Theory Into Practice, 50:247–253, 2011
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ISSN: 0040-5841 print/1543-0421 online
DOI: 10.1080/00405841.2011.584036

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Moving Beyond Readability: Considering Choice, Motivation and Learner Engagement

As reading professionals and former middle school teachers, we believe it is essential for teachers to select books thoughtfully, understand the relationship between book selection and student motivation and engagement, and realize the importance of classroom instruction during the reading of literature. Teachers strive to help middle school students be strategic, independent readers. They want their students to successfully read and comprehend a text, think critically about its content, and discuss their thoughts with others. Unfortunately, the current educational climate makes these lofty goals. Often, more assignments are equated to accountability and rigor. We make the argument that in order for students to want to read and comprehend a text, think critically, and be willing to discuss their thoughts, teachers must consider the texts selected, the attributes of motivation, and the kinds of instructional opportunities afforded to students.

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TEACHERS STRIVE TO HELP middle school students be strategic, independent readers. They want them to successfully read and comprehend a text, think critically about its content, and discuss their thoughts with others. They

want their students to be lifelong readers who enjoy books and value the interactions they have with books. Unfortunately for many teachers and students, the current educational climate makes these lofty goals. In the name of accountability, students find themselves reading excerpts of stories and answering multiple-choice questions to prepare for high-stakes, standardized tests. Under the guise of rigor, students find themselves wading through the classics in order to complete assignments and take tests. We know high expectations and rigor are important in middle school classrooms, and we realize the inevitability of standardized testing. As curricular standards continue to push teachers and schools to do more, we worry that classroom instruction falls short of meeting students' needs. Simply assigning harder" texts and more work cannot serve as a proxy for accountability and rigor.

Recently, one of us had the opportunity to sit down and visit with Peter (pseudonym) about the book he was currently reading. Peter is an eighth-grader who attends a parochial school. The male students in this school typically matriculate to an all-male college prep high school located nearby, and the female students matriculate to a local college prep all-female high school. Both high schools have stringent entrance requirements.

Interviewer: What are you reading?

Peter: *The Color Purple*.

Interviewer: Interesting choice. Why did you choose this book?

Peter: It was on the list and it is worth 3 books.

Interviewer: What does that mean, "it is worth 3 books?"

Peter: Longer books count for more. We have to read 10 books each quarter. But some books are longer and harder, so they might count as 2 books or 3 books. So, if I read this book, I only have 7 more. But, I plan to read books that are worth more than just 1.

Interviewer: So, are you choosing the books because you like them or because of their worth?

Peter: I mostly choose them for how many books they count for.

Interview: Oh, so do you like *The Color Purple?*

Peter: It's OK. I think it's pretty good.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about it? It's been a while since I read it.

Peter: Well, I'm not very far into it.

Interviewer: Will you be discussing this book with other students who are reading it?

Peter: No. We don't do that. We just read it.

Interviewer: Will you be discussing the book with your teacher? Like does she have conferences with you while you are reading the book?

Peter: No, we just answer the questions for each chapter. When we finish the book, we hand in our answers.

Interviewer: Then what happens? Does your teacher correct your answers and hand them back? Does she discuss your answers with you?

Peter: No. I guess I get the answers right, I don't really know. She never says anything about them.

A number of issues surrounding this exchange warrant careful consideration and discussion. As reading professionals and former middle school teachers, we believe it is essential for teachers to select books thoughtfully, understand the relationship between book selection and student motivation and engagement, and realize the importance of intentional instruction during the reading of literature.

Text Selection

Peter's comments make it clear that he did not walk into a library, classroom, or book store and select *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982) entirely on his own. Someone at his school, or in his district, managed his choice by placing the book on a reading list. What prompted Peter's teacher, or his school district, to recommend this book to eighth graders? Two concepts, readability measures and text leveling, should be taken into consideration when thinking about this question.

Readability Measures

For many educators, the word *readability* brings to mind calculating the difficulty of a text following a specific formula. Even though a number of such formulas exist, each focuses on two similar measures: syntactic difficulty (sentence complexity) and semantic difficulty (word difficulty) (Allington, 2006; Fry, 2002). For example, to calculate the readability of a text using the Fry Readability Graph (Fry, 1977), the teacher begins by randomly selecting three passages of one hundred words from the text. Next, the teacher calculates the average number of sentences (rounded to the nearest tenth of a sentence) and the average number of syllables overall. Finally, the teacher plots the results on the formula's accompanying graph. The intersection of the points correlates with the text's estimated grade level equivalency.

