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“Smarter Than We Give Them Credit For”: Assumptions and Disruptions in a Summer Reading Program

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Introduction

Research supports the claim that teachers’ assumptions about middle level readers can influence classroom practice, including how students are positioned for success—or marginalized—in the ELA classroom (Bintz, 1997; Hall, Johnson, Juzwik, Wortham, & Moseley, 2010; Moreau, 2014). Assumptions are part of teachers’ larger belief systems (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992), which can act as “mental parameters within which teachers conceptualize the teaching and learning process” (Donaghue, 2003). Researchers call on literacy teacher educators to create spaces where such parameters are “disrupted” and teachers’ assumptions about young readers become visible, leading to transformed understandings and actions (Bullock, 2011; Dantas, 2007; Petrone & Lewis, 2010).

Such a space was created this past summer for beginning and veteran secondary literacy teachers who participated in a “Book Buddies” reading program at a local Boys and Girls Club. Each teacher was paired with a rising sixth grader to read whatever text the middle level reader chose (see Groenke, Reece, & Varnes, 2015, for an in-depth description of the summer reading program).

We asked the teachers to write reflective papers about their experiences in the program. In their papers, teachers wrote about the assumptions they made about middle level students at the beginning of the program and reflected at program-end on how those assumptions were either confirmed or disrupted. Predominantly, teachers initially assumed that middle level students would choose texts to read that were “easy,” predictable, or already well-known and that middle grades young adolescents would not be sophisticated readers. At program-end, however, teachers reported that both of these assumptions had been disrupted by the sophisticated interpretive work their “book buddies” were able to do with their text choices. In what follows, we share vignettes of several book-buddy pairs, highlighting the teachers’ assumptions, disruptions, and important insights gained.

Book Buddy Vignettes

Kevin and Jill

Multiple motivations to read. Kevin (all names are pseudonyms) was a preservice ELA teacher who had no prior experience working with middle level students before his participation in the summer reading program. Kevin’s book buddy was Jill, who chose to read books from the Dork Diaries series (Russell, 2009), a seventeen-book series that follows the trials and tribulations of eighth grader Nikki Maxwell, as documented through a combination of text and art. As Kevin wrote in his reflective paper, he initially assumed that Jill would want to read a book in the Dork Diaries series solely because she was already familiar with the series.

This initial assumption was disrupted, however, when Kevin began reading and discussing the first book in the series, Dork Diaries, Book 1: Tales From a Not-So-Fabulous-Life (Russell, 2009) with Jill:

I initially asked Jill why she chose to read the Dork Diaries. Her answer was, as expected, that she had read books in the series before, but hadn’t yet read this one. As I continued to ask this [why] question, the answer began to change. The second time, she said that she enjoyed the book because she could relate to the protagonist Nikki in the novel. Jill could identify with her difficulties—mean girls are at her school, too, and her sister went through something Nikki did: wanting a new cell phone.

Through their collaborative reading and discussion of the Dork Diaries book, Kevin gained insight into important reasons why young adolescents choose to read the books they choose. He realized that in addition to prior familiarity with a book series, other motivations...
could drive a young person’s interest in and engagement with a text, including the ability to make personal, “real-life” connections to the text. As he wrote in his paper, “[M]iddle grade readers] choose books with the same complexity that adults choose books to purchase and read.”

“Smarter than we give them credit for.” In addition, Kevin initially assumed that “middle-grades students would not understand some of the higher thinking skills necessary to access certain books.” This assumption was also disrupted as Kevin read the Dork Diaries book with Jill. Kevin wrote in his paper that, as they continued to read together, “we uncovered a more sophisticated reading. The plot started to reveal itself and Jill started to notice moments during the text when the protagonist was being a ‘chicken’ or a ‘champion’ in the book, which we started to track as we read.” This insight ultimately led Kevin to have a newfound respect for middle level students as readers and thinkers. He wrote, “[K]ids are smarter than we often give them credit for. They can track theme better than I could at their age.”

Indeed, as Kevin realized, Jill demonstrated one of the hallmark skills of what Hall, Burns, and Edwards (2010) call “disciplinary literacy,” which in the language arts classroom includes the ability to “[analyze] . . . texts for themes and patterns to understand language and society” (p. 16). As Hall, Burns, and Edwards (2010) suggest, disciplinary literacy is a move “beyond simple comprehension” toward interpretation—“the highest level of ELA activity” (p. 24).

Robin and Ralph

“Struggling” readers want “easy” books. Robin, an experienced reading specialist, also made some assumptions about her book buddy, Ralph. Robin drew on her previous experiences working with high school struggling readers in making some assumptions about Ralph. Robin wrote in her paper:

The majority of students I’ve worked with had a learned helplessness with the idea that they would never become successful readers. When given opportunities to choose their own books, they instantly went to the smallest books. These students also initially tended to be attracted to books that had become movies and/or books that were well-known in middle school. When asked why they chose these books, the common reply was that they were easier to read.

Before Robin began working with Ralph, she “assumed the same would be true for Ralph,” since he was participating in the summer reading program. Thus, Robin positioned Ralph as a struggling reader before she met him. As such, she assumed Ralph “wouldn’t know what type of book to choose . . . and I expected him to find something easy that he might have already read.”

No easy way out. As a result of her initial assumptions about Ralph, when Ralph chose to read Diary of a Wimpy Kid (Kinney, 2007), Robin assumed this choice was “his easy way out” because Ralph had already seen the movie. But like Kevin, Robin’s assumptions were disrupted through the interpretive work Ralph did with the text:

I was wrong. When we were reading Diary of a Wimpy Kid, [Ralph] would comment throughout about how the book was different from the movie. He knew exact scenes that he could compare and was showing deep, critical thinking during these discussions. He enjoyed being able to critique the differences between the two mediums, and we would discuss why we thought the differences were made in the movie. This allowed for some great conversations!

