clubs, their comments were often very limited. However, as the adults in the group encouraged students to respond by giving value to their responses, students quickly became much more involved. I suspect that students observed our conversations when they first joined the mostly-adult group and through our modeling learned to respond to literature taking both an efferent and aesthetic stance. Likewise, when given the opportunity to serve in roles of authority during classroom literature discussions, students were far more engaged than in lessons following the traditional teacher initiation-student response-teacher evaluation

pattern of discussion (Cazden 2001). Teachers who want to foster more active discussions in their classrooms must encourage young people to take both an efferent and an aesthetic stance as they respond to literature, and model these practices. This means that they encourage students to make personal connections with the literature that they read, but they must also teach students to seek meaning from the author through textual analysis.

Likewise, as teachers seek to foster a community of readers who engage in reader response, they must create a classroom environment where it is okay to have an opinion that is different from that of the teacher or other young people in the class. Teachers and young people can have meaningful exchanges about literature, and they can disagree about certain aspects of the literature. This happened time and again during our book club meetings. Finally, teachers need to model probing and questioning techniques that help young people

---

**Others who struggled in school and said they “rarely read for pleasure” volunteered to participate when they heard that we were focusing on literature that they could relate to and about which they had something to say.**

---

to respond to literature from both an efferent and aesthetic stance. It is not enough to say *that* we like a particular character or an author's style, but we must learn to explore the question of *why* we respond as we do. What about the author's craft leads us to the response that we have?

3. *Allow adults and young people to be more knowledgeable others.* Because of their larger wealth of experience, teachers can sometimes serve as the "more knowledgeable other" in the learning community. We saw that quite often in our book club discussions—the history teacher knew about the Dust Bowl represented in *Out of the Dust*; a teacher who had lived in a small town had insight into the setting of *Wrinker*. However, because the childhood or adolescent experiences of young

people are more recent, and more closely related to those of the characters in the literature, they too can serve as the "more knowledgeable others." Several times the young people in the group demonstrated knowledge about the adolescent characters that were represented in the texts we were reading that the adults simply did not have. Teachers should recognize and celebrate this "shared power" and must allow students to have voice and expertise within the

learning community. If book club discussions (or whole class discussions, for that matter) are used as a vehicle to mine the literature and to expand readers' understanding of a work of literature, then a respect for "more knowledgeable others" must be fostered. When adults in our group respected the knowledge of young people, the community grew more closely knit, and the level of discussion moved to a higher level. This was especially clear in discussion of the adolescent characters in *The View from Saturday* and *Holes*.

So, was the comment of the teacher in the lunchroom valid? *Do* the responses and reactions of young people to adolescent novels differ greatly from those of adults? Although my research involved a small group of adults and young people reading and reacting to these seven adolescent novels, the data did shed some light on the answer to this question. Readers, no matter their age, have unique responses to and transactions with works of literature based on their prior knowledge, prior experiences, their purpose for reading a particular text, and even on their frame of mind when they are reading the text. It is impossible to generalize whether all adults or all young people will respond to a work of literature in a particular way or if their opinions will be predictable. Indeed, after reviewing the data that I collected during faculty-student book clubs over the past three years I can reaffirm Bob Probst's (1998) assertion that, "the actual encounter between a reader and a text is too complex to allow for reduction to a simple formula" (p.126). While it is true that because of their breadth of experiences, adults may bring more (or different) prior knowledge to the reading of a text written for young people, it is also true that that their prior knowledge may be further removed chronologically than that of young people reading the same text. That is, when a novel chronicles the experiences of an adolescent, an adult reader may have more difficulty relating to those experiences, and may have different opinions as to whether the adolescents in the book are "believable." This was the case during our discussion of young characters in several of the books that we read. Does this mean that adults cannot or should not read books written for young people? To the contrary, my research reaffirms that it is crucial for teachers to create situations where they can engage in meaningful dialogue with young people about a wide range of literature, acknowledging that both groups bring unique experiences to, interpretations of, and reactions to the reading of the text. When this happens, a true community of readers is formed, and both adults and young people in that community learn from the experience.

*Marshall George is an Associate Professor of English and Literacy Education in the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University in New York City. Marshall has taught*

---

**However, because the childhood or adolescent experiences of young people are more recent, and more closely related to those of the characters in the literature, they too can serve as the "more knowledgeable others."**

---

English language arts in grades 7–12 and has served as literacy coach, staff developer, and department chair in various schools in the NYC area. He is an active member of ALAN and on the executive committee of the Conference on English Education.

### Works Cited

- Bleich, David. "The identity of Pedagogy and Research in the Study of Response to Literature." *College English* (1980): 350-66.
- Bogdan, Robert, and Sari Knopp Biklen. *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998.
- Brown, Anne L., and Annemarie M. Palincsar. "Guided, Cooperative Learning and Individual Knowledge Acquisition." *Knowing, Learning, and Instruction: Essays in Honor of Robert Glaser*. Ed. L.B. Resnick. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1989. 393-451.
- Brown, Jean E., and Elaine C. Stephens. *Teaching Young Adult Literature: Sharing the Connections*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995.
- Cazden, Courtney. *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning. Second Edition*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.
- Harste, Jerome C., and Kathy G. Short. "Literature Circles: Literature Response Activities." *Creating Classrooms for Authors: The Reading-Writing Connection* Eds. Jerome C. Harste, Kathy G. Short and C. Burke. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988. 191-195.
- Huberman, A., and Matthew B. Miles. "Data Management and Analysis Methods." *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994. 428-444.
- Monseau, Virginia R. "Students and Teachers as a Community of Readers." *Reading Their World: The Young Adult Novel in the Classroom*. Eds. Virginia R. Monseau and Gary M. Salvner. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992. 85-98.
- Probst, Robert E. "Reader Response Theory in the Middle School." *Into Focus: Understanding and Creating Middle School Readers*. Eds. Kyleene Beers and Barabra G. Samuels. Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon, 1998.
- Raphael, Taffy E., & Virginia J. Goatley. "Teacher as "More Knowledgeable Other:" Changing Roles for Teachers in Alternative Reading Instruction Programs." *Multidimensional Aspects of Literacy Research, Theory, and Practice*. Eds. Charles Kinzer and Donald Leu. (43<sup>rd</sup> yearbook of the National Reading Conference). Chicago: National Reading Conference. 1994. 527-536.
- Rosenblatt, Louise M. *Literature as Exploration. Fifth Edition*. New York: Modern Language Association, 1995.
- Wells, Gordon. "Talk About Text: Where Literacy is Learned and Taught." *Curriculum Inquiry* (1990): 369-405.

English Graded Readers. Pearson English Assessment. Exam Preparation. It's been a privilege to recognize teachers who are constantly improving the lives of their students and demonstrating their passion for teaching. Winners are chosen from five different regions - Africa & the Middle East, South America, North & Central America, Europe & Central Asia, Asia & Oceania. How to enter. 5 easy steps - Matilda El Hage, 2019 Pearson English Teacher Award winner for Africa & the Middle East. View our catalogue. Primary.