Why do we have to *read* this?

A Snapshot of Local Literature Teachers' Curriculum Choices

A Teacher-Research Project

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to encapsulate the decision-making processes of a small sample of secondary literature teachers in their efforts to create their classroom curricula and choose the texts they teach. The project focuses on internal factors in the teacher's curriculum-making process (personal views about the quality of literature, the literary canon, and which texts are worthy of classroom study), the decision-making process itself (accounting for students and teacher interests, and exposing students to multicultural texts), and external forces in the process (state mandates, materials available, textbooks, school-sponsored programs and issues of controversy). This study provides a snapshot of the curriculum creation process and seeks to shed light on the rationales teachers employ when making curriculum-related decisions.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Scratch. Tick. Scratch. It was seventh period, and I was alone in the classroom. I wistfully eyed the clock, listening to the combined rhythm of its ticks and the sounds of my pen scrawling large, obnoxious, hot pink X's on multiple choice tests. As I tallied the next student's grade, I crossly mumbled to myself, "Has my supervising teacher never heard of Scantrons?" It wasn't that manually grading a multiple choice test was an exhausting task. What *was* taxing (and somewhat psychologically damaging for a student teacher) was having to scratch down F after F after D after F on 11th-grade papers.

When Ms. Starr, my supervising teacher, entered the room to check on my progress (It was Friday. She hoped to have all tests graded before the 2:30 bell, so we wouldn't have to take them home over the weekend), she could tell I was disturbed.

"I don't get it," I moaned. "Why are the students failing this test? There are *so* many F's. Some of them didn't even get half of the questions right."

"Why do you think, Elaine?" she replied caustically. "Because they didn't bother to read the damned book."

The "damned book" Ms. Starr was referring to was Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* As an avid Twain scholar, Ms. Starr would have *never* mentioned this novel with such a sneer in any other context. But on that Friday afternoon, she and I were united in our frustration over the students' poor performance. The test I was grading was what Ms. Starr called a "reading check" test. The students (the majority of whom are labeled gifted) were given about four weeks to read *Huckleberry Finn* outside of class. The reading check test marked the deadline, and appropriately named, it tested whether the students read the book or not. It

contained no complicated questions on themes or literary devices. It simply checked whether the students were familiar with basic plot events and character descriptions.

Ms. Starr and I ended up staying at school about 20 minutes late to finish grading the tests. As I trudged across the emptying parking lot that afternoon and miserably plopped into my driver's seat, I worried about the rest of the semester. I felt disillusioned by the students' lackadaisical attitude towards completing the assigned reading, and I dreaded the negative climate of the classroom on Monday when Ms. Starr revealed their abysmal grades.

Sure enough, the D's and F's were received with grumbles and gripes. Ms. Starr proclaimed that the students would be retested on Friday, not to replace the grades they just received but to be added to those grades.

"If you failed it once, you better read the book, or you're going to fail it again. Then you'll have two F's instead of one," Ms. Starr warned. It was after this proclamation that one of the most awkward moments of my student teaching experience occurred.

A student turned to me and said, "Ms. Broussard, this book really sucks. Why do we have to *read* this?"

I froze. I had no idea what to say. I could think of several reasons why *I* appreciated Mark Twain and why *I* found value in *Huckleberry Finn*. But how do you articulate this to a 16-year-old kid?

"Umm, ask Ms. Starr, hon," I replied. "She assigned the reading."

The student rolled his eyes at my cop out, and I turned away frustrated and flustered. That brief exchange left me feeling more befuddled than any of my previous student interactions. I had failed to articulate an intelligent rationale for the class objectives. Even though it wasn't *my* class, as a student teacher, I still felt responsible for helping the students understand why their

schoolwork was important. The "why" is important to children, both small and nearly grown, and as a teacher, if you cannot provide it, you cannot expect your students to take your assignments seriously. It's the answer to this "why" that I am determined to develop for myself.

I don't know whether that student later approached Ms. Starr with his question, but I hope he did. After teaching roughly the same curriculum for two decades, she is fiercely confident in her rationales for choosing the texts she teaches and would have been able to give him an immediate, transparent response. As I later discovered by investigating this topic further, many highly experienced teachers have strong opinions and perceptions of the literature curriculum and what texts are appropriate for their students. I hope to illuminate the perceptions of Ms. Starr and several of her similarly experienced peers in this paper.

Even before my semester student teaching with Ms. Starr, a subject that has always sparked my curiosity is how texts are selected as part of a literature class curriculum. My perception was that there would be a large variation in how free English teachers are to choose the texts studied in their classrooms. I expected to see some classrooms in which the curriculum is heavily mandated text-by-text and other classrooms in which teachers are free to choose texts they feel will be relevant to their students without following strict guidelines. Among the teachers who need not struggle with specific mandates, I expected to also see a large variation in how much teachers *choose* to handpick reading selections for classroom study and how much they simply follow a "packaged" curriculum (i.e., following a literature textbook chapter to chapter, without much addition or deviation).

This was not my experience. None of the schools in which I observed had a curriculum guide telling teachers *specifically* what texts they must teach, when to teach them, and what classroom activities must go along with them. Ms. Starr assured me that schools like this *do*

exist, and they exist in the local area. However, for the most part, she said, the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum gives teachers a reasonable amount of freedom to choose their own texts, with a few conditions. Also, I never observed teachers who refused to deviate from the textbook. Of the classroom teachers I studied extensively, Ms. Starr used hers the most (about half the time), while Mrs. Harrison used hers the least ("Only a half a dozen times per year," she said). However, all four case studies involved teachers who had taught for a decade or more. According to Ms. Starr, inexperienced teachers tend to use the textbooks more exclusively than those who have had years to seek out additional materials.

Current Views on Selecting Worthy Literature

Reflection on which texts are *worthy* of study in a classroom is a task that has been continuously undertaken by teachers, administrators, textbook publishers, etc., since the beginning of formal education. In literature classrooms, secondary teachers have always turned to the classics for reading material. Two studies by Applebee (1963, 1989) surveyed which book-length works were most often taught in public, private and parochial schools in grades 9-12. In a span of 26 years, not much had changed. In both studies, Applebee concluded that classic literature dominated the literature curriculum. The most commonly studied titles were as follows: *Macbeth, Julius Caesar, Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

These titles have been studied extensively for decades (or in some cases, centuries), and they hold a special place of lasting significance in our culture. Because of this, these works, along with others of the same notable status, are often referred to as the "literary canon." There is

an immense love for canonized texts among thoughtful adult readers, scholars of great literature, and often English teachers themselves. Classics like the ones listed above have become a staple in the secondary literature curriculum, but why?

Because they are good for us, proponents of the canon explain. Canonized texts are often characterized by complexity of thought, an expression of universal truths, elevated vocabulary, structural peculiarities, a high re-read value, and most importantly, as canon scholar Bloom (1994) explains, originality. He writes:

> I have tried to confront greatness directly: to ask what makes the author and the works canonical. The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange. [...] When you read a canonical work for the first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfillment of expectations (p. 3).

Scholars like Bloom (1994) maintain that the canon should remain mostly static. For example, he proclaims that Shakespeare is "the largest writer we ever will know" (p. 3) and no writer has or ever will match the originality of Shakespeare. Others claim that the canon should change and is changing to include more works of literature written by women and minorities (Stotsky 1992; Christenbury & Kelly 1994). A third group of voices asks whether the canon is even relevant to secondary literature classrooms. They pose the question: how much are middle and high school students actually gaining from studying the classics?

Not much, concludes Gallo in a 2001 *English Journal* column. He warns that it is dangerous for English teachers to assume that works of literature in which *they* find great meaning will have the same effect on their students. He writes, addressing teachers, "It seems to be part of human nature for us to think that everyone has had the experiences similar to ours and

that they share our perspective on things. Thus, as a lover of classical literature, it seems logical for you to conclude that there is something wrong with today's students if they don't share your passion. You may never consider how the required literature in your school's curriculum affects kids who are not like you" (p. 33).