Similar to the Fry formula, the Fog Index (Gunning, 1952), considers the average length of the sentences in a 100-word passage and the number of words in that passage containing three or more syllables. Again, the focus is on syntactic difficulty and semantic complexity, as readability calculations are objective measures (Fry, 2002). According to the Fog Index, *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982) falls at an approximate fifth-grade reading level. A random passage from the book demonstrates this finding:

> Harpo sit on the steps acting like he don't care. He making a net for seining fish. He look out toward the creek every once in a while and whistle a little tune. But it nothing compared to the way he usually whistle. His little whistle sound like it lost way down in a jar, and the jar in the bottom of the creek. (Walker, 1982, p. 71)

Approximately 59% of the words in this passage are on the Dolch sight word list. This list of sight words, or high frequency words, is intended for mastery by students in grades three and under (McKenna & Stahl, 2009). Based on the passage, there is little reason to expect a typically progressing eighth grader would have difficulty pronouncing the words in this book. Aspects of this text, other than syntactic and semantic difficulty, warrant discussion. Leveling, which is more subjective, focuses on numerous features.

Leveling Criteria

Unlike readability formulas that rely exclusively on quantitative measures, text leveling emphasizes the importance of qualitative features. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) warned, "A text's demands and supports cannot be reduced to a mathematical formula" (p. iv). The following features, among others, impact understanding:

- Content—Is it age appropriate or familiar to that age group?
- Illustrations—Do pictures tell the story or explain vocabulary?
- Length—Are there two words on a page? How many pages are in the book?
- Curriculum—How are levels related to teaching methods or framework?
- Language structure—Does language include repetitious words or phrases, flow?
- Judgment—Are the readers' background and experience appropriate to understand the text?
- Format—How will the type size, spacing, and page layout affect readers' understanding? (Fry, 2002, pp. 287–289)

Discussions about these features and the use of leveled books tend to occur more frequently in elementary settings (Fry, 2002). Teachers of beginning readers must know their students, know the texts, and understand the reading process. Knowledge of these "three interrelated sets of understanding" is critical to the effective teaching of young children, and accurately matching books and readers is imperative for students' success (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999, p. 1). We believe middle school teachers must take these sets of understanding to heart as well. As students get older, the texts they encounter become more complex, making middle school students resemble beginning readers in many ways. They encounter unfamiliar text structures, new text features, and find themselves faced with a vast

amount of unknown vocabulary. To be successful, middle school students must be able to utilize known strategies while expanding their strategic repertoire. They must acquire information from reading, and they must continue to learn how to be successful as readers when faced with challenging texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

No two middle school students have exactly the same reading abilities, nor are they alike in their level of physical, mental, emotional, and social development. In many regards, adolescents are caught between childhood and adulthood (Lesesne, 2003). Today's classrooms are exceedingly diverse, and the range of development can be very broad. Those who are more mature in some areas may be at the early stages of development in others. Like their elementary colleagues, middle school teachers must consider the needs of the whole child and use this knowledge to match the right book to the right reader at the right time (Lesesne, 2003). Consider the following excerpt from an online summary of *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982):

> Celie, the protagonist and narrator of *The Color Purple*, is a poor, uneducated, fourteen-year-old black girl living in rural Georgia. Celie starts writing letters to God because her father, Alphonso, beats and rapes her. Alphonso has already impregnated Celie once. Celie gave birth to a girl, whom her father stole and presumably killed in the woods. Celie has a second child, a boy, whom her father also steals. Celie's mother becomes seriously ill and dies. Alphonso brings home a new wife but continues to abuse Celie. (SparkNotes Editors, 2003)

Although Peter and his classmates are capable of pronouncing the words in this book, not all of them are mature enough to understand issues such as rape, incest, bigotry, prejudice, and the ramifications of such behaviors. According to Rosenblatt (1978), reading is "a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text. The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality" (p. 12). The text is essential, but it is only part of the reading event. It "is merely an object of paper and ink until some reader responds to the marks on the page" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 23). Typical middle school students have few life experiences to bring to a book like *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982), and the dialect spoken by the characters adds to the challenge of accessing the book. For these reasons, comprehension beyond a superficial level is difficult to achieve, especially when there is no outlet for discussion or an opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns. Reading under such conditions is merely the fulfillment of an assignment and does not necessarily constitute engagement (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

