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What Are My Middle School Students Reading?

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As a teacher of eighth-grade writing in a rural, mainly white, Michigan middle school, I became curious about the reading habits of my students. The students are required to have a book to read whenever they come to my writing class so that they have something to do if they finish their work early. Books are available to students through a variety of sources: my personal classroom library, other teachers' personal classroom libraries, the school library, and the local public library. Other sources of reading material include Accelerated Reading and opportunities for students to purchase their own books from book clubs.

I began to notice the limited range of book genre and authors in the students' choices of reading material. This piqued my curiosity and caused me to wonder: Are the book choices I see them making in eighth grade typical of the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students at this middle school? With this question in mind, I decided to create a survey to determine what types of books students preferred to read. I thought that, with a better understanding of student interests, I could broaden the range of authors the students could select for young adult literature.

Based on the record books that students use to check out books from my classroom library and other books they have brought to class, I have recognized six types of books that were

frequently being read. Those book types were thriller, historical diary, humorous, adventure, true story, and fantasy. Several book types were added to the survey to allow for a broader range of student interests.

Survey of Literature

According to an article in *Teacher Librarian*, October 17-23, 1999, an online survey of favorite books conducted during Teen Read Week by SmartGirl.com and the Young Adult Library Services Association with more than 3,000 11- to 18-year-olds responding (59% female and 41% male) showed that among their favorite books during the past year were literary classics such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, young adult novels including *The Giver* and *Bridge to Terabithia*, Stephen King best sellers, and the popular *Harry Potter* series. Mysteries were cited as the most popular type of books among teens, followed by adventure, horror, and true stories (Survey Finds, 2000).

Other than the *Harry Potter* books (1999-2000), Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) was the most recent of the books mentioned in that survey. While these Newbery Medal books were noted as "young adult literary classics," they hardly promote an understanding of today's young adult literature. Today's young adult literature looks more at historical novels and diaries, and problematic situations are quite popular.

Reading Today published a book list titled, "Books that get kids reading." This list included books that have been written from 1997-2000. Teenagers throughout the United States compiled the book list. Of the more than 11,000 ballots that were cast, the top 30 books made up the "Teachers' Choices list" of books to be recommended to students. A sampling of the books mentioned included many historical novels such as *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, A Freed Girl* (1997) By Joyce Hansen, *Witnesses to War: Eight True-Life Stories of Nazi Persecution* (1998) by Michael Leapman, *Honus and Me* (1998) by Dan Gutman, and *Soldier's Heart* (2000) by Gary Paulsen ('Choices' lists, 2000).

Julia Duin of the *Washington Times* states, "'Young-adult' books, or books aimed at readers 12 years old and over, consistently explore themes such as rape, mental illness and murder" (2000, p. 26). My personal classroom library contains a number of books that fall within this type of literature, and my students enjoy reading these books; however, because such content deals with sensitive areas of people's lives, I do require my students to have parental permission before reading these books. Unfortunately, many young adults are experiencing similar issues in their own lives. In contrast, other studies have shown that due to these experiences, the *Chicken Soup* books have become popular.

Sally Lodge, a writer for *Publisher's Weekly*, notes self-help books are also at the top of young adult reader interest. Lodge states: "Grabbing the top two spots are the teen-geared installments of Health Communications' enormously popular *Chicken Soup* series. Written by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen and Kimberly Kirberger, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul II* and its predecessor have together sold more than eight million copies" (2000 p. 32). I have not seen this interest with my students. I have seen some books listed within book club order forms; although, none of my students have ordered any of these books.

Purposes of the Survey

The purposes of the survey were:

- to determine what types of books my students preferred and provide my students with a broader range of authors within these areas of young adult literature and
- to gain an understanding of reading preference trends.

The Population

Out of a Class B rural middle school, ninety-nine students (40 sixth-graders, 21 seventh-graders, and 38 eighth-graders) completed the survey during homeroom. Sixth-grade students have a full year of language arts, and the seventh and eighth grades require one semester of language arts. This eighth-grade schedule allowed students to have a half-hour per day of in-class reading.

The Survey

In the survey (facing page), the students were asked to select their reading preference from a list of book types. They were also asked who their favorite authors are and what they like about their stories. The survey contained fourteen book types: thrillers, diary books, sports, true stories, mysteries, humorous, adventure, Holocaust, Native American, Hispanic, African American, Civil War, fantasy, and science fiction. An "other" category was added. The students ranked types of books in order of reading preference. Another component of the survey asked the question, "Who are your favorite authors?" This allowed students to share their author preferences. The classrooms to be surveyed were selected at random.

