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Reading Democracy: Exploring Ideas That Matter with Middle Grade and Young Adult Literature

Wolk explores how a wide range of middle grade and young adult literature can be used to teach caring and critical readers in a democratic classroom environment.

Let's begin with Chris Crutcher's terrific young adult novel *Deadline*. Ben is a high school senior and has been told by his family doctor that he is terminally ill and has a year to live. Being 18 years old, he orders his doctor to keep this secret. He decides that he wants to live his last year on his terms. One important part of that final year is the civics project he has chosen to do for school: to get a street in his white town in Idaho named after Malcolm X. Ben also begins to challenge his history teacher during class, questioning the "official" and sanitized version of history that he teaches, resulting in heated debates during class. When his teacher tells him to choose a different civics project, Ben refuses.

In an entirely different genre, Patricia McCormick's remarkable historical novel, *Never Fall Down*, tells the story of Arn Chorn-Pond's survival as a child during the horrific Cambodian genocide of the Khmer Rouge. At the end of the book, many years after Arn has been adopted by an American and is in New York giving his first speech about his experiences in Cambodia, he explains that he was finally able to cry: "The paper I hold, big splash of water on it, the word now dripping off the page. And my voice now, my careful American voice, it crack and break and die in my throat. Never have I cry, not one time, all these year. From eleven-year-old kid till now, not one tear. So many year, I think I kill off all the tear inside me. But after this long, dry season, now finally the rain" (210).

Or how about yet another genre, this time Neal Schusterman's dystopian novel *Unwind*. It is

the future and there has been another American Civil War, but this time it was over abortion. They settled the war with the new "Bill of Life," which outlaws abortions but allows "retroactive abortions," meaning parents can have their child's body "unwound"—that is, taken apart—and donated to other people. Three teens on their way to be unwound escape and are on the run.

Besides stellar writing, intriguing stories, and identifiable characters, what do these books have in common? All of them can be used to teach for a caring and critical democracy. These books resonate with vital themes and issues that are central to our democratic society. Inside these stories, and countless others, are the endless opportunities for teachers to have their students inquire into topics and issues that redefine the aims of school and cultivate reading as a truly purposeful and social experience. No longer are students simply reading a book to become better readers or pass a test. They are using those books to inquire into important ideas that matter to adolescents, society, and the world.

Why Go to School? Why Read?

One of the primary aims of our schools is supposed to be to educate children and young adults to be caretakers of our fragile and complex democracy. School is the one common American experience with the hope to inspire students to participate in the ongoing pursuit of a more caring and thoughtful society and a more harmonious world. John Dewey wrote that the most vital parts of a democracy are not the "mechanics," such as the three

branches of government, or how a bill becomes a law, or even voting. He believed that the lifeblood of democracy was in the people engaging in daily discussion and debate about the vital issues and questions confronting our lives and the world. In his essay "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," Dewey wrote, "I am inclined to believe that the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another" (230).

Somewhere along the way our schools have lost this civic mission. They have largely become factories for producing workers and test-takers. The new US education mantra, heard repeatedly in

Our classrooms and curriculums should be life-centered, student-centered, democracy-centered, community-centered, and world-centered.

political speeches and policy statements, says that the purpose of school is "college and career readiness" so we can compete globally. In fact, the US Department of Education's entire mission is this: "to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access" (US Department of Education; <http://www.ed.gov>). Global competitiveness. That's it?

Compare this to Mark Edmundson writing about a central aim of teaching the humanities. In his book *Why Read?* he writes about what he calls our "Final Narratives." He defines them as "the ultimate set of terms that we use to confer value on experience. It's where our principles are manifest" (25). Edmundson argues that reading literature is one of the most significant ways for us to develop our Final Narratives. He writes, "Get to your students' Final Narratives, and your own; seek out the defining beliefs. Uncover central convictions about politics, love, money, the good life. It's there that, as Socrates knew, real thinking starts" (28). Within students' Final Narratives are their core beliefs and values and passions, which influence how they interact with the world and the decisions they make in our democracy.

