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Enabling Texts: Texts That Matter

by Dr. Alfred W. Tatum

WHILE VISITING A BOSTON public school, I asked more than 120 teenagers to construct their textual lineages, that is, a visual representation of texts that they have found to be significant in their lives. On average, the students identified two texts that held significance throughout their entire, albeit young, teenage lives. The reasons the text held significance converge on three major themes: **personal connection**, **empathy**, and **identity shaping**. The following comments provided by the students illustrated the three themes:

I love *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998) because it's something that has to do with me and the girls in that book act like me.

The book, *Forged by Fire* (Draper, 1998), is a book that all young black males can relate to of how your life can go from negative to positive.

Just like any other book, *Tears of Tiger* (Draper, 1994) got me reading more and got me crying.

I like a *Child Called "It"* (Pelzer, 1995) because I learned that my life is not so bad compared to other people, especially David's.

The poem, "Our Deepest Fear" (Williamson, 1992) had me rethinking myself because I fear a lot.

I like the poem "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou (1995) because it reflects the pride of women and how they don't care what others think about the way they look.

Sadly, however, more than 30% of the adolescents did not identify a single text they found significant.

Several of the students explained they did not believe they were encountering challenging, meaningful texts. One student shared, "It ain't going down. I don't see how just reading is going to help me, I need something more academic." Another student offered, "We need to learn harder vocabulary. [The vocabulary] is the same we learned in elementary school." The students were complaining about the text because "teachers [were giving] books that were boring and when the class [didn't] want to read, [the teachers] [got] aggravated."

The students ascribed the absence of meaningful texts in their lives to teachers' refusal to acknowledge their day-to-day realities couched in their adolescent, cultural, and gender identities. A young man offered

that "I need to read interesting topics like teen drama, violence, something you can relate your life or other people's lives to." A young woman commented, "They give us different books than we would read; the books are boring."

Summing up the sentiments that many of the adolescents held towards texts disconnected from one or several of their identities, a student shared, "I read them, but I do not care what they say." This reflects a stark contrast to the students who found value and direction in the text, as reflected in this young woman's

comment, "*The Skin I'm In* reminds me of real life in school. A girl so black in school, and she wanted to kill herself. If I was in her school, I would be her friend. Even the teacher hated her."

High school students need and benefit from a wide range of texts that challenge them to contextualize and examine their in-school and out-of-school lives. I agree

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with Apple (1990) who argues that ignoring text that dominates school curricula as being simply not worthy of serious attention and serious struggle is to live in a world divorced from reality. He asserts that texts need to be situated in the larger social movements of which they are a part.

However, in an era of accountability, where the focus is placed on research-based instructional practices, the texts that adolescents find meaningful and significant to their development are being severely compromised. Instead of trying to score with reading, schools have focused on increasing reading scores. This is problematic because texts can be used to broker positive, meaningful relationships with struggling adolescent readers during reading instruction.

Powerful Texts

It is prudent to use a combination of powerful texts, in tandem with powerful reading instruction, to influence the literacy development and lives of adolescents. Texts should be selected with a clearer audit of the struggling adolescent reader, many of whom are suffering from an underexposure to text that they find meaningful. These students need exposure to *enabling* texts (Tatum, in press). An enabling text is one that moves beyond a sole cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include an academic, cultural, emotional, and social focus that moves students closer to examining issues they find relevant to their lives. For example, texts can be used to help high school students wrestling with the question, What am I going to do with the rest of my life? This is a question most adolescents find essential as they engage in shaping their identities.

The texts selected for *Edge* are enabling texts. First, they serve as the vehicle for exploring essential questions, but secondly, the texts are diverse—from classics that have inspired readers for decades (Shakespeare, Frost, St. Vincent Millay, Saki, de Maupassant, Poe, et al.) to contemporary fiction that reflects the diversity of the U.S. (Allende, Alvarez, Angelou, Bruchac, Cisneros, Ortiz Cofer, Soto, Tan, et al.).