Gallo (2001) draws the shocking conclusion that educators are to blame for creating a society of adults who are apathetic to reading. He believes this phenomenon begins in middle schools and high schools where students become disconnected from finding pleasure in reading. They begin to view reading as simply an assigned task, only to be completed when the teacher says so. Gallo quotes one of his former graduate school students, who exclaimed, "My experience in high school with the classics was similar to dissecting a frog. It was tedious, and it stunk" (p. 34).

Assisting low level, struggling readers is obviously a priority for educators, but what about “aliterate” readers? "Aliterate" is a buzzword referring to readers of medium or high skill who simply do not read, because they are disinterested. These students have no developmental or learning disabilities hindering them from reading for pleasure. Instead, they view reading as a cumbersome task, not to be performed out of a school required context (or in the case of Ms. Starr's students' lack of interest in Mark Twain, not to be performed at all). Are our outdated teaching methods causing this phenomenon? Several critics think so (Blasingame, 2007; Gallo, 2001; Herz, 2005; Sullivan, 1991; Hipple, 1997; Monseau & Salvner, 2000). Whether teachers are causing students to become "aliterate" or whether it happens for a different reason, it is still an issue that needs to be addressed. Regardless of who is to blame for student apathy towards reading, educators must contemplate what can be done differently to change students' attitudes.

Many of these same critics listed above believe the answer lies in Young Adult Literature (YAL).

This topic has been heavily debated and well discussed for at least 20 years. The emergence of YAL as a recognized literature genre occurred in the 80s. Before this, there were many well-known novels specifically written for teenage audiences, but they were not numerous enough for critics to take notice and analyze their educational worth (Herz, 2005). Now, YAL sections fill significant spaces in bookstores and libraries, prestigious awards are given to YAL authors, and entire academic journals are devoted to the criticism of this genre. YAL has firmly established itself as a commercially successful body of popular literature for more than two decades. However, the educational worth of this genre is still hotly debated, and the inclusion of these works in literature classrooms is still considered risky by some due to lack of familiarity with YAL titles and concerns about standardized testing (Miller & Slifkin, 2010).

Background Theories and Discussions

The theoretical background supporting the use of YAL in classroom stems from the belief that students become more engaged with topics that are relevant to their lives. Also, it is questionable whether high school (and especially middle school) students should even be expected to tackle the lofty language and complex structures of many classic texts. The studies of Carlsen shed some light on this question and analyze the psychological and social development of young adults as it relates to their reading choices.

Carlsen (1980) studied the story choices of different age groups of adolescents and broke them down according to topic. His results are as follows: 11 to 14 year olds loved stories about animals, adventure, mystery, the supernatural, sports, broad slapstick and fantasy; 15 to 16 years olds chose nonfiction accounts of adventure, historical fiction, romances and stories about

children their own age; 17 year olds chose a mixture of adult and young adult novels, many concerning the topics of personal values, social significance, odd human experiences and growing into adulthood (as cited in Herz, 2005, p. 18). These findings are notable for several reasons. First, it is obvious that adolescents choose to read stories involving main characters who are close to their own age. Unfortunately many classics are tales of adult behavior, and even those with adolescent main characters were often written for adult audiences. Secondly, adolescents generally do not choose novels that contemplate universal themes of social significance until the tail end of high school (most likely the equivalent of senior year). So why are students introduced to such complex texts as early as middle school?

Another Carlsen study (1974) suggests that students undergo five stages of reading development:

1. Unconscious delight (elementary to early middle school). – Students read for pleasure without analyzing.
2. Living vicariously (middle school) – Students read horror, mystery, romance, fantasy and adventure for fun and escapism.
3. Seeing oneself (late middle school, early high school) – Students explore subjects they can easily relate to their own lives.
4. Philosophical speculations (late high school) – Students begin contemplating about the world beyond their lives.
5. Aesthetic delight (adulthood) – Adult readers have developed a higher awareness, the ability to critically analyze and recognize universal themes.

My background reading helped me contemplate several questions. If Carlsen's theories are correct, does that mean that when we teach the classics in secondary literature classes, we are

expecting higher developmental thinking than the student's stage of life actually warrants? How can we bridge the gap between the subject matter of the classics and a student's interests and life experiences? How can YAL play a part?

Herz (2005) states that opening her classroom to YAL transformed her teaching methods, revitalized her students' enthusiasm, and led her to become a happier, more successful literature teacher. Because of this, she has written an entire volume of "theme connectors" linking popular YAL titles with the classics. Herz's objective is not to replace the classics with YAL but to create a curriculum in which both can be included. She writes, "Accepting Carlsen's stages of literary development does not mean we have to provide an entire curriculum suited to students' tastes (that could mean reading six consecutive Lemony Snicket or Stephen King novels!), but it does mean that we ought to provide a *comfort* level in students' reading choices by providing *quality* literature that is *accessible* to them regardless of whether it fulfills our notion of what great literature is" (p. 19, emphasis Herz's).

In congruence with Herz's statement, many critics believe it is more important to instill a love of reading into a child than to instill an appreciation for classic literature. Critics may question the literary value of highly popularized YAL titles such as the Harry Potter novels by J. K. Rowling. But few critics can deny that these titles attracted multitudes of children to *read*, many of whom had long abandoned reading for pleasure or had never considered it. These literary phenomena *are* phenomena regardless of measured critical "worth" or literary "value." For example, a child who reads all seven of Rowling's books consumes more than 4,000 pages of words -- of imagination -- of *literature*. This is an accomplishment in itself for many so-called "aliterate" readers.

On the flipside, there *is* a richness of experience that students can gain from studying classic literature, and I've learned that local literature teachers are able to describe and rationalize this phenomenon quite eloquently. Bloom has a valid point that the ingenuity of Shakespeare and other revered figures of the Western canon should not be ignored, because they provide texts that can be explored extensively (or they have "tons of literary veins to mine" as Ms. Starr says). However, Bloom has continuously bemoaned the changing face of literature instruction and has publicly attacked immensely popular young adult authors like J.K. Rowling for producing unintelligent children's literature. He writes in a 2000 *Wall Street Journal* column:

> Can more than 35 million book buyers, and their offspring, be wrong? Yes, they have been, and will continue to be for as long as they persevere with *Potter*. A vast concourse of inadequate works, for adults and for children, crams the dustbins of the ages. At a time when public judgment is no better and no worse than what is proclaimed by the ideological cheerleaders who have so destroyed humanistic study, anything goes. The cultural critics will, soon enough, introduce *Harry Potter* into their college curriculum, and *The New York Times* will go on celebrating another confirmation of the dumbing-down it leads and exemplifies (Bloom, 2000).

From viewpoints like this one, a rhetorical spectrum begins to take shape. Bloom lives on the conservative end of the spectrum, proclaiming that *only* the classics are worthy of study, while Gallo inhabits the liberal end, arguing that the classics have actually been harmful to the educational process. There is a perspective missing here. What about the key figure in this equation, the classroom teacher, the executor of the educational process? What does he or she think?

Research Questions

My research is aimed at encapsulating a small sample of classroom teachers' perspectives of what texts are worthy of study and the decision-making processes involved when they create curricula. I am also interested in any outside influences teachers encounter during their decision-making processes (for example, curriculum guides, textbook usage, adherence to school programs and mandates, concerns about controversial content, etc.). My research questions are as follows:

1. How do local secondary literature teachers define the literary canon, and what perceptions do they hold about teaching canonical versus non-canonical texts?
2. What decision-making processes are involved when local secondary literature teachers choose the texts they teach? What rationales do they provide for their curriculum choices?
3. What outside influences do local secondary literature teachers encounter during their curriculum-making processes, and how do they respond to these influences?