Rather than being strictly economy-centered and work-centered, our classrooms and curriculums

should be life-centered, student-centered, democracy-centered, community-centered, and world-centered. This is how we truly engage students in learning and intellectual curiosity and arouse them to work to make the world a better place.

When I was in middle school and high school, reading meant absolutely nothing to me. I actually read just *one* book in all of high school, Paul Zindel's classic *The Pigman*. Every other novel assigned to me I fake-read because it was an adult "classic," such as Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, that I had zero interest in reading. *The Pigman* was about a boy like me, so I actually read it. Donald R. Gallo addressed this issue when he wrote that young adults have little interest in reading books about adults. He writes, "I wasn't READY for classical literature when I was 13, 14 . . . 17, 18 I was a typical teenager interested in teenage things. *The classics are not about TEENAGE concerns!*" (34).

Young adult literature may be the perfect medium for teachers to use to truly engage their students in the cultivation of civic habits of mind and explicitly connect these to Edmundson's notion of our Final Narratives, as a way for students to wrestle with and articulate who they are, what they value, and how they want to live their lives. Through these books, the issues are situated in stories that are enjoyable, relevant, and interesting; they open up endless possibilities for students to engage in meaningful dialogue and debate of issues and ideas that truly matter to them and society. Good books bring purposefulness and intellectualism to civic issues, while they also bring—perhaps most importantly—good writing, creativity, and joy to reading and learning.

Many educators assume that the responsibility for teaching democratic participation and social responsibility rests with social studies and history teachers. But the aims for cultivating caring, informed, and critical citizens are discipline-wide. These aims cannot be limited to one small part of the school day and curriculum, but must permeate the whole school experience. Language arts and English teachers have a unique and powerful place in this process. Corinne Mantle-Bromley and Ann M. Foster write: "Language arts teachers are fundamental to the transmission of democracy from generation to generation and more immediately, from school to the larger surroundings in which

our young people live. The knowledge and skills students gain or do not gain in their language arts classrooms contribute to the kind of society they and future generations will experience” (74).

Democracy and Social Responsibility

I like to see these democratic aims of schooling as teaching for social responsibility, which Sheldon Berman defines as “The personal investment in the well-being of others and the planet” (15). Teaching social responsibility expands the ideas of democracy into more specific knowledge, skills, dispositions, and habits of mind. By cracking open democracy and social responsibility we can see more precise ideas teachers can explore with their students. Some of these core ideas include the following:

- caring and empathy
- media and information literacy
- historical knowledge, understanding, and empathy
- global awareness
- the common good
- activism
- environmental literacy
- moral and ethical consciousness
- war, peace, and nonviolence
- government and political systems
- culture, racism, and prejudice
- keeping informed of and discussing current events and problems
- critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making

We are living in the most exciting time for the scope and quality of middle grade and young adult literature. All of the above ideas of social responsibility can be matched to good books. Figure 1 lists some good novels for teaching different themes. In addition to these books, I strongly suggest teachers choose more “popular” books that students would love to read as part of an in-depth inquiry unit, such as the dystopian novels *Rash* and *Uglies*, the fantasy *Elsewhere*, the funny (but serious) sports story *Stupid Fast*, the multilayered *Perfect* written in verse, or the bestselling *Little Brother*, about teenagers illegally held by Homeland Security after a terror-

ist attack. Rather than delegate these books to the classroom library strictly for independent reading, we can design units around them to help students see that within those popular and “fun” stories are important ideas relevant to our daily lives and the well-being of our democracy.

