

# “You Got More of These?”

*Re-engaging Adolescent Readers and Writers with Meaningful Texts*  
by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

**O**ur eyes were opened several years ago to the power of meaningful texts when we were teaching a writing class to a group of adolescents. You can imagine how excited these 32 ninth-grade students were to take this semester-long writing course. For 90 minutes every day, our students were put through their paces. Syntax, vocabulary, generative grammar—our students averaged 600 written words per day. Yet the atmosphere was not what you might expect: Despite the 7:30 a.m. starting time for this first-period class, we enjoyed excellent attendance. Behavioral challenges were minimal. We saw students who once defined themselves by their lack of performance become expressive thinkers and writers; one student, for example, used his writing to disclose a physically abusive home environment, and many others wrote earnestly of their struggles with personal relationships, with understanding the war in Iraq, and with dealing with difficult teachers.

What disrupted the conventional wisdom about adolescents and their lack of enthusiasm for school in general and for writing in particular? We believe an important element was our use of the texts of popular culture—graphic novels, anime, internet sources, and music—as tools to motivate and inspire creativity (Frey and Fisher, 2004). Although our class was focused on writing, our students engaged every day with nontraditional texts selected to spark interest and to serve as mentor texts for their writing. We debated content and then analyzed the ways in which artists and writers conveyed their points of view in powerful ways.

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*We knew we were on to something when Anthony, a struggling reader with high social capital among his peers and a reputation as a difficult student, strolled up to Doug one day. (“Strolled” is the word for it, too. Anthony never moved anywhere quickly. That would be so not cool.) We had introduced to the class the work of Will Eisner, known as the man who gave graphic novels their name. As the other students wrote dialogue for a wordless panel from an Eisner story, Anthony casually asked, “You got more of these?”*

### **Engaging Adolescent Readers**

Much has been researched and written about the unique qualities of the adolescent reader, that is, of students between the ages of 11 and 18 who are enrolled in sixth through twelfth grades. Not surprisingly, few of the findings are good news for secondary educators. For example, reading interest and motivation peak in first grade and decline steadily every year after that, with the largest one-year drop occurring when students move to middle school (McKenna et al., 1995). Difficulty with reading usually begins in the elementary grades, when some students fall behind and never catch up. Chall and colleagues (1990) described the “fourth grade slump,” a time when some students, especially those who live in poverty, exhibit a sudden decrease in reading comprehension. Even more troubling is that students who experience this decline in fourth grade are likely to be in the lowest quartile in eleventh grade (Chall et al., 1996).

These secondary students are commonly labeled as “struggling readers,” but they do not all struggle for the same reasons: Approximately 7% of 13-year-olds have serious reading difficulties that significantly limit their ability to understand written text (Campbell et al., 2000). The majority of struggling readers, our second category, are students who can decode efficiently but who do not effectively use comprehension strategies to support their understanding (Loranger, 1994; Paris et al., 1991). The vast majority of struggling readers, therefore, will not improve with a focus on phonics instruction alone. In fact, comprehension-strategy instruction has been found to be effective for the adolescent readers who are struggling most (Gersten et al., 2001). A third

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category of students includes those who lack the motivation to read. Motivation is an important factor in not only the volume of reading, which is important in and of itself, but also in students' ability to comprehend (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

There have been a variety of explanations for the progressive disengagement of adolescent readers who struggle with reading. Some of this disengagement may be traced to the developmental factors that arise as young people navigate the middle ground between childhood and adulthood. Students may lack the requisite literacy skills and strategies that allow them to access the texts that might otherwise interest them. In addition, a significant group of adolescents is alliterate—that is, they can read, but choose not to unless they are coerced. In the next sections, we address each of these elements and provide suggestions for the types of texts that may be used to re-engage adolescent learners in literacy learning.

### **The Role of Adolescent Development in Literacy**

All readers are not created equal, and adolescent readers certainly differ from their younger peers. Their need for autonomy grows as these learners seek to try out the ideas they have been formulating. Worthy and colleagues (2001) call this the adolescent's "quest for independence and control," a phrase that aptly describes the recalcitrant teenager, determined to demonstrate his or her autonomy at all costs (p. 8).

Educational theorist Kieran Egan (1997) describes the learning of children and adolescents as a pursuit to find answers to three kinds of questions.

First, very young children seek to answer questions about themselves and are thus fascinated with the functions of the body and with themselves in general. Hence, we see lots of "All About Me" curricula in the earliest grades.