By answering these three questions, I hope to provide an informative snapshot of how and why literature teachers plan their lessons the way they do.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

I began my research on this topic with a quick search of the Louisiana State University library catalog. The first title I checked out was *From Hinton To Hamlet: Building Bridges Between Young Adult Literature and the Classics* by Herz and Gallo (2001). This has been my most valuable resource, and I have found many additional sources from this book's bibliography pages.

I also used the Academic Search Complete and JSTOR databases from LSU's online access to find journal articles. The search terms I used included: young adult literature, young adult literature and classics, literary canon, young adult literature and canon, secondary literature textbooks, and secondary literature curriculum. I also specifically searched for articles contained in the *English Journal* through online access.

Dr. Bickmore generously allowed me to borrow his copy of *Books that Don't Bore 'Em: Young Adult Books That Speak to This Generation* by Blasingame (2007) which was also quite useful to my resource search. Finally, Dr. Bach e-mailed me a copy of an unpublished *ALAN Review* article by Miller and Slifkin (2010). The article has since been published, and it was invaluable to my understanding of the literary canon as a social construction.

I have organized my literature review into three sections to coincide with my three major research questions. First, I will further explore the body of discussion on the use of canonical and non-canonical texts in the classroom. Second, I will touch on some background information about teachers' decision-making processes when planning lessons and the value of constructing rationales for the texts and units they teach. Finally, I will discuss external influences teachers encounter as they make their decisions. In this last section, I will provide background information on the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum and the Accelerated Reader program. I

will also discuss common issues pertaining to literature textbooks, and concerns teachers encounter when deciding whether to teach controversial texts.

Canonical vs. Non-Canonical: Additional Viewpoints

From my reading, I have identified three viewpoints in the debate about which texts are worthy of classroom study:

1. Teachers should stick to teaching the canon, because YAL and popular adult titles do not hold the same level of literary worth as the classics. The goal is to expose students to exemplary works of writing that have withstood the test of time (as cited in Anderson & Zanetti, 2000; Bloom, 1994; Hirsch, 2002).
2. Teachers should give their students freedom to choose what texts they would like to read in a literature classroom. The goal is not to teach the classics; it is to instill in students a love of reading (Gallo, 2001; Motoko, 2009).
3. Teachers should teach a mixture of canonical and non-canonical texts in their classrooms. The goal is to arrange the curriculum so that modern pieces of literature can shed light on themes, symbols and meanings contained in the classics. (Blasingame, 2007; Herz, 2005; Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Monseau & Salvner, 2000; Hipple, 1997; Santoli & Wagner, 2004; Stover, 2006).

The term "canon" is a problematic one in itself, because it is difficult to define. Anderson and Zanetti (2000) examine several semantic approaches of defining canon, in which they ultimately provide this explanation: "works or authors that are understood to be of central importance in a culture" (p. 345).

Anderson and Zanetti (2000) list a wide array of canon critics such as those who believe the canon does not properly include works of minorities and women, those who believe minority

groups have a right to their own canon, those who reject the idea of a literary canon altogether (as a study of popularity contests or instruments of social control), and in contrast, "at the conservative end are Harold Bloom and E. D. Hirsch, who defend the traditional canon as the basis of 'cultural literacy' and social stability" (p. 344).

The preceding quote mentions Bloom, whose viewpoints I have already discussed in detail. It is also referring to the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (2001) authored by Hirsch and others, which is a reference book listing all things considered to be "canonized" in American culture. This book covers a list of disciplines, including history, politics, geography, physical and natural sciences, medicine, technology as well as English literature. The literature section includes the names of authors, titles and well-known quotes from "canonized" works of literature in alphabetical order. The entries begin with Chinua Achebe and end with William Butler Yeats. The authors' rationales behind what is included in the lists involved a three-step process: measuring how general or specialized the item is (with "cultural literacy" falling in between), determining how widely known the item is within society, and examining the item in terms of lasting significance.

The lasting significance criterion is an argument often used by educators to justify the teaching of the classics in English classrooms. If a work of literature has been studied for several hundred years, it must be worthy of inclusion in a secondary classroom. However, as Anderson and Zanetti (2000) refer to the "canonical trinity" -- Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton -- "They were masculine, authoritative, affirming in the prevailing social order, and in command of a prestige mode of discourse -- the 'dead white male' syndrome, as it is now called by the disaffected" (p. 344).

A multitude of critics echo this viewpoint -- the classics are old, outdated and difficult to

connect to the lives of teenagers. Blasingame (2007) writes, "I have nothing against dead old white men: in fact, I plan to be one someday. But it is very possible that the issues teens find relevant to their lives may not deal with hunting down evil masquerading as a whale, explaining the levels of hell, or distinguishing between windmills and evil giants" (p. 23).

Gallo (2001) goes so far as to claim that the classics create an aliterate society by forcing students to read works with which they cannot engage, hence ruining any hope to instill a love of reading in them. Gallo confesses how he detested the classics at a young age but fortunately came to love them as an adult. He describes the situation in the following quote.

> When I look back at that phenomenon now, it all makes perfect sense to me. I wasn't READY for classical literature when I was 13, 14... 17, 18. [...] *The classics are not about TEENAGE concerns!* They are about ADULT issues. Moreover, they were written for EDUCATED adults who had the LEISURE time to read them. They were also, not incidentally, written to be ENJOYED -- not DISSECTED, not ANALYZED, and certainly not TESTED. When I became an adult, I became interested in adult things, and so the classics finally had meaning for me, and I could finally appreciate them (p. 34, emphasis Gallo's).

Gallo's view is shared by many critics who call for literature curricula reform. Some critics maintain a moderate viewpoint, claiming that the classics and YAL can co-exist within a classroom, and titles such as *From Hinton to Hamlet* (Herz, 2005), *From Snicket to Shakespeare* (Stover, 2006), and *Books That Don't Bore 'Em* (Blasingame, 2007) have been published, providing lists of common themes between various classics and YAL counterparts. A recent *New York Times* article describes an even more radical approach in which a classroom teacher in

Atlanta has her students choosing every text they read, within a "reading workshop" framework (Motoko, 2009).

This topic is obviously a current, commonly debated topic among literature education critics, but I have identified some gaps in the literature. First, there have been several student-related studies of this type, but I have not yet found one that surveyed teacher perceptions as well. Most of the critics I have read presuppose that literature teachers either teach certain titles because they personally like them and believe their students will as well or because they are required to teach them as part of a mandatory curriculum. There is more to this story that has not yet been studied. Studying how *teachers* feel about what titles they are teaching is a different angle of study from how *students* feel about the titles they are being taught. Studying why certain choices are made -- at the teacher level, not the administrative level -- is a valuable addition to the existing body of research.

Planning Lessons and Writing Rationales

For this section, I will turn to Smagorinsky's 2008 book *Teaching English By Design*, a lesson planning guide for teachers. Smagorinsky is a proponent of teachers creating "conceptual units," which he defines as "a unit of instruction [that] dedicates a period of time -- roughly four to six weeks of fifty-minute classes or two to three weeks of ninety-minute classes -- to *sustained attention to a related set of ideas*. These ideas are pursued through a variety of texts, both read (usually literary) and those produced (usually written)" (p. 111, emphasis Smagorinksy's).

Smagorinsky (2008) goes on to list seven ways in which a conceptual unit can be organized and gives examples. Units can be designed according to:

- theme (coping with loss)
- period (Vietnam era)
- movement or belief system (Romanticism)

- geographic region (Oklahoma authors)
- genre (westerns, detective stories, etc.)
- works by a single author (Shakespeare)
- a key learning strategy (analyzing and identifying irony) (Smagorinksy, 2008, pp. 117-121).

Through my research, I have discovered that some of Smagorinsky's formats for organizing unit plans are deemed acceptable by local literature teachers and are commonly used by them. However some of his formats may be more difficult to use due to restrictions set in place by the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum, which I will discuss in greater detail shortly.

