

Assignment 1a
Krista Belanger

Module 1: Views of Childhood

Often, when adults think of childhood, there can be a largely negative or positive reaction, depending on their own childhood and baggage carried forward to being an adult. Those who do not have children have a much different view than those who do, those who work with children professionally also have a much different perspective of childhood and children in general. I do not have children, so my appreciation of childhood is not as fresh in my memory as my colleagues who are watching their own children grow up. They track and compare milestones, they share stories of the things their children say, and have a common bond. As Willem Frijhoff writes, “Adults speak for children, often and loudly, not only throughout history, but also in the writing of history itself” (*Historian’s discovery of childhood*, 2012, pg. 12). In these same conversations where my colleagues compare milestones and stories, those stories certainly have a different perspective than the child’s. Thankfully, in my school, a number of my students’ parents allow them to speak, rather than be spoken about. I try my best to integrate the student into the conversation when we have Parent Teacher Conferences, and I often encourage them to come. I meet with my students one-on-one prior to the conference to ensure they understand what I will be telling their parents during the conference, as well as ask them their perspective on how their year is progressing.

I view childhood simply: a growing period of mental, physical, and emotional capacity, fearlessness and risky behaviour, as well as deep needs which have a chance at being minimized or brushed off at home. Over the more recent years in the classroom, I have found my students’ basic needs overall fairly well met, resulting in very interesting and dynamic teaching opportunities as they are not necessarily concerned about where their next meal will come from. In my current school, this view of students and their needs during their childhood years is considered normal, as we are an Independent Christian school in a fairly small town. Many of my students come from families who understand our Christian values and believe they are important. The majority of my students come from safe and loving homes, even when there is unrest in the family, separation, or other

conflict. These characteristics are not because we are a Christian school, but simply indicative of the community in which I work. There are certainly families who send their children to us who do not identify as Christians but appreciate the work we do in our teaching of respect and our high expectations. In a *Historian's discovery of childhood*, I struggled with understanding the perspective of the author as he wrote "Children are considered to be near to God. They are either seen as unspoiled intermediaries between God and man, . . . or as easy examples of god-fearing life, like the children who died young and whose pious death-bed was exalted in stories for a broad public" (pg. 14). This perspective may have been true a number of years ago, or in particular religions, but in my own experience and understanding, and given that I work in a faith-based school, I struggled with the perspective that some adults see children as "unspoiled" or "god-fearing", as this is certainly not a belief or practice we in our school and community hold. We discuss in school that children are equal to adults in that the single way to earning everlasting life is believing in God - not baptism, communion, "being good" or any other thing: just belief. I would agree that belief can come easier to children if exposed to the ideologies of Christianity or faith early, if it's practiced or witnessed in the home, and unfortunately, modern literature does not exist in a religious context to show children in a light other than the one in which Frijhoff writes. However, there is a danger still to literature and examining childhood, in that "Even when texts appear realistic, they will be underpinned by certain cultural understandings of childhood" (Kimberly Reynolds, *Perceptions of Childhood*, 2014). I appreciated how Frijhoff indicated that over time, "taking adolescents seriously as autonomous youngsters with their own language and set of practices that are to be respected as a real, be it transitory, phase of the life course of every human being" (*Historian's discovery of childhood*, pg. 25) was accepted and respected.

In my previous school, two hours north of a major city, I taught high school students whose needs were lacking to the point that they had no other choice but to find their most basic needs met by one another, resulting in choices being made that my students should not have had to make. While I taught high school, I found that most of my students' childhoods were ripped away from them, so many had a chip on their shoulder

and resulted in acting immaturely at school to compensate for not being able to be a child at home. None of us could blame them, so our job as a school was to provide safety, warmth, and food.

In the view of childhood in relation to literature, I often gravitate toward showing my students how different peoples' experiences are, so we read a variety of books about different perspectives of a similar event. For example, we might read *Fatty Legs* after reading the short paragraph about residential schools in our textbook or watching a *Heritage Minute*. My goal in showing them different perspectives is to show how we can feel empathetic toward someone and their situation, we can find commonalities, and as a collective, we can understand that our stories, both fictional and real, can have unexplained (or explained) gaps in information.