Second, as learners move into the middle grades, they take the measure of the world, asking how big? How long? How small? How wide? Children at this age are eager to soak up all the curious/amazing/gross facts about the world. They are collectors, and they build their collections of comics, video games, or obscure facts with a zeal that can be breathtaking. Is it any wonder that texts like the

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books in the *Guinness World Records* series [Guinness (2005, 2006)] are such hot commodities with learners at this age?

Third, as they move through middle school, students shift their focus to a third major pursuit that combines the knowledge they have gained from the first two questions into a third question: where do I fit into this world? Having gained a sense of themselves and of the span of the world, adolescents strive to find the niche that fits them best (Egan, 1997). Their eagerness to debate even the smallest issues should be viewed as a means to understand the details, contradictions, and shades of gray between positions and ideas. The problem is that this need to challenge every assumption can be exasperating for adults. At precisely the time when secondary educators are feeling the pressure to pack as much information as possible into courses, they are met with students who have a developmental need to question everything. Hynds (1997) describes “negotiating life with adolescents,” and the metaphor fits (p. 2). Insight into the developmental needs of adolescents should drive text selection in the classroom. Given the adolescent’s need for negotiation, it is wise to incorporate texts that foster critical literacy.

### **Re-engaging Through Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy is “an understanding of how social contexts and power relations work together in and through texts to produce unequal social practices” (Peyton, 2000, p. 312). In particular, critical literacy is the ability of a reader to understand who and what is represented in a text, what bias an author may possess, and how power influences the production of ideas that may or may not represent all viewpoints. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) illustrate the principles of critical literacy that focus on:

- \* Issues of power that promote reflection, transformation, and action
  - \* Problems and their complexity
  - \* Disrupting the commonplace by examining it from multiple perspectives
- (pp. 15-16.)

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Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) described a unit in their English class that juxtaposed hip-hop musical lyrics with selections from the works of English poets such as Coleridge and Donne. For example, they noted that students used the lyrics of Public Enemy's "Don't Believe the Hype" as a way to understand T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." The intent was to move beyond literary analysis, and students in their class discussed the role of the apocalyptic poet's voice in a society. The discussions with students focused not only on the content of twelfth-grade English but also on discussions of current issues and social action.

The contrastable natures of texts can spur meaningful discussions about an author's intent and about the representation of cultures and ideas. For example, a critical-literacy unit that is focused on Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* (1868/2005) and Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* (2004) can encourage dialogue about the expectations and challenges of finding and defining success in American society. Alger's morality tale of hard work, honesty, and good fortune embodied the spirit of the rags-to-riches promise of life in nineteenth century America. Students can compare this influential work with Obama's recounting of his life in the late twentieth century as he sought to accept his identity as the son of parents who divorced early in his life and as he struggled to find success in communities that did not always welcome him. The questions of identity and success resonate with adolescents who are seeking similar pathways. Additionally, these readers can be engaged through debate and discussion about representations of young men in American society as well as about the fairness of the expectations that an older generation places on young people.

### **The Role of Comprehension Difficulties in Literacy**

As discussed earlier, a significant number of students read below grade level because they lack the ability to apply comprehension strategies in order to create meaning. This inability is exacerbated by a pattern of teaching in many secondary classrooms that circumvents the lack of students' comprehension through an "assigning and telling" model of instruction: teachers assign outside reading, then lecture on the content the next day (Smith and Feathers, 1983; Thomas, 1993). As

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a result, students implicitly learn that the content of the reading assignments they failed to complete will be explained in class, lessening their need to utilize their nascent comprehension skills.

Merely holding students accountable for reading assignments is not enough. All readers, not just those labeled as struggling, benefit from purposeful instruction in strategies that aid in comprehension of academic material (e.g., Alfassi, 2004; Dole et al., 1991; Frey and Fisher, 2006). These comprehension strategies include:

- \* Activating background knowledge
- \* Making and revising predictions
- \* Summarizing
- \* Forming mental images
- \* Questioning
- \* Determining importance
- \* Understanding the author's purpose

Effective secondary school teachers use research-based instructional strategies to teach these comprehension strategies, including graphic organizers, vocabulary instruction, reciprocal teaching, note taking, and examples of reading aloud (Fisher and Frey, 2004). These instructional routines become habits of mind for adolescent readers as they apply these comprehension strategies to their own reading. These strategies are best taught when using texts that are within the reader's level of understanding, since the use of texts that are too difficult will have limited effect. It is wise, therefore, to choose texts that are accessible to struggling readers while still possessing content that is meaningful to those readers.