FIGURE 1. Novels for Teaching for Democracy and Social Responsibility

Media and Technology

The Adoration of Jenna Fox by Mary E. Pearson
Feed by M. T. Anderson
Bzrk by Michael Grant
Cinder by Marissa Meyer
The Gospel According to Larry by Janet Tashjian

War and Peace

Tree Girl by Ben Mikaelson
Fallen Angels by Walter Dean Myers
Lord of the Nutcracker Men by Ian Lawrence
Inside Out and Back Again by Thanhha Lai
The Loud Silence of Francine Green by Karen Cushman

Global Awareness

No Ordinary Day by Deborah Ellis
Endangered by Eliot Schrefer
In Darkness by Nick Lake
Trash by Andy Mulligan
Queen of Water by Laura Resau and Maria Virginia Ferinango

Race, Prejudice, and Economic Class

Black and White by Paul Volponi
Tyrell by Coe Booth
Crossing Jordan by Adrian Fogelin
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie
Mexican Whiteboy by Matt de la Pena

Sexual Orientation

The Miseducation of Cameron Post by Emily M. Danforth
Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Saenz
Totally Joe by James Howe
Ask the Passengers by A. S. King
Shine by Lauren Myracle

Historical Understanding and Empathy

Between Shades of Gray by Ruta Sepetys
My Mother the Cheerleader by Robert Sharenow
Before We Were Free by Julia Alvarez
Daniel Half Human by Daniel Chotjewitz
Never Fall Down by Patricia McCormick

Teaching through Inquiry

There is a growing list of educators advocating for combining inquiry-based teaching and literature-based teaching (Beach and Myers; Daniels and Harvey; Friedman; Smith and Wilhelm; Wilhelm). The root word of *inquiry* is *inquire*, which means to question and investigate and explore. Connect this notion to social responsibility and it makes *democracy* a verb—all about *action*. By practicing inquiry in the classroom we are turning that space and that experience into Dewey's vibrant living democracy. Students are engaged in the emotional and messy give-and-take of democratic life, exploring vital issues and questions that truly matter.

Teaching through inquiry reframes a literature unit. No longer is the unit strictly about the book, but rather a larger question that does not have a single correct answer. Kelly Gallagher suggests framing units on classic literature around “anchor questions,” such as a unit on *All Quiet on the Western Front* becomes a unit on the question “Are wars avoidable?”

Democratic participation, at its best, involves daily inquiry.

Jeffrey Wilhelm designed a unit on *Death of a Salesman* around the question, “What are the costs and benefits of the American emphasis on sports?”

A unit with middle grade and young adult books can be reframed around questions as well; for example, a study of the dystopian novel *Rash* becomes a unit on “In a democracy, where is the line between freedom and security?” Sometimes a book has such provocative ideas that it screams to have multiple main questions for exploration, such as Paul Volponi's *Black and White*: “How are race and culture factors in our justice system?” and “Do we have a greater responsibility to our friends or to society?”

An inquiry-based unit does not need to be limited to a main question. We can create a list of guiding or essential questions, sometimes collaboratively with students. In a unit I co-designed with a sixth-grade teacher using the novel *Esperanza Rising* to explore US and global poverty, we had the following guiding questions:

- Why is it important to know history?
- What is historical empathy?
- What was the Great Depression?
- Why are people poor?
- What does *poor* mean?

- Why are there such high percentages of African Americans and Latinos/Latinas in poverty?
- Do we have a responsibility to help the poor?
- What is life like for the poor in the United States and around the world?
- How important is money to our happiness?

Through the unit students explore these questions as a true classroom community of inquiry. We do not want to tell students *what* to think, but encourage them *to* think. High school teacher Phyllis A. Muldoon had a marvelous way to describe her inquiry-based literature classroom; she called it a “brawl of ideas” (34).