The texts are also diverse in subject matter and genre, exploring issues of personal identity as well as cultural and social movements. Here are just a few examples of selections in *Edge* that deal with personal identity:

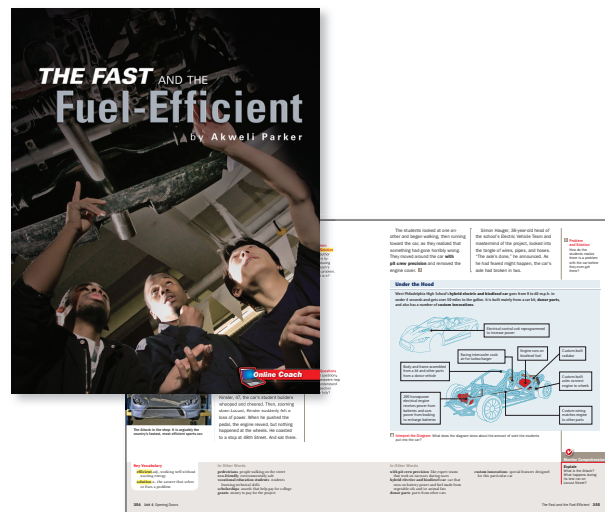
- “Who We Really Are”—being a foster child
- “Curtis Aikens and the American Dream”—overcoming illiteracy
- “Nicole”—being biracial
- “My English,” “Voices of America,” “La Vida

Robot”—being an immigrant to the U.S. And here are just a few examples of selections dealing with social and cultural issues:

- “Long Walk to Freedom”—overthrowing apartheid



“My English” reflects on the immigrant experience.



Teens develop eco-friendly cars.



Art has the power to build bridges.

- “Hip-Hop as Culture” and “Slam: Performance Poetry Lives On”—the power of art to build bridges and shape culture
- “Violence Hits Home”—how young people are working to stop gang violence
- “The Fast and the Fuel Efficient”—how teens are developing eco-friendly cars.

Unfortunately, many high school students who struggle with reading are encountering texts that are characteristically *disabling*. A disabling text reinforces a student’s perception of being a struggling reader. A disabling text also ignores students’ local contexts and their desire as adolescents for self-definition. Disabling texts do not move in the direction of closing the reading achievement gap in a class-based, language-based, and race-based society in which many adolescents are underserved by low-quality literacy instruction.

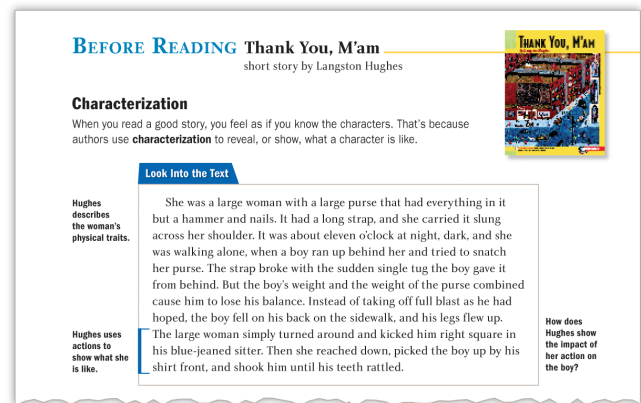
It is important to note that meaningful texts, although important, are not sufficient to improve literacy instruction for adolescents. High school students who struggle with reading and lack the skills and strategies to handle text independently need support to become engaged with the text.

Powerful Instruction

One of the most powerful techniques is to *use the text to teach the text*. This is a productive approach to help struggling readers become engaged. It simply means that the teacher presents a short excerpt of the upcoming reading selection—before reading—and then models skills or strategies with that text. For example, if the instructional goal is to have students understand how an author uses characterization, the teacher could use an excerpt of the text to introduce the concept.

There are several pedagogical and student benefits associated with using the text to teach the text, namely nurturing fluency and building background knowledge. Because students are asked to examine an excerpt of a text they will see again later as they read independently, rereading has been embedded. Rereadings are effective for nurturing fluency for students who struggle with decoding and for English language learners. Secondly, the students are introduced to aspects of Langston Hughes; writing that will potentially shape their reading of the text. Having background knowledge improves reading comprehension. Using the text to teach the text provides a strategic advantage for struggling readers while allowing teachers to introduce the text and strategies together. It is a win-win situation for both teacher and student.

Figure 1



An example of using the text to teach the text before reading—a powerful instructional technique.

Conclusion

It is difficult for many teachers to engage struggling adolescent readers with text. I hear the common refrain, “These kids just don’t want to read.” There are several reasons adolescents refuse to read. Primary among them are a lack of interest in the texts and a lack of requisite skills and strategies for handling the text independently.

It is imperative to identify and engage students with texts that pay attention to their multiple identities. It is equally imperative to grant them entry into the texts by providing explicit skill and strategy instruction. The texts should be as diverse as the students being taught. The texts should also challenge students to wrestle with questions they find significant. This combination optimizes shaping students’ literacies along with shaping their lives, an optimization that informs *Edge*. ❖

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His current research focuses on the literacy development of African American adolescent males (*Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*, 2005, and “Building the Textual Lineages of African American Male Adolescents,” 2007), and he provides teacher professional development to urban middle and high schools.