Smagorinsky (2008) also points out that it is vital for teachers to know their students before attempting to create conceptual units for them. He writes:

> When asked, "What do you teach?" some teachers answer, "Students." Rather than viewing themselves as subject-area specialists, they see themselves first as teachers of the people who are in their care. [...] When you believe that you are teaching the subject, you release yourself from much responsibility to make sure that your students are learning. You also can ignore the particular characteristics and needs of your students, since it's their job to learn the subject (p. 131).

These remarks are aimed at teachers who use the same unit plans year after year with no regard to the changing student population. According to Smagorinksy, to be truly effective, teachers must consider the cultures and communities in which they teach, the developmental levels of their students, the ever-changing interests of their students and the social and psychological needs of their students. It is also important for teachers to take their own interests and areas of expertise into consideration when planning units (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 131-135).

Despite thoughtful consideration of students and self, teachers' curriculum choices are often challenged by administrators, parents, and as the incident I discussed in my introduction showed, students themselves. This is why every conceptual unit should include a rationale, Smagorinsky writes. "A rationale is the argument that you make to justify your selection of a unit topic and its contents: its materials, activities, assessments, and so on. I believe that writing out this rationale is the most effective way of articulating reasons for teaching decisions" (Smagorinsky 2008, p. 112). Smagorinsky goes on to devote a chapter of *Teaching Reading by Design* to the discussion of rationale writing. In this chapter he presents a list of common justifications for thematic units and questions teachers must ask themselves while writing their rationales.

While Smagorinsky's rationale format relates to an entire conceptual unit, Pipkin (2000), offers a guide for professional rationale writing on a single work of literature. She states that this is the best line of defense when planning to teach a text that may be deemed unconventional or controversial. Her rationale format contains the following components: a) the bibliographic citation; b) the intended audience; c) a brief summary of the work; d) the relationship of the work to the program; e) the impact of the work; f) potential problems with the work; and g) critical support for the work and related works (Pipkin, 2000, p. 175). In my study, I did not ask my teacher participants to submit formally written rationales for their curricula (although that would have been very interesting data to study). However, I did ask them several written and oral questions relating to why they choose the texts they teach and the decision-making processes involved in their choices. These informal "mini-rationales" are still valuable in the study of teachers' perspectives of the literature curricula.

External Influences

There can be many external influences on teachers' decision-making processes when planning lessons and units, the largest of which may be government mandated curriculum guides. The Louisiana Department of Education issued a "comprehensive curriculum" in 2005 and later revised this curriculum in 2008. Here is a description quoted from the introductory page of the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum:

> The curriculum has been revised based on teacher feedback, an external review by a team of content experts from outside the state, and input from course writers. As in the first edition, the *Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum*, revised 2008 is aligned with state content standards, as defined by Grade-Level Expectations (GLEs), and organized into coherent, time-bound units with sample activities and classroom assessments to guide teaching and learning. The order of the units ensures that all GLEs to be tested are addressed prior to the administration of iLEAP assessments (Louisiana Department of Education, 2008).

The English Comprehensive Curriculum is divided by grade level, and each grade level must follow a prescribed order of unit topics. The three middle school curricula along with the English I and II curricula cover six unit topics each. The English III and IV curricula cover seven topics each. Here is a list of required unit topics for grades 6 through 12.

6th grade
Unit 1: Nonfiction—Newspapers and Magazines
Unit 2: Fiction: Realistic Fiction
Unit 3: Historical Fiction
Unit 4: Myths
Unit 5: Poetry
Unit 6: Drama

7th grade
Unit 1: Modern Fantasy—Through the Wardrobe
Unit 2: In a Galaxy Far Away—Science Fiction
Unit 3: Content Area Reading/Informational Nonfiction
Unit 4: Ode to Me—Poetry
Unit 5: Fiction/Short Story
Unit 6: Propaganda/Persuasion

8th grade
Unit 1: Mystery—Elementary, My Dear

Watson
Unit 2: Laughing Out Loud—Humorous Fiction/Essays
Unit 3: Life is a Poem—Poetry
Unit 4: Nonfiction "I-Search"—Research Reports—Writing Products
Unit 5: That's a Novel Idea—Novel
Unit 6: All the World's a Stage—Drama

English I
Unit 1: The Short Story
Unit 2: Nonfiction
Unit 3: Drama
Unit 4: The Novel
Unit 5: Poetry
Unit 6: The Epic

English II
Unit 1: The Short Story
Unit 2: Nonfiction
Unit 3: Drama
Unit 4: Poetry
Unit 5: The Novel
Unit 6: The Epic

English III
Unit 1: The Colonial Period
Unit 2: The Revolutionary Period
Unit 3: The National Period
Unit 4: The Civil War Period
Unit 5: Rise of Realism and Naturalism
Unit 6: The Early Years of the Twentieth Century
Unit 7: The Mid/Late Twentieth Century and Beyond

English IV
Unit 1: The Anglo – Saxon Period
Unit 2: The Medieval Period: England During the Age of Chivalry and Feudalism
Unit 3: The Elizabethan Period: The Renaissance Comes to England
Unit 4: The Seventeenth Century: The Puritans and the Restoration
Unit 5: The Eighteenth Century: The Age of Reason
Unit 6: The Romantic Period: Turning to Imagination, Fantasy, and Nature
Unit 7: The Victorian Period: Power and Change

The introductory page for each prescribed unit topic gives an expected time frame (three to six weeks), a unit description, a list of unit goals, and a set of 6 or 7 "guiding questions." Next comes a long list of coded Grade-Level Expectations (GLEs), which are narrative "statements that define what all students should know and be able to do at the end of a given grade level. GLEs add further definition to the content standards and benchmarks" (Louisiana Department of Education 2008). For example, the first unit of the English III curriculum, named "The Colonial Period in American Literature" contains a list of 76 GLEs. Some GLE statements are quite broad, such as 07c: " Analyze and synthesize in oral and written responses distinctive elements (e.g., structure) of a variety of literary forms and types, including forms of lyric and narrative poetry such as the ballad, sonnets, pastorals, elegies, and the dramatic monologue." Other GLE statements are shorter and more specific like 16d: "Develop complex compositions using writing

processes such as conferencing with teachers and peers" (Louisiana Department of Education, 2008). The pages beyond the GLEs of each unit contain sample classroom activities and sample assessments coinciding with the unit goals and GLEs. For example, the first unit of the English III curriculum contains about eight pages of sample activities and three pages of sample assessments.

So what does this mean for Louisiana literature teachers, and how do they use this curriculum? The answer varies widely depending on the school district, and the individual school. The Comprehensive Curriculum has written-in allowances for teachers wanting to deviate from the prescribed structure. The implementation guidelines are as follows:

> Local districts are responsible for implementation and monitoring of the *Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum* and have been delegated the responsibility to decide if
>
> - units are to be taught in the order presented
> - substitutions of equivalent activities are allowed
> - GLES can be adequately addressed using fewer activities than presented
> - permitted changes are to be made at the district, school, or teacher level
>
> Districts have been requested to inform teachers of decisions made (Louisiana Department of Education, 2008).

None of the teachers who participated in this study indicated that the Comprehensive Curriculum imposes any unreasonable restrictions on their freedom to choose the texts they want to teach. One participant described it like this, "The school does not mandate a curriculum, but the parish/state does. It is more of a guideline than a set of commandments. Teachers still have a fair amount of freedom in choosing texts." The 11th and 12th grade teachers did indicate that their choices of texts are more restricted than the other grade levels, because they are specifically

required to teach American and British literature according to time periods. In grades 6 through 10, the unit topics are usually structured according to literary genre (mystery, mythology, science fiction, etc.) or literary form (short story, novel, drama, etc.). Because of this rigid structure, some of Smagorinksy's ideas about how to organize conceptual units may be difficult to implement.