Self-efficacy plays an important role in the life of a reader who struggles. Many students arrive at the secondary level already possessing a belief that they are not good readers and a certainty that they will never become good readers. Years of failure, often formalized through in-grade retention, remediation, and permanent membership in the "low" reading group, have provided them with

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ample evidence for these conclusions, at least in their own minds. A challenge of middle and high school educators is to interrupt this cycle of thinking and to replace it with a series of carefully constructed successes. Stahl (1998) points out that “[p]art of teaching children with reading problems is convincing them that they can learn to read, in spite of their experience to the contrary” (p. 183). Two effective measures for accomplishing these goals include using texts that match students’ instructional levels and making use of their interests in order to provide authentic reasons to read (Margolis and McCabe, 2001). To achieve these ends, educators can look for ways to teach comprehension by using materials other than the traditional texts identified for middle and high school students.

### **Re-engaging Through Nontraditional Formats**

We have had great success in using nontraditional formats (such as graphic novels and audiobooks) as tools for engaging students in the act of comprehension. Many of our students who struggle to read have had little experience with the kinds of understanding that their teachers and their more academically able peers discuss so easily. Consequently, we look for opportunities to reduce the amount of written text initially in order to create the experience of understanding at a sophisticated level. Many of our students have developed advanced comprehension skills for understanding visual formats, such as comic books, television, movies, and role-playing games. Graphic novels afford us with a technique that allows us to use the language of artists to analyze how a story is told in graphic form.

For instance, when using the graphic novel *Fagin the Jew* (Eisner, 2003) with our students, our discussions focus on how we come to understand the story as told in graphic form. Many of our students are surprised that the same cognitive strategies they use to understand what happens between the panels of a strip are similar to those used by readers to infer meaning from written words. Other comprehension strategies we model in this way include:

- \* The use of symbols and metaphors
- \* The use of typeface and font as tools for describing the tone of the speaker

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- \* An emphasis on the importance of dialogue as a means for understanding plot and character
- \* The use of tone and of mood in the piece
- \* The connections made (personal, textual, and experiential)

As students become more metacognitively aware of how they understand, they are increasingly able to apply these strategies to more complex prose novels. We have found that once students notice how they comprehend, they are better able to monitor their understanding; they notice when they have lost meaning, and they then retrace their reading to regain comprehension. Such monitoring applies to both narrative and informational texts.

Audiobooks offer another conduit for teaching comprehension strategies while using meaningful texts. Books on tape provide struggling readers with a model of fluent and expressive reading, especially in the use of phrase boundaries, intonation, and punctuation. As Rasinski and colleagues (2005) remind us, fluency is related to comprehension and remains an instructional priority through high school.

Often these audiobooks are paired with the written text, so that the reader can follow along with the professional reader. For example, a middle school student listening to *The Chocolate War* [Cormier (1974, 2004)] is able to participate fully with his literature circle group as they read and discuss the story. The student then has the added benefit of associating fluent and prosodic reading with the written word.

Cunningham (2000) notes an additional advantageous result of audiobooks in the classroom: “[I]t will be impossible to continue to exclude listening from literacy” (p. 64). The importance of spoken word has always been acknowledged, at least for some portions of the canon such as poetry and Shakespeare. The link between oral and written literacies can further be strengthened through experiences with audiobooks for all readers, not just for those who struggle to read.

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## **The Roles of Motivation and Interest in Literacy**

Not all secondary students who fail to read do so because they cannot. A significant number of students choose not to read even though they can. In particular, their motivation and interest in reading appears to wane with each progressive school year (McKenna et al., 1995). Motivation and interest in reading both play a part in the reading lives of these students.

Motivation can be described as the individual's impetus to read when he or she is not compelled to do so by academic assignments. For many secondary students, reading is not a habit of their daily lives. There have been some efforts that have used various rewards-based programs to encourage students to read daily, but these endeavors fail to address the goal of reading as an independent choice outside of the reward programs, owing to a fundamental flaw in the programs' design. The choice to read independently must ultimately be intrinsically motivated. As adolescents move into young adulthood, they have an increasing amount of autonomy in determining how they will spend their free time. Several decades' worth of research on intrinsic motivation shows that outside rewards do not increase intrinsic motivation (Cameron and Pierce, 1994). While extrinsically motivating programs can increase reading for the duration of the program, they have less impact on developing lifelong reading habits.