Inquiry and Democracy

Inquiry is not just a school thing; it is a life thing. In cultivating lifelong learners and readers, teachers inspire their students to be fully engaged with the world and live a life filled with learning for joy, understanding, and wisdom. Democratic participation, at its best, involves daily inquiry. As people learn and read about the important issues of the day—and as they participate in those conversations advocated by Dewey—they are asking questions, seeking out multiple perspectives, considering possibilities, and (at times) taking their investigations or inquiries further for better understanding and wider knowledge. An inquiry-based English language arts classroom uses good books to engage students in open exploration and investigation of life, their own lives, the human condition, our society and democracy, and the world.

Literary Synergy: Connecting Real-World Resources

We can take our inquiry-based literature units one step further by connecting them to a wide variety of resources from the real world. These include the endless short texts, such as newspaper, magazine, and Internet articles; poetry; short stories; speeches; published letters; studies and reports; and interviews. It also includes non-written resources, such as photographs, movies, infographics, data and graphs, radio news reports, popular music, and the wide variety of videos, from poetry slams to TV news stories to oral histories.

Connecting these resources to books under the common theme of teaching for social responsibility creates what I call literary synergy, which, in turn, creates a dynamic whole by integrating multiple resources and mediums. Reading the informational texts can also serve to satisfy the Common Core State Standards. The dystopian novel *The City of Ember* can be connected to the *New York Times* op-ed piece “Is Your Shopping Cart Killing Songbirds?”; *The Tiger Rising* can be connected to Gary Soto’s short story “Your Turn, Norma”; and *Make Lemonade*, the story of a friendship between two teenage girls, one of whom has two young children, can be connected to a report on teenage pregnancy by the National Campaign to Prevent Teenage Pregnancy.

We can also connect those books to unwritten resources, such as having students reading *Make Lemonade* first read the lyrics, and then listen to and discuss rap singer Lupe Fiasco’s song about absent fathers, “He Say, She Say.” Or while reading the novel *Bronx Masquerade*—about a diverse group of teens using poetry to explore their complex lives—students can watch videos of adolescents and teens participating in poetry slams to express their similar feelings and experiences.

Three Examples

I worked with six middle school teachers to design and co-teach inquiry-based literature units to engage their students in a variety of issues of social responsibility (Wolk). Below are examples of some of the real-world resources we used with these students and some of the writing assignments, activities, and projects they did as part of our units. These units were between three and seven weeks long, and most of the novels and short texts were read as shared reading, with me or the teacher reading aloud as the students followed along in their own copies (Allen). Using shared reading allows teachers to use texts that are above students’ independent reading levels.

Media, Technology, and Self-Identity:
The Adoration of Jenna Fox (Pearson)

Democracy and Social Responsibility

Media and technology play vital roles in our daily democracy. From watching TV news to playing violent and sexualized video games to the impact

of technology and industry on the environment to the technology of war, it is impossible for us to ignore the influence of media and technology on our daily lives. Citizens in a democracy must be critical of the media content they consume. The typical American adolescent interacts with media for nearly eight hours a day (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts). That is *one-third of their lives*. By devoting so much of our lives to technology we must consider what we are *not* doing, such as spending time outdoors and reading—two activities that have seriously decreased as our media use has increased.

Real-World Resources

- We read excerpts from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*.
- We watched excerpts from the documentary *Rivers and Tides* about the environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy (Riedelsheimer).
- We listened to an interview from National Public Radio on different policy beliefs on organ donation.

Writing, Activities, and Projects

- Students logged and graphed all of their media usage for one week.
- Students wrote to the prompt: “How might you benefit if you lived like Thoreau for one year near a pond in the woods without any technology or media?”
- For the final project students had the option of cutting a CD with at least eight songs that defined their self-identity and writing liner notes that explained what each song says about them.

Global Awareness: *Red Glass* (Resau)

Democracy and Social Responsibility

It is ironic indeed that in our 21st-century globalized world Americans seem to know so little about the planet beyond our own borders (National Geographic Education Foundation). Our democracy may be rooted in our own country, but our actions, policies, and ways of life touch every corner of the planet. As citizens we have a responsibility to know how our political and personal decisions affect the world; as human beings we have the responsibility to understand the global diversity of people and

cultures. The more knowledgeable we are of the world, the more we can put our own lives into perspective and develop empathy toward others.