Reading Engagement and Motivation

Based upon Peter's comments, we surmise extrinsic motivation, rather than intrinsic motivation, cultivated his desire to read *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982). He did not appear drawn to this book out of curiosity. He did not mention a desire to read challenging text or to experience a book with a complex plot. Peter realized, as many middle school students would, that reading this book gave him an advantage. Choosing *The Color Purple*, a title worth "three books," decreased the total number of books he must read. In Peter's mind, this fact alone made choosing the book his best option.

Although adhering to a list and fulfilling reading requirements limited his choices, the ability to make the final selection is important to Peter's reading motivation and level of text engagement. Several studies reveal this connection. Through meta-analysis, Guthrie and Humenick (2004) examined 22 different studies, experiments and quasi-experiments, and computed 46 effect sizes focused on student choice in reading. They also looked at the impact of knowledge goals, interesting texts, and collaboration on a student's reading motivation. Effect sizes in each category were moderate to high, classifying them as important for improving reading. Of the four categories, the effect size for student choices was 0.95, the second highest result. This indicates it to be "verified experimentally as having a sizable impact on reading motivation" (p. 332). In addition, the authors explained how student choice "should be

viewed as [a] major constituent[s] of any long-term instructional program" (p. 332).

Other research, focused on the relationship between student choice and reading motivation, explored students' reading preferences. In a survey of over 1,700 sixth-grade students, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found students preferred to read magazines, comics, series books, and scary stories outside of school. Results revealed that as much as 25% of the respondents reported an interest in other genres including nonfiction and poetry. These data mirror those of a survey conducted by Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999). When asked about materials read during school, students in the Ivey and Broaddus (2001) study reported a preponderance of award-winning fiction. Nonfiction titles and informational magazines appeared infrequently. Results imply a mismatch between what students prefer to read outside of school and what they must read for school. In light of these results, we question whether requiring students to read a certain number of books from a specific list really constitutes student choice. Without the enticement of receiving "three for the price of one," would Peter have gone into a library or bookstore and selected *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982)? Findings from studies of student preferences indicate this to be unlikely. Extrinsic motivation, rather than intrinsic motivation, prompted Peter's choice.

Choice affects motivation, and motivation, when combined with cognitive competence and social interaction, leads to engagement (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Engagement, Schussler (2009) posited, goes beyond tangible behaviors. Rather, engagement in learning occurs when students develop an interest in and form a bond with a topic that lasts beyond the short term. A "deeper connection" is necessary (Schussler, 2009, p. 115). Intellectual engagement results from classroom instruction that promotes challenge, provides support, and demonstrates relevance. Students want to be intellectually challenged (Sizer & Sizer, 1999) and work in an engaging learning environment (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009), but intellectual challenges must be aligned with instructional support to assure students' success.

Classroom Instruction to Support Adolescent Readers

In classrooms that intentionally promote challenges, teachers support students by facilitating intellectual discourse that mirrors authentic conversations. These conversations encompass the issues, questions, concerns, and needs relevant to students (Alpert, 1991; Sizer & Sizer, 1999). In *Readicide*, Kelly Gallagher (2009) talked about the "chop-chop" philosophy of reading instruction (p. 92). Texts become "chopped" as students find themselves repeatedly stopping and starting, stopping and starting. Marked by overteaching and overanalyzing, the curriculum places a myopic focus on meaningless, irrelevant activities included to fill time and space. Authentic conversations are not a priority. Intentionality and purpose are lacking (Atwell, 2007; Gallagher, 2009).

While on a site visit, one of us had the opportunity to talk with Sam (pseudonym), an eighth-grader who attends a public school. Because of his standardized test scores in reading, he is enrolled in an advanced English class. Based on Sam's comments, his English class appears to be operating under the chop-chop philosophy.

Interviewer: What are you currently reading?

Sam: For school?

Interviewer: For school or at home.

Sam: My teacher assigned *Great Expectations*. We already read it once, but we have to read it again.