Closely related to the concept of intrinsic motivation is the development of autonomy, defined as a sense of independence and self-rule. Notably, adolescence is characterized by the drive for autonomy. The need for autonomy is essential to learning as well. A sense of autonomy has been found to be an important influence on academic outcomes (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Further, autonomy and intrinsic motivation work in tandem (Boggiano et al., 1992). The teacher in a secondary school has a great deal of influence in how autonomy will be fostered because he or she can determine the extent to which students can exercise choice. Several studies have found that teachers who exert high levels of control and who limit student choice undermine learners' autonomy and intrinsic motivation to learn (e.g., Connell et al., 1994; Deci et al., 1981). Thus,

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opportunities for choice and self-selection play an important role in developing a self-regulated desire to read outside of academic assignments.

Student interest is another factor in the choice to read. As adults, we can certainly understand this perspective. After all, it is unlikely that you would be reading this article unless you were interested in the topic. The same can be said for our secondary students. When it comes to voluntary reading, the subject of the text is critical. A book or article that matches a student's interest is more likely to be read. In addition, interest plays a role in comprehension, precisely because the reader is attending to the text more closely. Wigfield et al. (1998) note that "interest is more strongly related to indicators of deep-level learning, such as recall of main ideas, responding to deeper comprehension questions, and representation of meaning, than it is to surface-level learning, such as responding to simple questions or verbatim representation of texts" (p. 77). A book or article of interest is therefore more likely not only to be read but also to be understood.

### **Re-engaging Through Opportunities to Read**

The survey by Ivey and Broaddus (2001) of more than 1,700 sixth-grade students identified independent reading as the favorite school activity. The opportunity to read during the school day has other benefits as well: it is associated with an increase in the volume of reading, which is a strong correlate to reading achievement (Allington, 2001). In addition, the positive effects are not confined only to the more effective readers. Adolescents who were identified as struggling readers identified time spent reading as a valuable activity that contributed positively to their efforts to become better readers (Stewart et al., 1996). Clearly, providing opportunities each day to read texts of their own choosing can re-engage learners.

Free, voluntary reading has been re-energized at our high school through daily and schoolwide sustained silent reading (SSR). Each day, the school stops for 20 minutes as every student and adult reads a text of his or her own choosing (Fisher, 2004). The availability of a wide range of texts, varied in both difficulty and subject, has been critical to the success of this program. Every classroom at

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the school, from English to algebra to physical education to woodshop, is outfitted with texts that have been selected for their appeal. Pilgrien's (2001) meta-analysis of the factors associated with a successful SSR program identified appealing texts as one element, along with the following:

- \* Access to reading materials
- \* A comfortable environment in which to read
- \* Encouragement through discussion about reading
- \* Staff training on principles of SSR
- \* Non-accountability of students (i.e., no book reports or other formal assessments)
- \* Follow-up activities through shared experiences
- \* Distributed time to read each day, not just once a week

Finding interesting texts has been a challenge, and our school has formed a student SSR advisory committee to help identify materials and practices that encourage reading. The students on this committee have been integral to locating popular texts we might not have considered, including magazines and comic books, as well as free materials such as the driver-education manual from the state. These students have also provided us with a glimpse into what is perceived as interesting to males and females.

Much has been written of the differences in reading habits and interests between adolescent boys and adolescent girls. To be sure, there are differences, although the reasons for those variations may be more complex than was once thought. For instance, there has been great attention in the media about the decline in reading interest among boys. In particular, we have heard teachers explain that reading is perceived as a female activity and as such is an activity that many boys avoid. This observation, however, appears to be inaccurate. A recent survey of boys in Canada found that the majority of them reported that they liked to read but that they began to feel estranged from school reading as early as second grade (O'Donnell, 2005). McFann (2004) reported in *Reading Today* that a survey of 14-year-old boys designed to elicit their reasons for not

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reading revealed that 39.3% of them described reading as “boring” or “no fun.” Interestingly, the second most common reason (given by 29.8% of the boys) was that there was no time to read.

Research done by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) on reading and adolescent boys provides a more nuanced look at the unique needs of these learners. In particular, the boys’ interest in the type of text is paramount. The investigators found that many boys enjoyed reading texts that are less commonly sanctioned by the school, such as comics and graphic novels, as well as books containing humor. Appealing genres included science fiction and fantasy, as well as informational texts. Popular books at our school include *Shadow Divers* (Kurson, 2004), the story of the discovery of the mystery behind the sinking of a submarine during World War II, and *The Martian Chronicles* (Bradbury, 1954). In addition, we have added to our growing collection of graphic novels and *manga* each month, since these titles have proven to be among the most popular in our SSR program.