Robin and Ralph

“Smarter than we give them credit for.”

Pairs of students respond to literature alternately in shared journals, responding to group read-alouds, independent reading, literature circles, or any instance that pairs of students are exposed to the same texts. After introducing the concept of literature response journals, the teacher models a basic exchange. Students brainstorm possible generic prompts for their journals, then practice an exchange with their partners. As students begin using the journals, mini-lessons are presented on responding to prompts, creating dialogue, adding drawings, and asking and answering questions. Students can choose their own partners, or partners can be teacher-assigned so that less proficient and more proficient writers can be paired.

http://bit.ly/1Mia0cq

Lisa Storm Fink

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The ability to make and analyze intertextual connections between books and movies is a sophisticated interpretive skill, often defined as **intermediality**, or the ability to “critically read and write with and across varied symbol systems” (Semali & Watts-Pailliotet, 1999, p. 6). Lenski (1998) suggests that expert readers use intermediality “more or less consciously to construct rich meanings from single texts” (p. 74). Ultimately, as Robin realized, “reading” the book version against the movie version (and vice versa)—as Ralph wanted to do—allowed Ralph to deeply consider the stor(ies) of *Diary* in ways that went beyond simple comprehension.

Karen, Tony, and Allie

No graphic novels. Lastly, another preservice ELA teacher, Karen, who had no prior experience with middle level students before the summer program, also made some implicit assumptions about the kinds of books young adults read. In her reflection, Karen wrote that before the summer program she “imagined having a classroom library full of the ‘classics’ . . . great novels that I studied throughout high school and college.” But her book buddies, Tony and Allie, wanted to read graphic novels—a genre Karen had not ever read before. Karen reflected: “My book buddies huddled over all the graphic novels. I never thought to include those in my classroom library because I had never read them.” As a result of her work with her book buddies, Karen came to a different conclusion about the kinds of books she would have in her future classroom: “Now, in addition to the works that traditionally hold value, I will include books that carry a different kind of value.”

“My buddies taught me to see this.” Also, like Kevin and Robin, Karen gained insights into the sophisticated, multimodal interpretative processes her book buddies were capable of as she read graphic novels with them. Karen wrote in her reflection:

An especially unique part of reading graphic novels was that the kids meticulously “read” the pictures. I have never read a graphic novel before, so I would read the text then skip over to the next page to continue reading. The kids made sure I would slow down and look at the pictures. Allie was able to use the pictures as context clues to learn new vocabulary. She learned about “locus” when she saw a swarm of them chasing the characters in *Bone*. Tony saw how “evil” Sinister actually was when he found a picture of Sinister dismembering one of the mutants. I did not realize how valuable pictures can be in instruction until I took the time to see the amount of detail in each frame. The facial expressions, color, and even the shapes of the speech bubbles could add meaning to the story. It was the perceptive nature of my buddies that taught me to see this.

Ultimately, Karen’s experience with her book buddies challenged initial assumptions she held about graphic novels and young people’s reading abilities. Karen wrote in her reflection, “I guiltily believed that high school students were superior learners, but these students helped me realize that even young people are capable of critical thinking.”

Implications

**Engagement and Critical Thinking Go Together**

What becomes clear to us, summer after summer, as we work with young readers and let their book choices and interests guide us, is that reading engagement does not have to be separate from the sophisticated, critical thinking we want readers to do with texts. As Jill and Ralph taught us, their familiarity with a book series and movie adaptation were the starting points—not end points—for the rich interpretative work they ultimately did with the texts. Jill and Ralph got to this “high level of ELA activity” (Hall, Burns, & Edwards, 2010) because they were engaged with the stories.

With the rise of new standards that call for more text complexity and reading rigor, we must keep in mind that intellectual rigor can occur with *any* text (Beers & Probst, 2012). As we see time and again in the summer program, young adolescents often get to the intellectual rigor we hope for on their own when they read choice texts because they are excited about and engaged with the texts they are reading.

**Why These Books Are Good For Readers**

In addition, we shouldn’t ignore the research that provides insights on why young people might choose series books, graphic novels, and book-to-movie adaptations to read when given opportunities to choose. McGill-Franzen and Botzakis (2009) suggest the repetition of language in series books helps develop reading fluency and automaticity, and series books sustain narratives—and thus reader involvement—over multiple books. We imagine books with movie-tie-ins might be popular for similar reasons.

In addition, as Karen learned, the images in graphic novels and hybrid text/art books like *Diary of Wimpy Kid*...
and Dork Diaries may help readers make inferences and gain contextual information and thus better comprehend what they are reading (McGill-Franzen & Botzakis, 2009).

Interrogating “Systems of Reasoning”

Finally, we see the need to heed Petrone and Lewis’s (2012) call to encourage teachers to consider the larger “systems of reasoning” that their assumptions about young people, teaching, and learning are embedded in. Petrone and Lewis suggest that teachers’ beliefs about and experiences with adolescents are always “mediated and produced” by discourses about adolescents that “authorize how young people are known and acted on” (p. 256). Ultimately, we wonder: where do beliefs that middle-level readers can’t do “higher-level” thinking come from? Where do negative assumptions about the kinds of books young people choose to read come from? What larger discourses inform the ways we position middle-level readers, both in and out of classroom spaces? And what might be ways to disrupt these larger discourses if they carry the potential for harmful practices? These are questions we will continue to pursue as our experiences with middle level readers—and teachers willing to consider the assumptions they bring to teaching and learning—show us disruptions to limiting “mental parameters” are possible.

References


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