The Survey Results

The survey results (see table on page 20) indicate that these middle schoolers have an avid interest in thriller books. Authors such as Lois Duncan (13 students), Stephen King (9 students), and R. L. Stine (14 students) are among the top writers that students identified by name. Adventure books by Gary Paulsen

(26 students) hold a large portion of the student population interest. Although only three students mentioned her by name, mysteries by Caroline Cooney are quite popular, followed by humorous books by Gary Paulsen and Roald Dahl (6 students). In fifth place of the five most-read type of books is fantasy fiction, which has been largely influenced by J. K. Rowling's (25 students) *Harry Potter* series, although C. S. Lewis and Brian Jacques had a strong following.

Survey findings indicate the top picks were thrillers (27 students), fantasy (12 students), humorous (12 students), mysteries (9 students), true stories (7 students), and adventure

(6 students). The authors mentioned by students surveyed were all white. Interest in literature about the Holocaust, Native Americans, Hispanics, and African Americans holds little interest for surveyed groups. All of these middle school students have had a full year of social studies or history. Sixth-grade students cover social studies of the Americas. Seventh-grade students have a full year of world history that explores the Holocaust in Europe during the mid-twentieth century and has an extensive exploration of African cultures. Eighth-grade American history covers the history of the United States from its beginning through the Civil War.

SURVEY FOR READING INTEREST

MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

Age _____ Grade _____ Male or Female (circle one)

The purpose for this survey is to find out what types of stories middle school students would prefer to read. Do you like to read thriller books like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* by Lois Duncan? Do like fantasy fiction books like the *Harry Potter* series? Do you want to read about people your own age playing sports?

Please list between one and fifteen the order of what types of books you would be most interested in reading:

_____ thrillers	_____ diary books	_____ sports
_____ true stories	_____ mysteries	_____ humorous
_____ adventure	_____ Holocaust	_____ Native American
_____ Hispanic	_____ African American	_____ science fiction
_____ Civil War	_____ fantasy fiction	
_____ other (please write a description) _____		

Who are your favorite authors?

What do you like about their stories?

Conclusion

Why is there such a lack of interest by my students in multicultural literature? The school library and Accelerated Reading Lab have had and still have a low interest in books by recognized authors like Christopher Paul Curtis, Walter Dean Myer, Victor Martinez, Joyce Hansen, and Gary Soto.

Short stories by Langston Hughes and Richard Wright are taught in eighth-grade literature class; however, while these men are fine African American writers, they are hardly contemporary authors of young adult literature. They wrote literature aimed at adults. New literature textbooks, *Elements of Literature* (1999) by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, which contains multicultural young adult literature, were purchased for this middle school at the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year. Perhaps this lack of interest is related to poor name recognition by the students to authors

of multicultural young adult literature.

Another possibility may be that much of the multicultural literature that I have read deals with the cultural aspects of the people in the novel but has very little to do with types of books such as thrillers, mysteries, humor, adventure, or fantasy. Many multicultural novels tend toward life struggles as the primary focus. With that in mind, it would appear that students would be even more interested in these books since they look at how individuals overcome some of the struggles in their lives.

Young adult literature looks at life struggles also, but it still provides the reader a certain amount of escapism. Perhaps it is the chance to be drawn into another world that holds these students' interest within the genres of their choice. With guidance on the part of the teacher or media specialist, students can find themselves drawn into another

Order	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	Totals
Type of book						
Thrillers	27	19	10	8	8	72
Diary books	3	5	2	4	6	20
Sports	5	5	7	6	5	28
True stories	7	8	9	6	6	36
Mysteries	9	9	20	11	11	60
Humorous	12	10	13	13	9	57
Adventure	6	13	15	17	16	67
Holocaust	2	3	3	4	6	18
Native American	3	4	2	2	1	12
Hispanic	1	0	2	0	2	5
African American	1	2	1	1	2	7
Civil War	3	2	3	3	5	16
Fantasy Fiction	12	11	6	12	12	53
Science Fiction	2	4	4	11	6	27
Other	6	4	2	1	4	17

world. The historical diaries of Holocaust survivors and books written about early African Americans can provide these students with a look into the lives of young adults who have struggled in ways that they cannot even imagine.

Future Studies

Looking at the survey results raised a few questions in my mind about the types of books that are being offered to my students. What does your personal classroom library or school library look like in relation to multicultural young adult literature? If this survey were implemented in other schools, would the results be similar in urban area schools to what it was in this rural school? What about rural and urban schools in other states?

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