Another external consideration that my teacher participants discussed is the Accelerated Reader (AR) program. The AR program, as described by Thompson, Madhuri and Taylor (2008) is "a computer-assisted program designed for library, school, and classroom used to encourage and measure the frequency and accuracy with which students read" (550). As of 2009, the AR program was being used in more than 75,000 schools (Straight, 2009). The majority of my teacher participants indicated that the AR program is used at their schools. AR is designed to be a supplement to the curriculum, and it does not directly affect a classroom teacher's curriculum choices. However, there is something to be said for the amount of classroom time devoted to the implementation of this program, and this does have some bearing on lesson planning decisions. For example, some schools allow students silent reading time in class to read their AR books (Mrs. Harrison's students read for the first 15 minutes of every class period), and some teachers allow their students to take computerized AR tests during class.

There has been much controversy over the program, and an inconclusive body of research exists arguing over its strengths and weaknesses. The company that distributes the AR program, Renaissance Learning, claims on its Web site that "in total, 155 research studies and reviews support the effectiveness of Accelerated Reader." The Web page later indicates that 20 of the 155 studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals (Renaissance Learning, 2010). Critics have argued that the program can be counterproductive by actually *decreasing* students' interest

in reading (Thompson, Madhuri & Taylor, 2008) or by misguiding students' reading priorities with seemingly arbitrary point values assigned to books (Straight, 2009). However, defenders of the program describe success stories of using the AR program to reach reluctant readers, English as a second language students and special education students (Hamilton, 1997; Moyer, 2006). The majority of participants in this study had positive things to say about the AR program except for two strongly dissenting voices, which I will discuss further in my data analysis chapter.

During the curriculum creation process teachers are sometimes limited by what materials are available to them, and among the most common materials available to teachers is the class textbook. In a 1994 *English Journal* article titled "What Textbooks Can— and Cannot — Do," Christenbury and Kelly analyze the strengths and weaknesses of literature class anthologies and provide reasons for their use in America's classrooms. Textbooks are widely used in literature classrooms due to time (teachers have little time to develop curricula from scratch), money (class anthologies are often cheaper than running off multitudes of copies or purchasing novels), authority (there is a wide perception that researchers and "experts" who create the textbooks know what they are doing), convenience (textbooks are "one-stop shopping" for information), and control over teachers by school administrators (Christenbury & Kelly, 1994).

However, literature textbooks tend to be enormous in size, discouraging students from using them, and they tend to shackle timid teachers and dictate the curriculum. Christenbury and Kelly (1994) argue that teachers should find a happy medium between using the textbook when it's appropriate and convenient and creatively seeking out additional materials. They write, "Sole reliance upon a textbook does not open the world but circumscribes it; teachers need to use supplemental materials and, indeed, to encourage not only the students but also *themselves* to question what is often presented as one truth" (emphasis Christenbury's & Kelly's, p. 80). The

participants in this study indicated various degrees of how much they use their textbooks. However, none of them admitted to *never* deviating from the text.

The final subject I will discuss in this literature review is how fear of controversy can affect a classroom teacher's curriculum decisions. Often teachers encounter texts that they would love to teach, but they worry about whether they are appropriate for their classroom contexts. Greembaum (1997) dismisses what she calls the "myth of appropriateness" as it relates to secondary literature instruction, and ruefully describes how teachers try to avoid controversy by ignoring study-worthy texts. She writes:

> Unfortunately, the current climate in education leads some English teachers and (perhaps especially) administrators to self-censor, rigorously investigating the "appropriateness" of any material taught. Some would withdraw *Huck Finn* before any parents complain about the use of the word *nigger*; some would avoid mention of Hamlet's mother's sexuality, or chastise any student question on the matter as 'inappropriate,' thereby quelling potential difficulties, like student giggles or parental furor. Indeed, many English teachers are feeling war-weary; not in the mood to incite parental controversy, media coverage, sessions in the principal's office (Greenbaum 1997, p. 16).

As Greenbaum points out, texts like *Huckleberry Finn* are still widely avoided despite the text's widely revered status in American literature. Fortunately there are extensive resources available to assist teachers who are contemplating teaching controversial texts. As referenced earlier in this literature review, there are guides on how to write professional rationales before their classroom practices are challenged (Smagorinsky, 2008; Pipkin, 2000). Also, there are many anti-censorship guides dealing with commonly taught texts such as the Public Broadcasting Service's *Huckleberry Finn* teaching guide (Carr, & Forchion, 1999) and a detailed

rationale published in *The English Journal* for teaching Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (Worthington, 1985). As related to the context of this study, I observed one teacher courageously decide to continue teaching a graphic novel despite her realization that it contained a drawing of a penis, and I watched another teacher unflinchingly teach *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* again this year as she has done for decades.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This project is a qualitative research study with the goal of producing a quality example of action research. The majority of action research studies produced by Holmes Program students involve the study of school-age students in specific classroom settings. However, my project, aimed at studying the behavior of teachers, still qualifies as action research as defined by Mertler (2009). His definition of action research is as follows:

> Action research is defined as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn. More important, action research is characterized as research that is done *by* teachers *for* themselves (p. 4).

Mertler's description of action research carried out "*by* teachers *for* themselves" is a central goal of this project. I designed this study as a means of seeking out vital information about my future practice. It was important for me to deeply explore the key considerations teachers must weigh when making curriculum choices, so I will be prepared to make these choices myself reflectively and effectively.

The specific qualitative research design I chose to employ was an observational case study design. This design is described by Mertler (2009) as involving "the study of a particular organization or some aspect of the organization. The focus of observational case studies might be a particular physical location in the organization, a specific group of people, or a particular activity within the school" (p. 79). In this study I focus on the curriculum choices of four classroom teachers of varying grade levels (one 6th grade teacher, one 8th grade teacher, one

10th grade teacher and one 11th grade teacher), three of whom I observed teaching in their classrooms extensively.

Research Plan

My research was conducted using the following steps.

1. I developed a 10-question survey for literature teachers, asking for their perceptions of various topics involving the curriculum creation process. (A copy of this survey is labeled APPENDIX A at the end of this paper). I contacted approximately 52 literature teachers from eight different schools throughout the East Baton Rouge Parish area and asked them to participate in my survey. I received 11 responses from six different schools.
2. I transcribed and studied the survey responses.
3. I chose four teachers I wanted to interview. I chose my interview participants based on their years of teaching experience, my familiarity with the teachers and their teaching methods and their confident, compelling survey answers. I also tried to represent a mixture of grade levels in my interview sample.
4. I personally observed three of the four interview participants in their classroom settings. Two of the participants (Mrs. Harrison and Ms. Starr) had been my supervising teachers, so I was intimately familiar with their teaching practices. I also made it a point to observe Mrs. McCartney's class on multiple occasions.
5. I developed a specific list of interview questions, tailored to each interview participant. I based the questions on what I already knew about the teachers (from their survey results and my personal observations).
6. I conducted my interviews. I employed a group interview strategy with Ms. Starr and Mrs. McCartney, because they are close colleagues and work together on a consistent

basis. I assumed that a group interview strategy would provide for a richer discussion, as Ms. Starr and Mrs. McCartney would be able to elaborate on each other's answers. I conducted a separate in-person interview with Mrs. Harrison, and I e-mailed interview questions to Mrs. Lennon. The in-person interviews were tape recorded.

7. I transcribed the interview tapes.

8. I analyzed my data. Details of my data analysis process will be discussed shortly.

Participant Information

A total of 11 teachers from six different schools in the East Baton Rouge Parish area participated in my survey. Seven participants are high school teachers, and four are middle school teachers. The grade-level breakdown is as follows: two 6th grade teachers, one 7th grade teacher, two 8th grade teachers, four 9th grade teachers, three 10th grade teachers, and two 11th grade teachers. Three teachers indicated they teach multiple grade levels. Unfortunately, no 12th grade teachers are represented in this study. Of the six local schools included in this study, two are public high schools, two are public middle schools (one magnet, one traditional), one is a Catholic middle school, and one is a university-affiliated laboratory school. I will now provide more detailed information about my case study participants.

Ms. Starr.