Real-World Resources

- We read part of Joe Sacco's graphic journalistic account of the Bosnian genocide, *Safe Area Gorazde*.
- We watched the videographic "The Girl Effect" about the power of educating girls in poor countries.
- We looked at photographs of a *Los Angeles Times* photojournalist of Central Americans trying to get into the United States illegally on freight trains.

Writing, Activities, and Projects

- Students brought in and shared artifacts that represented their own "beautiful memories," which was an idea mentioned by a character in the book.
- They wrote "six-word memoirs" about their important life journeys.
- Students researched a country they wanted to visit and the class created a "Class World Journeys" map.

Race, Our Justice System, and Friendship: *Black and White* (Volponi)

Democracy and Social Responsibility

Race and prejudice have been dominant themes throughout American history and are at the core of our pursuit for a more caring and just democratic society. By situating issues of race (and economic class) in specific social systems, such as our criminal justice system, it compels us to ask critical questions about our beliefs, values, and assumptions as a nation. Why, for example, do we have such proportionally high percentages of African American and Hispanic Americans in our prisons? Are all Americans treated equally in our justice system? Why does the United States have far more of its citizens incarcerated than any other country in the world? Only by asking questions such as these can we make progress toward realizing our democratic ideals of equality, justice, and integrity.

Real-World Resources

- We read and discussed an infographic with data on the demographics of the US prison population by race and gender in the report "One in One Hundred: Behind Bars in America 2008," published by the Pew Center for the States.
- We watched the HBO documentary *Prom Night in Mississippi* about the effort in 2008 in a high school to integrate separate African American and white proms.


Writing, Activities, and Projects

- Students wrote essays to the prompt: "Explain racism to a space alien who has no idea what it means. Include examples to help them understand."
- For the final project students had the option of working together to write and perform skits portraying what would happen if the two main characters, Marcus and Eddie, bumped into each other five years after the story ended and after Marcus got out of prison and Eddie did not go to prison (for a crime they both committed).
- Students made life-sized cutouts of each character and filled them in with positive and negative character traits as we progressed through the book.

Wisdom and Hope through Good Books

In her work advocating education for a strong and moral democracy, Maxine Greene defines *social imagination* as "[t]he capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, and in our schools" (5). English language arts teachers have a unique role in cultivating that imagination to empower adolescents with the insight and inspiration to help make that vision a reality. A large part of that uniqueness is the remarkable books we can use in our classrooms. Inside those books are the seeds of a better world.

The psychiatrist Robert Coles has written about the special power of reading good books. For many years he has taught a class at Harvard titled *The Literature of Social Reflection*. The Harvard

catalogue describes the class as being about “an examination of selected novels, essays, poems, and autobiographical statements which aim at social scrutiny or at a moral critique of a particular society” (Li). Clearly Coles believes that reading good books and other texts—and excavating their meanings and connections in groups of inquiry—is one of the most powerful ways to develop our moral identities, improve the human condition, and make a better world. In his book *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, Coles writes that in his class “we read fiction in the hopes of doing moral and social inquiry” (xvi). He also writes, “I can still remember my father’s words as he tried to tell me, with patient conviction, that novels contain ‘reservoirs of wisdom,’ out of which he and our mother were drinking ‘Your mother and I feel rescued by these books’” (xii). This is the great hope of having students read literature for social responsibility. These books and their wisdom—immersed in the unique power of young people engaged in thoughtful discussion and exploration—can heal a troubled world and help our democracy to thrive. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Learn more about Patricia McCormick’s historical novel *Never Fall Down* and a number of her other texts in this interview with her from the ReadWriteThink.org *Text Messages* podcast series. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/conversation-with-patricia-mccormick-30947.html>