Due to my current employment, I often reach for these different perspective texts because I do not want my students to be or feel sheltered from reality. Just because they come from loving homes or supportive families does not mean that outside our school or outside our community there are no children without a meal or no children experiencing neglect or abuse. In a study cited by Pennington and Waxler, the study found that “[the scientist] maintained that fiction could function as a “moral laboratory” for exploring and developing new and more empathic attitudes to others” (*Why Reading Books Still Matters*, 2018, pg. 167). It is my goal to help my students find empathy for people and to find opportunities to serve and assist others in difficult times. It has been reported that “Since people tend to learn whatever they are taught and exposed to, and often model their behavior accordingly, it is perhaps not surprising that those who have the most exposure to the type of reading that emphasizes human nature and themes [namely fiction] – especially human relationships and feelings – are more tuned in to those features and more affected by them than people who read other things” (Pennington, pg. 168). As a teacher, I use narrative, fiction books to humanize the characters. There certainly is a time and a place for non-fiction, but as Pennington and Waxler discovered, the way fiction books are written allows for escapism and helps promote empathy.

For students in my current classroom, their reading-at-home situation certainly determines what they choose to read. Those who do not read at home choose books far below grade level and often cannot show reading stamina, a goal our school is working on. Those who do not read at home already often have a difficult

time choosing a book with a topic more evolved than a sport they are interested in or a certain series. Those who do read at home often are eager to choose a book, make recommendations to others, read a variety of books, may have a specific genre or theme they gravitate to, but can often be swayed into trying something new given that they have a positive relationship with the person making the recommendation. Socio-economic status, in my opinion, does not have as much to do with reading ability or practice as reading at home. Certainly, socio-economic status prevents some students from accessing literature, but when given access, the only limiting factor is whether or not they read at home or in their spare time. Some of my students come from low socio-economic households with somewhat chaotic lives and they use literature as an escape from their daily lives. In the text, *Why Reading Books Still Matters*, “those who read fiction are better able than those who do not read fiction to read social cues and are also more likely to develop the Big Five personality trait of Openness” (Pennington, 2018, pg. 171). I would suggest that many of my students who practice reading at home on a regular basis are readily able to accept new ideas or new perspectives versus those who do not read as often at home. I would not suggest that the reading level of a student would be indicative of their empathy or sense of openness, as I have not found that to be the case. I have sat my students down at my computer with an open Amazon cart and had them choose books they wanted to read, after explaining why it was of interest to them. My students have chosen many different books that I would hesitate to pick up at the store, and loved them. Letting my students choose their books is important to me, so much so that I stopped doing class novel studies. Student access and choice, in my opinion, is more important than socio-economic status.

I think that the most important thing that literature offers children is difference. A different way of looking at their lives, the world, their experiences, and others. Literature offers a different viewpoint to help develop empathy, it offers a different world to exist in (if only temporary), it also allows our students to see and experience a different way of communicating and increases their vocabulary.

Module 4: Context, Literary Canons, and Grand Conversations

What is the value of a canon of children's literature in your experiences and context and what would this look like?

I feel incredibly fortunate to have taught students of various backgrounds, experiences, age levels, and contexts. I previously taught in Manitoba, where the government does not have a canon per-se for students to read, but around the province, it is widely expected that students will read particular books/novels during each year of their academic career. Ask any high school English teacher and they would tell you that in Grade 9 they read *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in Grade 10 the students read *Romeo and Juliet*, *April Raintree* and *To Kill A Mockingbird*, in Grade 11 they read *Macbeth* and *Brave New World* or *Catcher in the Rye*, and in Grade 12 *Hamlet* is read, along with *1984* and *Othello*. There may be a few variations between titles, as the older the students are, the more class sections are offered at varying levels.

What strikes me as interesting is that Manitoba has developed a Quality Literature List (Government of Manitoba) which was not sent out to schools or teachers in the five years I taught there, or at least was not given to me. During my time teaching Manitoba, I spent a significant amount of time working closely with people in the Education Department as I graded provincial exams each semester, worked on Pilot exams, and sat on the provincial exam committee. We had our own guidelines for selecting resources for the exams, which were as follows (from what I can remember and my notes I found):

- Variety of genders (author and protagonist)
- Variety of backgrounds (ethnic, socio-economic)
- Variety of lexile levels
- Variety of formats (poetry, short story, chapter, article)
- Variety of sources (newspaper, book, website)
- Variety of communities (Winnipeg, outlying communities, Northern communities)
- At least 2/6 (better if more) writers must be Indigenous
- Variety of perspectives

- Must apply to the exam's theme

I feel as if the guidelines for choosing these pieces for provincial exams are like collecting a canon. A canon simply cannot be a one-sided view of a particular incident or theme - a variety must be represented, of a variety of formats. The provincial exams were thematic, and we discovered quickly in curating the exams that any piece of text can be argued to either fit (or not fit) a theme, often extensively.