Ms. Starr is an 11th grade American literature teacher at Eleanor Rigby High School. She has been teaching for a total of 22 years, 20 of which have been spent in her current job. She is also the English department head for the school, although she did not indicate how long she has held this position. Ms. Starr teaches three sections of gifted English (students are labeled according to IQ) and one section of honors/Great Scholars English (students are labeled according to GPA/academic achievement).

Mrs. McCartney.

Mrs. McCartney is a 10th grade world literature teacher at Eleanor Rigby High School. She has been a teacher for 15 years, and she has spent 9 years in her current position. All of Mrs. McCartney's world literature students are labeled gifted.

Mrs. Harrison.

Mrs. Harrison is an 8th grade English language arts teacher at Abbey Road Middle Magnet School. She has been teaching for 32 years, 5 of which have been spent in her current job. Abbey Road Middle Magnet School is a selective admission school. The school admits only 750 students at a time, so students are required to maintain decent grades to remain at the school. Although Mrs. Harrison is now teaching at a high performing school, she indicated that she spent many of her previous teaching years teaching in lower performing schools.

Mrs. Lennon.

Mrs. Lennon is a 6th grade reading teacher at Sgt. Pepper University Laboratory School. Mrs. Lennon submitted compelling survey responses, and I had hoped to interview her more extensively for this study. I felt it was important to capture the viewpoint of a sixth-grade teacher, which is the youngest end of the secondary education spectrum. However, at the deadline for this project's completion, Mrs. Lennon had not yet responded to my e-mail interview questions. I will submit an addendum to this paper either stating what I learned from Mrs. Lennon (if she submits her answers before my project defense) or what I had hoped to learn from her (if she does not).

Some caveats about my participant pool.

I have identified some flaws in my participant selection process. First, the three teachers I interviewed extensively, while worthy and valuable sources of information, were people I

already knew quite well. Mrs. Harrison was my supervising teacher in the fall, Ms. Starr was my supervising teacher in the spring, and Mrs. McCartney inhabited the classroom next door to Ms. Starr. The fact that I was deeply familiar with my participants' teaching practices provides a richness of understanding on my part, but it also may present possible biases. Second, all three case study participants teach high performing (or at least highly capable) students. Ms. Starr and Mrs. McCartney teach gifted classes, and Mrs. Harrison teaches in a magnet school setting. This leaves out the perspective of a teacher of lower performing students or struggling readers. Finally, 10 out of 11 of my study participants are public school teachers, and I wanted more representation of private and parochial school teachers. Unfortunately, I did not receive much response from the private and parochial schools I contacted for my study.

Data Analysis Procedures

After collecting and transcribing all available data, it was time to begin analysis. At this point, I turned back to my original research questions for guidance. Here is a restatement of my research questions:

1. How do local secondary literature teachers define the literary canon, and what perceptions do they hold about teaching canonical versus non-canonical texts?
2. What decision-making processes are involved when local secondary literature teachers choose the texts they teach? What rationales do they provide for their curriculum choices?
3. What outside influences do local secondary literature teachers encounter during their curriculum-making processes, and how do they respond to these influences?

The goal of my data analysis process was to answer these questions using my teacher participants' responses. I decided to consider each question one at a time. By studying my data

numerous times and taking notes on my participants' responses, I identified common themes emerging from the narratives. These themes I have refined as sub-topics to be employed in the discussion of my original research questions.

For question 1 - "How do local secondary literature teachers define the literary canon, and what perceptions do they hold about teaching canonical versus non-canonical texts?" - I identified the following sub-topics: *defining canon, perceptions of canonical texts,* and *perceptions of non-canonical texts*.

For question 2 - " What decision-making processes are involved when local secondary literature teachers choose the texts they teach? What rationales do they provide for their curriculum choices?" - I identified the following sub-topics; *student interests, teacher interests* and *multicultural literacy.*

For question 3 - "What outside influences do local secondary literature teachers encounter during their curriculum-making processes, and how do they respond to these influences?" - I identified the following sub-topics: *The Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum, The Accelerated Reader program, materials available (including textbooks),* and *controversial texts*.

By exploring these sub-topics in greater detail, I will provide a closer look at the various factors teachers must consider when planning curricula.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, I will explore the various topics of conversation that emerged between my teacher participants and myself throughout the course of this study. I will also identify the most common perceptions of my teacher participants as well as unique ones. In my surveys and interviews, I chose to ask my participants questions that I felt were relevant to the study of curriculum-making processes and were relevant to my future experiences as a classroom teacher. This section is organized into three main topics, corresponding with my original interview questions. These main topics are divided into sub-topics, representing the interesting themes emerging from the conversations I had with my participants.

Canonical vs. Non-Canonical: Teachers' Perceptions

In my survey, I asked my participants to provide their definition of the literary canon, to describe the differences between canonical and non-canonical texts, and to explain what percentage of the texts they teach in their classrooms would they consider canonical and what percentage they would consider non-canonical. The results are as follows.

Defining canon.

Some of the words and phrases the teachers used to describe the literary canon were *classic*, *stood the test of time, important, well-known*, *necessary* and *relevant*. From these descriptions it is clear that most of these teachers have a high level of respect for texts of the canon. For example, one participant noted that canonized literature is "beneficial to an educational system" and another participant explained, "A literary canon is a collection of literature that is generally regarded as necessary. Meaning most students of the language arts should study these well-known texts. The epitomic example of various literature." Among my 11 participants, five teachers said they teach a majority of canonical literature (with two claiming a

100 percent canonical curriculum), two teachers said they teach a majority of non-canonical literature, and four teachers said they teach about half and half.

Perceptions of canonical texts.

On my survey, I asked the following question: What components of classic texts set them apart from modern, popular texts? The teachers responded that classic texts: are more challenging to read and interpret, are time-tested, have a higher level of vocabulary, are richer in artistic language, employ deeper meanings, provide a higher level of literary scholarship, are written about more conservative topics, are representative of past eras, remain relevant despite the time period and are written in more captivating, elegant language. Most of these comments are positive, clearly reiterating the high level of respect the teachers feel for canonized texts.

One unique viewpoint that emerged from the responses is the following: "Classic texts don't have easy or resolved conflicts. Classics can be read multiple times and only get better. Modern, popular texts are often only worth one read. Their pleasure is transitory." This response was from Ms. Starr's survey, and in her interview, I asked her to elaborate on this viewpoint. Both Ms. Starr and Mrs. McCartney argue that the defining characteristic of a classic text is that there are numerous topics to explore within the text. Mrs. McCartney explained, "If it's a really good book, you can't possibly talk about all of the things there are to talk about [in one unit]" (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

"Exactly," Ms. Starr agreed, "For years that's how I have determined whether a book is worth teaching year after year. There are books that I've taught, and I liked them, and the kids liked them, but there wasn't the same richness. There were not a whole lot of things to keep picking at and keep talking about. We read it, we got it, and that was it" (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

Both Ms. Starr and Mrs. McCartney commented that they prefer texts so rich in meaning and symbolism that they catch something new every time they read them. They also said they are delighted when a student points out something they never noticed before. Mrs. Starr explains with the following example:

> For years and years and years I've taught *The Scarlet Letter* by Hawthorne, and I've taught *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner. And I am ashamed to say that I never caught the parallels between those novels until the kid pointed it out. And there are lots of parallels. Both of the main female characters have an affair with a minister. One of them names her child Pearl. The other one names her child Jewel. Both of the minister characters are symbolic of extreme hypocrisy, of being self serving, of displacing blame. So once the kid opened up that door, we were able to mine that vein extensively. And later I went on to read more about Faulkner and found out he was a big fan of Hawthorne and saw himself as "mining the recesses of the human heart" just like Hawthorne did. So I think it was very deliberate - him calling to mind this other classic in his novel (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

Mrs. McCartney also provided her own example:

> When I was teaching *Othello* one year, a student pointed out to me that every act ends with a rhyming couplet except for act 3, and I had not noticed that. I point that out every year now. See how everything is out of balance, where the plot is the most tense? It is an incredible thing to point out. In that act, everything is in turmoil. There's no nice way to wrap it up. It's the most intense part of the play. Everything is out of kilter at that point [...] it obviously was deliberate, but I didn't notice it, because there are so many things to notice (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

It is clear from these statements that Ms. Starr and Mrs. McCartney use the classics to challenge their students to be perceptive, to notice details and to make connections between texts they are currently reading and ones they have previously read.

