Keeping Students at the Center of Text Selection

by Sara DeMartino and Anthony Petrosky

Over the last year we’ve been collaborating with teachers in several districts around novel studies and incorporating young adult literature into their curriculum. We’ve been helping to identify readings for students that provide a steady diet of both windows—texts that allow students to see into events and lives different from theirs—and mirrors– texts that reflect students’ cultures and personal experiences.

Last December, we suggested two YA novels to use with the 9th grade students for one of the collaborating Blue Engine teachers (see Personal & Culturally Relevant Reading in the Era of the CCSS for an earlier report on this work). We have been collaborating with two teachers, eight interns, and Ariel Sacks to design and pilot whole novel studies. We suggested books by Matt de la Peña and The Other Wes Moore. The population of Bronx River High School, where we’re working, is 97% minority and largely Hispanic. We thought we were suggesting books that would captivate students.

After discussions with Erick Roa, Senior Director of ELA for Blue Engine, and after his discussions with students about their readings, we decided against them because students wanted to see themselves in books, but they wanted to see themselves portrayed as whom they really are – regular kids trying to get through growing up. They had their fill of reading books that they thought of as depressing, books with characters facing one tragedy after another.

With the students’ help, we landed on a novel, Shadowshaper by Daniel Jose Older, and essays on gentrification. Gentrification is a major theme in the novel. Meg Hutchinson, the lead mentor teacher, along with her interns used these texts and photographs of surrounding neighborhoods to help students explore the gentrification commentary in the novel. When we met with them in their PLC, Emily Walsh and Sarah Hainbach, two of the interns, spoke eloquently about the students’ engagement with the novel and the essays. The texts, Emily said, "legitimized [students] life experiences." Sarah said she saw students make connections between the novel, the photos, an article on gentrification, and their own lives, because, as one of the students said, they "are used to buildings in the Bronx looking like the [dilapidated] one in the photo...."
Text complexity isn't the only thing

We share this story because it highlights a side to curriculum design that is easy to overlook with the CCSS emphasis on text complexity. While we certainly agree that students should be reading rich, complex texts that offer them opportunities to explore compelling ideas with a range of forms and content, complexity isn’t all that matters. Through our collaborations with teachers in districts across the country, we’ve heard many conversations around efforts to identify and use complex texts. We’ve heard teachers and students talk about the problems raised by texts that seem irrelevant. This problem of relevancy to students isn’t new. Historically, curriculum has been a set list of skills and objectives to be obtained, or lists of prescribed books that should be covered at a specific grade (Applebee, 1993). When curriculum is set around these lists, students (and their contributions to classroom discussions) can be easily overlooked in favor of making sure each skill and objective is covered. We aren’t advocating for getting rid of the guidelines and frameworks that drive curriculum development. We are arguing that we can and should consider students’ backgrounds and interests to invite them to have experiences with content that they find relevant and interesting, that motivates them to want to be readers.

Looking beyond the text complexity rubric

We recently came across a series of pictures on Twitter from a pretty large PD session of teachers and coaches lead by Student Achievement Partners. Images were of text complexity rubrics and a list of 10 key features of complex texts. The list ranged from such things as “dense information” to “unfamiliar settings and topics.” It echoed, of course, the CCSS three-part model for examining text complexity: quantitative measures, qualitative measures, and reader and task considerations. Unfortunately, for many teachers working from such guidelines, considerations of readers and tasks have fallen aside in favor of a focus on quantitative (e.g., using Lexiles) and qualitative rubrics. We worry lists such as these, list that emphasize descriptions of textual features, run the risk of leaving students' curiosity and interests out of the mix.

In our collaborations with teachers around selecting texts for instruction, we think about texts both quantitatively and qualitatively as outlined by the CCSS, but we don’t stop there. We think about the texts using questions such as these:

1. Is this a text that will make students want to be readers?
2. Does the text generate intellectual excitement, engagement, and curiosity?
3. Will this text push students beyond their comfort zone?
4. Is it cognitively challenging?

5. Does the text allow students to wrestle with important and complex ideas?
6. Does the text help students to gain knowledge (about language, concepts, events, topics, or themes) worth knowing?
7. Does the text support students to do intellectual work that’s valued by the standards? What is the intellectual work?

As adults, we benefit enormously from conversations with students about what they are interested in, and from creating surveys that invite students to reflect on the subjects that they want to learn and read about and the types of texts they would like to read.

After all, they are the ones who have everything to lose from not being engaged in readings.