Interviewer: That's interesting. Did your teacher talk about why you are reading it a second time?

Sam: Not really. The first time we just read it and answered some questions. This time we have to annotate it.

Interviewer: How do you do that?

Sam: I just highlight stuff and write in the margins.

Interviewer: What kind of stuff do you highlight? Are you looking for certain things?

Sam: I don't really know. She never really told us what we were supposed to highlight or write about. Probably literary devices and stuff.

Interviewer: Have you discussed the book in class? Do you talk in small groups about what you read?

Sam: Kind of, well, not really. We mostly do grammar in class right now.

Rereading has the potential to be very valuable. First, it allows readers to develop familiarity with the text and its characters, setting, and themes. Familiarity gives an added sense of comfort that encourages readers to think at a deeper level and realize the existence of alternative interpretations (Allington, 2006). Paired with good teaching and authentic conversations, rereading has the power to increase reading engagement, allowing students to discover the pleasure of developing a relationship with text (Schussler, 2009; Sumara, 2002). These relationships fuel the fire of intrinsic motivation.

After reading, discussing themes, teaching concepts, and rereading *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) with a group of fifth graders, Sumara, Davis, and van der Wey (1998) witnessed the bond such a process could create between the reader and the novel. Comments by the students revealed the formation of a kinship with the text. Many desired to keep the novel and share it with their parents. For them, the book "had come to represent a cultural object" capable of mediating conversations (Sumara et al., 1998, p. 141). They looked forward to conversing with family members about the knowledge they had gained and the thinking processes they had undergone during the reading events. As a community of readers, they had embraced the opportunity to engage with text at a deeper level and live through its words (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Unfortunately for Sam, this does not seem to be the approach in his classroom. Rereading the text is not presented as an opportunity to develop new insights, nor is it regarded as a stimulus for further peer discussion and reflection. It is simply an additional reading assignment. In this case, the chop-chop philosophy causes *Great Expectations* to be less than great. Gallagher (2009), on the other hand, warns against "underteaching" books. He explained, "simply handing students difficult books and asking them to fend for themselves is not the answer either" (p. 87).

As educators, we recognize that balance between overteaching and underteaching is imperative. Gallagher (2009) referred to this as the "sweet-spot" of instruction (p. 90). Some refer to it as the *Goldilocks Philosophy*: not too little, not too much, just right. Perhaps if Peter were not left to fend for himself, *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982) may have been a valuable book. On the other hand, if Sam were not asked to engage in meaningless, irrelevant activities, he may have appreciated *Great Expectations* for its literary value and timeless societal conflicts and challenges that continue to be encountered today. As Atwell (2007) has explained, middle and high school students are trying to make sense of their world but the version of reading encountered by many "is so limiting and demanding, so bereft of intentionality or personal meaning, that what they learn is to forgo pleasure reading and its satisfaction and, for four years, 'do English' " (p. 107).

Perhaps to achieve the sweet-spot, teachers must begin by being intentional about the texts they select and the purpose for which they select those texts. Upon selecting or recommending a book, we need to be clear how, through scaffolded instruction, our students will become wiser, more knowledgeable, and more culturally literate, as well as challenged and engaged. We need to move students beyond "doing English" to engaging with literature. Students need opportunities to engage in authentic conversations, ask question, evaluate thinking, and make their own judgments as well as appreciate diverse points of view. In other words, they deserve opportunities to engage with text at a deeper level and live through its words (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Although this may seem like a tall order, we don't believe it is. As teachers, we need to know and respect our students and appreciate their concerns, questions, and interests. At the same time, we do not advocate students be provided only with the books they are interested in at the moment. If taught in the sweet-spot, teachers can arouse an interest in books that students might not otherwise select.

Even when individual interest is lacking, effective instruction has the potential to be the catalyst for sparking situational interest. Accord-

ing to Schiefele (1991), "situational interest is an emotional state brought about by situational stimuli" (p. 302). Promoting authentic conversations, encouraging discussion and debate, considering diverse viewpoints, role-playing alternative solutions, and connecting issues to what is current and relevant could be the catalyst for promoting situational interest and ensuring students are not fending for themselves. Middle and high school students are ripe for facing increasingly difficult and often confusing issues. Purposeful book selection and intentional instruction afford students the opportunity to explore these issues. We cannot deprive them of this chance.

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