Young Adult Literature as Key to Literacy

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Belonging to a group that affirms their self-concept is a powerful motivation to become literate if literacy is a component of the group structure (Morris & Tchudi 60).

The use of language is critical in developing literacy. The more students are able to discuss issues, to talk about what they are reading and thinking, the more they will
devise critical literacy, the ability to interpret, analyze, and explain. As students gain fluency in expressing themselves orally, they will begin to see the need for reading the
text to support or refute a position. They will need to be able to read in order to participate in discussions with their peers-to become part of that literate community.

Another reason young adult literature is a key to literacy is that it has the potential to soften the resistance of students who have decided that they have no need of
literature, or for that matter, no need of school. So many students have built walls of defiance around themselves. They feel that school doesn't meet their needs, and yet
I will never forget the statement made by one of my blossoming readers as she unconsciously discussed characterization with a friend. "You got to be kidding!" she exclaimed
symbolism. However, while students struggling with reading literacy may avoid discussing literary terms and techniques, they can readily engage in a discussion about
understanding the world of the text is so obvious at the college level, how much more important is it for junior high and senior high school students? Young adult literature is
belonging to a group that makes them feel supported in their reading efforts. Finding a story that is like their life, their world, their beliefs, their environment makes them

The criteria, which mirror the world of adolescents are these:

- Young Adult Literature is written from the point of view of an adolescent, reflecting an adolescent's interpretation of events and people.

- The plot and characters reflect the experiences and interests of young adults.

- The language used is appropriate and familiar to young adults.

- The themes and issues are relevant to the lives of young adults.

- The setting and culture are familiar and relevant to young adults.

Why is it important to choose literature that mirrors the adolescent world? Paulo Freire's work (1973) with "illiterates" in Brazil explains why. He discovered that if he could
begin by entering the world of those with whom he was to work, discovering the realities of their world, finding out what they needed to know in order to become literate, he
was able to make acquiring literacy relevant to the Brazilians he was trying to help. In his book,

Finally, the genre of young adult literature is "user friendly," to borrow a term from technology. The vocabulary used in these books is not prohibitive. A student who certainly
doesn't see the need for vocabulary lessons can refuse to look up words and definitions and still understand the plot and become engaged in the reading. The texts are
straightforward and easy to follow. Therefore, students who have not become strong abstract thinkers will not be lost in the maze of images and literary forms. Dialogue is an
important part of young adult literature, and the characters speak the way teenagers speak. Even if dialect is used, it is presented in a way that is not intimidating. Students
who struggle with reading will have a better chance of negotiating the text. Students who struggle with the irrelevancy of school will have a better chance of gaining
something valuable from the reading of the text. There is no other genre that is so welcoming to accessible teen readers.
When I think of students who have struggled with literacy, I think of a classic that is a staple in many English classes. The Scarlet Letter was one of my favorite books on the "Suggested Reading List" for junior English. However, each time I taught that great work, I found that my students were resentful of Hester's attempts to protect Dimmesdale. By the time this generation of students reached high school, the issue of unwed mothers didn't carry the shame it carried thirty years ago, and television evangelists had tarnished our view of the clergy. My students were so incensed by Hester's stoicism and Dimmesdale's debilitating shame that they completely failed to relate to the characters with any understanding or compassion. Not only did the realities of the characters in The Scarlet Letter seem unrelated to the realities of my students, the vocabulary seemed foreign as well. Since the story wasn't believable to many of them in the first place, they saw no need to struggle with a vocabulary that was so dense. Being able to read the text with understanding seemed useless to them because they rejected the world of the characters. They had made their own decision about my curriculum choice. The world of The Scarlet Letter was not part of their reality; therefore, they saw no need in working with the novel. I taught the novel, but I'm not sure how many of my students really learned anything that was meaningful to them. How different that unit might have been if we first had read The Pigman by Paul Zindel, The Crazy Horse Electric Game by Chris Crutcher, or The Outsiders by S. E. Hinton? We could have discussed adolescents dealing with the prejudices and hypocrisy of society, fear and guilt, and survival outside one's family and community—all themes in The Scarlet Letter. From there we could have moved to a study of The Scarlet Letter, relating the incidents and themes in that great novel to the young adult literature we had studied first. Rather than being "put off" by the situation in which Hester and Dimmesdale found themselves, the students would have been better able to look at the characters more sympathetically and use the young adult novels as scaffolds on which to develop their understandings of the classic.

But what if, after reading young adult literature, my students still had not been willing to read The Scarlet Letter? Well, perhaps that is a work better left for adult reading. If that were the case, so be it. At least I would have used literature that was more accessible to all of my students so that more of them could have taken something with them from the readings. And if I had done my job well, if I had developed an environment in which my struggling students could make sense of the text and interact with other students in ways that encouraged literacy, then maybe I would have laid the foundation for them to pick up The Scarlet Letter sometime later in their life. After their literary development had progressed to a point where they could understand not only the words but the world of Hester and Arthur as well, then the possibility that they would come to love the novel as much as I do would have been greatly increased. Young adult literature might have unlocked the door to understanding, and therefore to literacy, for them in a way traditional literature never could.

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Works Cited


Reference Citation: White, Elaine J. (2000). "Young Adult Literature as a Key to Literacy." The ALAN Review, Volume 27, Number 3, p. 52-54.