In the context in which I am currently working in, a canon would look similar to what we chose for our exam texts. I often think about the needs of the students in my classes and select texts based on their interests. I might have a heavy non-fiction year for those students who struggle to attach themselves to main characters, or for a set of very empathetic students who require context and enrichment in the non-fiction realm. I do not think that a canon, especially for middle years students, should be thematic, as texts would easily be dismissed because they “do not fit the theme”. In our module reading, it is suggested that “they [writers of CCSS standards] do appear to value a particular canon of texts—those that are historical, win high-profile awards, and include little emphasis on contemporary issues or problems” (Haertling and Beach, *Critiquing and Constructing Canons in Middle Grade English Language Arts Classrooms*, 2013, pg. 11). In my opinion, I found that the authors were set on telling teachers that a canon in a middle years program ought to be established by including students in the process. From my perspective, I find even that process to be problematic as I have students reading at a D reading level, as well as students reading at a T level in my classroom. For those unsure about leveling, it is merely a guide to choose texts which will challenge but not overwhelm students. In my own work, the reading level is only reported on and progress is tracked, and any texts for assessment I do not read aloud and explain in class is given to my students at their level (mainly tests and exams). Other teachers use reading levels to determine which books a student may or may not choose, but I do not hold that belief system.

If I were to develop my own canon of children's literature, I would focus mainly on grades 4 and 5, as these periods of reading for students are mostly for enjoyment in my context. Upon entering grade 6, students begin reading and studying novels as a class. I disagree that a canon should be a set of titles, as I think each student can develop their own canon of books they love and they can understand. I love how Donalyn Miller

frames *The Book Whisperer* - that reading should be 100% student choice. I would frame my canon to my students as follows:

Choose something (one or more at a time):

- You will be challenged by
- You will enjoy
- And put it back if it does not interest you (no one has time to read books they do not enjoy!)
- That is a true story
- Completely made up
- With a great cover
- Your friend recommends
- With a main character you cannot relate to
- Whose author is from another country
- Whose author is local
- Whose author is Indigenous
- With pictures
- Colourful (you decide what that means to you!)
- With animals as the main characters
- Mysterious
- With a magical element

I think the danger of having an established canon means that as it changes over time, the previous versions of the canon may be questioned. I think canonizing literature and studying it is a turnoff for many students. If we were to make suggestions and let our students choose what they read, they may inadvertently develop a list of books they enjoy. Having no ulterior motive will help us as educators develop deeper relationships with our students, which will assist us in discussing literature, what we like, and what we got out of the text. In my mind, not every piece of text we read should be dissected as I feel canonized literature is. I

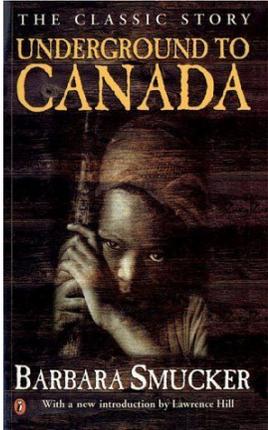
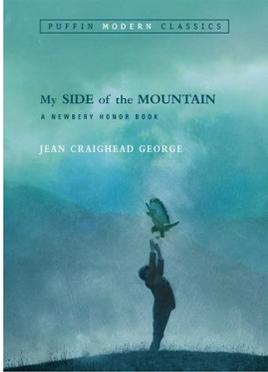
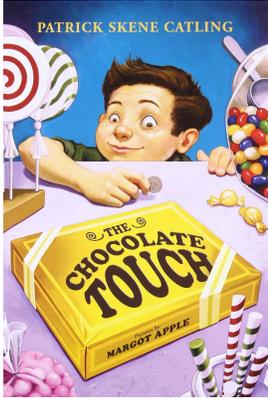
understand the argument that we should be using texts from a canon to give our students the ability to understand what they are reading. In *Moving Our Can(n)ons: Toward an Appreciation of Multimodal Texts in the Classroom*, by Jimenez, Roberts, Bruger, Meyer, and Waito, the authors indicated,