Taking inspiration from Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), a seminal work on adolescent girls, Sprague and Keeling (2001) argue for a “library for Ophelia” where adolescent girls have access to texts told from a female perspective that challenge assumptions about the suppression of ideas (p. 45). Of course, they are not referring to a building but rather to the availability of texts that resonate with adolescent females who are in the process of defining themselves and their place in the world. At a time when the National Coalition for Literacy reports that 85% of teenage mothers possess low levels of literacy, it would seem that this is a wise investment (*USA Today*, 2000). To make certain that female authors are represented in our SSR collection, we have added titles such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Nafisi, 2003); *The Devil Wears Prada* (Weisberger, 2006); and *Dreamland* (Dessen, 2002).

### **Responding to the Challenge: Re-engaging Adolescent Readers**

Improving the reading performance of our youth is possible. Possible, yes, but no one promised it would be easy. In particular, improvement demands that we look closely at who our students really are and at why they struggle. Every student

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who is reluctant to read resists for a variety of reasons. A small but significant portion of the student population lacks basic reading skills that would allow them to decode smoothly, which then interferes with their ability to attend to the meaning of the text. Many more adolescents have these skills in place, but such students have not learned to employ comprehension strategies that make texts come to life for readers. In both cases, these students are not going to be drawn to reading if they are given books designed for younger readers. Providing nontraditional texts (such as graphic novels, music lyrics, and audiobooks), however, can lower the barriers while engaging the students' interest in the subject. A third, silent category of students are those who can read but do not read by choice. Again, paying attention to their interests while providing opportunities to read texts of their own choosing can foster a rediscovery of what reading has to offer.

In addition to noting the positive results achieved by having educators select excellent texts for students, Ivey and Fisher (2006) found that having teachers use universal themes to organize their instruction produced better results. In other words, teachers who focused on ideas and then selected texts that spanned a range of difficulty (rather than focusing on a specific book as the *de facto* curriculum) saw increased engagement and achievement. In addition, Ivey and Fisher noted that the traditional English curriculum can be addressed in multiple text sets and with engaging books that adolescents want to and can read. That's the big idea here as well. Matching students with books and providing them with instruction, where they are, in reading those books makes a difference.

Ultimately, the re-engagement of adolescent readers requires that they discover how meaningful reading can be in their own lives. Given their developmental need to define their place in the world, it would seem that the accomplishment of this task might be only a few good books, graphic novels, songs, or audiobooks away. When a student discovers that the answers to some of his or her questions might be found through reading, you'll hear the words we heard: "Got more of these?" n

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### **About the Writers**

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Suggested Reading...

**Books cited in this article include:**

The Chocolate War

by Robert Cormier

Laurel Leaf, MM, 978-0-440-94459-1, 272 pp., \$6.50/\$9.99 Can.

The Devil Wears Prada: A Novel

by Lauren Weisberger

Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-1476-5,

368 pp., \$13.95/\$18.95 Can.

Also Available: Movie Tie-In edition

by Lauren Weisberger

Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-2595-2,

368 pp., \$13.95/\$18.95 Can.

Ragged Dick or, Street Life in New York with the Boot-Blacks by Horatio Alger

Introduction by David K. Shipler

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Modern Library, TR, 978-0-8129-7358-7, 192 pp., \$8.95/\$12.95 Can.

Dreams from My Father

A Story of Race and Inheritance

by Barack Obama

Three Rivers Press, TR, 978-1-4000-8277-3, 480 pp., \$14.95/\$21.00 Can.

Audio Available: Read by Barack Obama

Random House Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-7393-2100-3, \$25.95/\$35.95 Can.

Fagin the Jew: A Graphic Novel

by Will Eisner

Doubleday, TR, 978-0-385-51009-7,

128 pp., \$16.95/\$23.95 Can.

Guinness World Records 2006

Edited by Claire Folkard

Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-58906-1, 656 pp., \$7.50/\$9.99 Can.

The Martian Chronicles

by Ray Bradbury

Spectra, MM, 978-0-553-27822-4,

192 pp., \$7.99/\$11.99 Can.

Reading Lolita in Tehran

A Memoir in Books

by Azar Nafisi

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7106-4, 384 pp., \$14.95/\$21.00 Can.

Reviving Ophelia

Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls by Mary Pipher

Audio Available: Read by Mary Pipher

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Random House Audio, Abridged Cassette, 978-0-553-47694-1, \$18.00/\$28.00  
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The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of  
the Last Mysteries of World War II

by Robert Kurson

Random House, TR, 978-0-375-76098-3,

416 pp., \$14.95/\$21.00 Can.

Ballantine, MM, 978-0-345-48247-1,

416 pp., \$7.50/\$10.99 Can.

Audio Available: Read by Campbell Scott

Random House Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-7393-2083-9, \$14.99/\$21.00 Can.

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