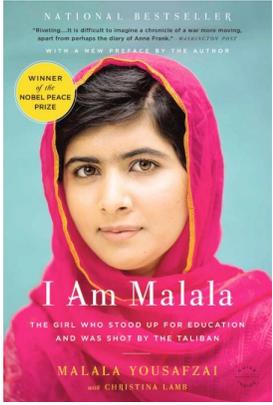
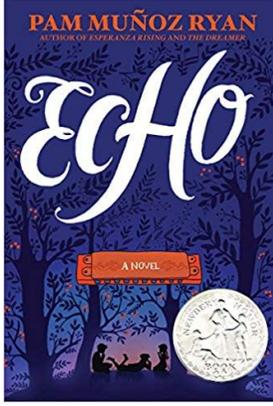
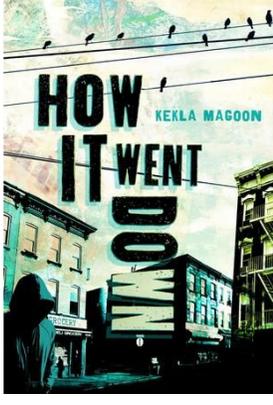
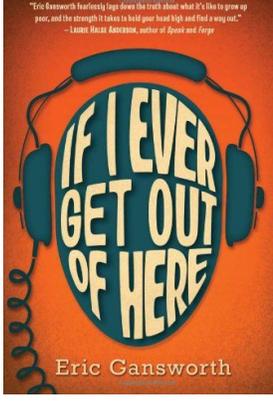
we advocate for the use of graphic novels in classrooms. However, that recommendation comes with an important caveat: We need to teach students how to read them. Graphic novels are multimodal, and as such, reading them requires reading words in ways that do not follow the same top-to-bottom, left-to-right, heavy exposition format of traditional print texts. Reading graphic novels also entails deep comprehension of images and even empty space, and perhaps most importantly, the ability to combine text and graphical elements to infer what is not directly written in the text (pg. 364).

In my own classroom, I meet with small groups to discuss some of the skills they need when reading literature. We discuss in their small group what they are reading, how they are understanding the text, and what they may be confused about. This also gives my students an opportunity to make recommendations to others in the small group and practice voicing their criticism or praise of a text.

Given all of the choices I would give my students for their own canon, I would share with the class some of my favourites from my classroom library which fit some of the pieces of criteria. I would not go through the entire list with them as I want them to develop their own ideas, and my list will change over the course of a year, a month, and also my career.

My suggestions for some of the categories I might share would be:

Choose something...	Title	Book cover
You will be challenged by	<i>Underground to Canada</i> by Barbara Smucker	
You will enjoy	<i>My Side of the Mountain</i> by Jean Craighead George	
And put it back if it does not interest you	<i>The Chocolate Touch</i> by Patrick Skene Catling	

<p>That is a true story</p>	<p><i>I Am Malala</i> by Christina Lamb and Malala Yousafzai</p>	
<p>With a great cover</p>	<p><i>Echo</i> by Pam Muñoz Ryan</p>	
<p>Your friend recommends</p>	<p><i>How It Went Down</i> by Kekla Magoon</p>	
<p>Whose author is Indigenous</p>	<p><i>If I Ever Get Out of Here</i> by Eric Gansworth</p>	

I think the most important part of teachers and teacher librarians to remember is that literature is not about asking questions and requiring answers. The appreciation of literature should be our ultimate goal, and no two people will agree on an entire list of books being “good”. However, we as individuals can develop our own sense of what is “good literature” and apply our own standards to develop our own lists. Upon practicing reading, being exposed to more literature, and discussing literature with others, our tastes can expand and we can add more to our repertoire.

References

Frijhoff, W. (2012). Historian's discovery of childhood. *Paedagogica Historica*, 48(1), 11-29.

Government of Manitoba. (n.d.). Quality Literature List. Retrieved February 3, 2019, from https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/ela/lit_list/index.html

Images obtained from Amazon.ca

Jiménez, L.M., Roberts, K.L., Brugar, K.A., Meyer, C.K., & Waito, K. (2017). Moving Our Can(n)ons: Toward an Appreciation of Multimodal Texts in the Classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(3), 363–368.

Pennington, M., Waxler, R. (2018). Why Reading Books Still Matters. New York: Routledge, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.4324/9781315210247>

Thein, A. H., Beach, R., & Fink, L. (2013). Critiquing and constructing canons in middle grade english language arts classrooms. *Voices from the Middle*, 21(1), 10.