Perceptions of non-canonical texts.

While teachers' perceptions of canonical texts were overwhelmingly positive, their perceptions of non-canonical texts were mixed. On the subject of YAL, for example, several teachers responded that they do not teach these texts at all for the following reasons: limited time, academic focus, college prep curriculum, the concern that YAL titles are not challenging enough for students, and the concern that students would be averse to studying popular titles in scholarly ways. Other negative comments surrounding non-canonical texts included, "they are often only worth one read," "often the themes are trendy," "popular titles aren't always unique," and "those books usually reach a 'cult' status."

On the flipside, several respondents praised non-canonical texts, explaining that popular titles, including YAL novels, often appeal to students' interests more effectively than the classics. For example, one middle school teacher wrote, "[YAL] is my favorite genre to teach. I hope it provides an opportunity for students to engage in reading that will eventually turn them into lifelong readers. I try to expose them to authors who spark the interests of young adults with themes that appeal to the middle school mind." Another teacher responded, " [I teach YAL] because students love YA books, and I want them to learn how to love to read just like I do."

The mixed messages from teachers over the usefulness of non-canonical texts in the classroom echo the mixed viewpoints of the critics. It is clear that there is no consensus in the educational community about the relevance of YAL in the classroom; proponents of the genre still have a tough job ahead of them.

The Curriculum Creation Process: Teachers' Choices

This next section focuses on how the personal opinions and perceptions of the classroom teacher contribute to his or her curriculum development. I have identified three major viewpoints: first that student interests should be taken into account above all, second that teachers should appeal to their own interests to improve their teaching performance, and third that exposing children to multicultural literature is an important concern.

Student interests.

It is obvious that many teachers believe that students learn more willingly and effectively if they are interested in the subject matter. When asked the question, "What decision-making processes do you follow when choosing which texts to teach?" seven out of 11 teacher participants indicated that they take student interests into account. However, after studying my data for elaborative statements, I found very few detailed, passionate descriptions of how the teachers measure their students' interest in various texts. Here are some statements I have extracted related to choosing texts based on student interests.

- "I also choose literature that I think will spark an interest in reluctant readers."
- "I love to teach *Romeo & Juliet,* because the students enjoy it, and they can relate to it."
- "My favorite thing to teach is Edgar Allan Poe. I love having the students compare his poetry to his short stories. He was an interesting guy, and the students really get into studying him."
- "I love teaching *The Hobbit*. Even before the movies, students were just drawn to the imagination of Tolkien."
- "Recently [I've taught] *Speak, Bronx Masquerade, The Killer's Cousin, The Contender, Slam!,* etc. I teach YA to keep students interested in what we're doing in class."

These are obviously thoughtful statements with the aim of keeping students' interests in mind; however, as you will see in the following section, teachers speak more passionately about other factors in their decision-making processes. Perhaps student interests are important for teachers, but other things are more important? Here is one detailed description of Mrs. McCartney's decision to cut a text from her curriculum due to lack of student interest.

> *Metamorphosis* is something I taught for 3 or 4 years, but I cut it, because the kids universally hated it. But I started it, because we had copies of it, and I liked it fine. But I ask the kids at the end of every year what was your favorite selection? What was your least favorite selection? If I had to cut something next year, what would it be? What I got from those every year was that kids liked *Metamorphosis* the least out of everything we did. So why keep teaching something that they don't like, and I'm not able to make them like it. I replaced that with something else. But I did do it for 3 years before I finally let it go (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

While I applaud Mrs. McCartney for her willingness to adjust her curriculum based on the students' interests, I do wonder why she continued to teach it for 3 (or 4) years despite early indications that the students were not receptive to it. This may indicate that whatever initial educational goals she was trying to reach through teaching that text may have been more important to her than how interesting the students found the text.

Teacher interests.

On the flipside, Mrs. McCartney finds it *very* important to measure her own interest in a text she is teaching. In her interview, she exclaimed, "If I don't like something then I'm not teaching it, because there's no way to teach something well that you don't enjoy!" Survey

respondents indicated how important it is for them to be personally interested in the subject matter in the following comments:

- "I [...] include texts I think are interesting and appropriate."
- "I choose texts that contain authors whose works I admire and find interesting."
- "I don't teach anything I don't personally enjoy, and I like them all."
- *"The Great Gatsby* [...] is just an interesting book that I loved, so I like to teach it."
- "'The Raven' and other Poe works are interesting teaching."

I agree that it is optimal for teachers to be interested in the subject matter that they are teaching, and I agree with Mrs. McCartney that teachers will perform better this way. However, I believe it is important to reach a compromise between the students' interests and the teachers' interests. For example, is Mrs. McCartney's decision to cut *Metamorphosis* from her curriculum a prime example of this type of compromise? Or did she hang on to the text a little bit too long, because she personally enjoyed it?

Multicultural literacy.

A final internal consideration that I observed literature teachers making is the decision to include multicultural texts in their curricula. This is one of Mrs. McCartney's key goals as a world literature teacher, and her decision to introduce the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjana Satrapi in her curriculum this year is based upon that goal. She explained:

> I chose this [graphic novel] in particular mostly because of the content and it being about Iran. I try in 10th grade to do as much world literature as possible, because they are going on to do all American or all British. So it's really the last chance to get anything from other cultures, which is why I teach *Things Fall Apart, The House on Mango Street,* etc. And it's also, like *Things Fall Apart*, written by a person of that culture, which is nice. I

> was teaching *The Good Earth*, but *The Good Earth* is about China but is written by an American, so it's about getting the most authentic voices that you can find that are also accessible to the students (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

Later in the conversation, she continued:

> I also think this is a region that a lot of people have preconceived notions about. So it's very nice to put a human face to it. You might say, "Oh the people there are like this." Well, no. The regime there is like this, but the people struggle just like any people struggle. So that's been nice, and it also got me interested in reading other things from the same time frame about Iran. What I can give the kids when I'm done with those books is, "If you liked this, or if you're interested in this, here are some other memoirs about the same place and the same time period (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

From her thoughtful comments, it is obvious that Mrs. McCartney is passionate about exposing her students to information about other cultures and promoting open-minded, tolerant attitudes. Proponents of multiculturalism like Mrs. McCartney believe that the school curriculum should be adjusted to include works of literature written by women and minorities and also works written about foreign cultures. Here are some comments that indicate other participants in this study feel the same way.

- "I want the texts to [...] represent different periods and diverse groups."
- "I also choose texts that cause students to think. I want the students to relate the texts to real life. I often choose texts that promote tolerance."
- "[I teach] *The Watsons go to Birmingham* [because] my students have not experienced racism or discrimination. I think it is important for students to learn

history and to appreciate diversity. As students grow to 'know' the characters in the novel, they can relate to the experience those characters face."

- "*The Diary of Anne Frank* is a great history lesson and leaves a lasting impression on the youth. This story reminds us of how precious our lives really are. Students seldom stop to think about the price that has been paid for their freedoms."
- "For me it was very important to incorporate some women, so those are some changes I made, because I was part of the generation in which women writers became very important. Whereas teachers older than I am were never trained to teach any women. For example, Zora Neale Hurston came 'in vogue' while I was a graduate student, so that's somebody I incorporated based on my personal experience."

External Influences: Teachers' Responses

Beyond personal opinions and preferences that contribute to the curriculum-making process, teachers are often influenced by forces beyond their control. In this final section I will discuss external influences that may change the way teachers plan their lessons and how teachers feel about these influences.

The Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum.

As explained in my literature review, the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum dictates each grade level's unit topics and the order in which these units are taught. While all three of my case study participants indicated that the Curriculum is not unreasonably restrictive, they did explain how it can sometimes get in the way of their creative freedom. For example, Mrs. Harrison discussed having to scrap one of her favorite units, because the eighth grade curriculum no longer allows for it.

> I miss doing the things that I like to do, and I think that's one of the faults of it [the Comprehensive Curriculum]. I know that I had an awesome mythology unit, and I thoroughly enjoyed teaching it, and there's something to be said for that, because when you have a teacher that has a specialty of something, and they love teaching it, it's going to come out to the children as a really, really vital learning experience. You're so into it, and you have so much depth of knowledge about it (personal communication, April 7, 2010).

All three of my case study participants agreed that while it has its faults, the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum does not severely impede their ability to perform their professional duties in peace. However, the teachers indicated that their personal ease is mostly due to the schools where they work. Unfortunately, Mrs. McCartney said, some schools dictate *specifically* what activities teachers must use with their students. She said:

> The [Comprehensive Curriculum] activities are based on the GLE's, which we have sort of independently of the curriculum. Those are the things we were supposed to be doing anyway. Some schools say you have to do those activities. This has never been one of those schools, so as long as you're meeting GLE's, the activities are up to you. In a sense, I don't object to the Comprehensive Curriculum as a "This is what you ought to be covering" idea. My objection to it would be if someone said prescriptively, "You are going to do this activity and this activity and this activity" because that's just irritating and wrong (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

Mrs. Harrison had a similar viewpoint:

> I like how the curriculum gives me the freedom to choose how I'm going to go about teaching the GLE's. That is something I would *not* like if someone said, "You have to

> teach this *this* way." I think that robs me and the children of a good experience, because it's not mine if I'm trying to teach it that way. If they want it that way, then anybody off the street can come in and teach a canned curriculum. To me they pay me to be creative to teach what they want me to, but I don't have a problem with them telling me what topics to teach (personal communication, April 7, 2010).

Mrs. Starr commented that the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum is user unfriendly and "too busy." She told a horror story in which one school forced teachers to do eight different activities with the same text, which she said was ridiculous and excessive. She also said the curriculum is riddled with errors, citing the following example, "In local color, Kate Chopin writes a lot of local color stories, but the story that they had for her wasn't a local color story. So it made it hard for teachers to try to figure out what that was all about" (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

The teachers I interviewed find the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum to be a tolerable external influence. They can see its flaws, but nevertheless they are able to work around these flaws. However, if Ms. Starr and Mrs. McCartney are correct that some local schools are enforcing the curriculum in a more literal, prescriptive way, I consider this to be a very grave truth. From my own experience as student teacher designing two units based on the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum, I found it to be very difficult and stressful to use. In fact, during my first semester student teaching, before I really understood the minimal level in which the Comprehensive Curriculum was being enforced at Abbey Road Middle Magnet School, I spent hours upon hours poring over the GLEs, trying to make sense of them, trying to incorporate them into my unit. It was not until Mrs. Harrison put me at ease by explaining that teachers just do the best they can with the GLEs, and she reassured me that my unit was fine. This statement is *not* a

cop out on Mrs. Harrison's part. She simply understood how user unfriendly the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum truly is.

The Accelerated Reader program.

Ten out of 11 survey participants indicated that their schools use the Accelerated Reader program, and the majority spoke positively of the program. Advocates of the program say it provides students great incentives to read when otherwise they would not do it on their own. Mrs. Harrison believes the AR program provides motivation for reluctant readers while also providing positive feedback and validation for students who are already strong readers. She explained:

> I think with most kids, if given the choice, they're just not going to read, because it's just another thing they'd have to do. Most kids would tend to just take the easy way out, and by requiring them to read, I would say that 90 to 95 percent of them find out that they have a love of reading, which they may have never found out otherwise. If I didn't require any kind of reading at all, I would have a few kids who would still read, but I would have this whole group who wouldn't. I have this tiny little group over here that would do it whether it was required or not, I have a tiny little group over here that still don't do it unless I stand over them with a whip and a chair, and this big group of kids in the middle who wouldn't do it if they didn't have to but find out that they love it (personal communication, April 7, 2010).

Mrs. McCartney also believes the AR program is a positive influence on her students. However, Eleanor Rigby High School has participated in the program for only one semester so far, so it is too soon to see the long-term effects of the program upon the school. Mrs. Starr explained that Eleanor Rigby never had enough money in the past to fund the AR program, even

though English teachers at the school had been discussing implementing it for years. The funds became available this year after a nearby school shut down for repairs, and Eleanor Rigby inherited this school's students -- and Title 1 funding. Now with a huge pool of money available, the school decided to implement the program. However, in their effort to be conservative, they implemented AR for only 9th and 10th grades. When asked about future plans to extend the program to upperclassmen, Ms. Starr replied:

> I would like to extend it, but I don't know if there will be money. That will be our concern. We would definitely like to extend it to 11th and 12 grade. It's quite expensive. [...] But as a person who isn't directly involved, because I don't teach any 9th or 10th graders, I do see *way* more students reading -- reading in the hallways, reading before class. I see lots and lots of kids carrying books, so that's exciting (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

While the teachers described the newly-implemented program as an overall positive influence at Eleanor Rigby, they did admit that some students were not keeping up with the program's requirements, and some teachers were not enforcing the reading policies properly. One survey respondent from a local middle school also expressed some frustrations regarding how AR is implemented. She wrote, "Students do not like the program and lose sight of the intended objective -- read more to improve comprehension and fluency. Students take tests without fully understanding or completing the text just to reach their goal points."

Mrs. Lennon at Sgt. Pepper University Laboratory School is the only respondent who indicated that her school does not participate in the AR program. She wrote, "No, we do not believe in this program. I have taught at schools that use this program, and I can honestly say my students read more for pleasure than the students I taught at schools with Accelerated Reader."

Based on my background reading, and the teachers' mixed responses, the AR program is obviously controversial. One of the journal articles I read about AR (Thompson, Madhuri & Taylor 2008) noted that there have not been enough peer-reviewed studies conducted, especially at the high school level, to draw definitive conclusions about AR's effectiveness.

Materials available (including textbooks).

I asked my case study participants whether their decision-making processes are often dictated by the materials they have available. To some extent, yes, they said. However, all three participants indicated that their schools are fortunate to have cooperative office personnel who are willing to supply what the teachers need under reasonable circumstances. In contrast, Mrs. Harrison explained how she used to work in an underprivileged, inner-city school where resources were tight, and she had to improvise. She said, "Over my 32-year career, I taught in schools in which we had nothing but the discarded textbooks from the 'nicer' schools. I found a story in something I had one copy of, and I learned how to make my own booklets, and you just have to be willing to take the time to do everything" (personal communication, April 7, 2010).

Ironically, Mrs. Harrison's current classes have expensive textbooks that are barely used, because they are not written to properly coincide with the state-mandated eighth grade curriculum. She explained:

> Our curriculum is not based on that book. For example, we spend the first six weeks of the school year on mysteries, and there's not a single mystery in our literature book. So that's a $75 book that is totally useless for the first six weeks of school. I could do without a textbook very easily. In fact, I was on the textbook adoption committee for the parish, and for a while we discussed not even getting a new textbook. But they wouldn't let us spend the money on any other materials, so if we didn't buy the textbooks, we'd

> have to give the money back, and they couldn't see doing that, so we got new textbooks. I end up using them, half a dozen times throughout the school year maybe? That's it (personal communication, April 7, 2010).

While Mrs. Harrison uses her class textbook very seldom, Mrs. Starr uses hers quite often. She said there's no point in "re-inventing the wheel." However, she and Mrs. McCartney agree that while the textbook is useful, using outside resources is important, too.

> I use the text, but I'm not married to the text. In almost every unit, I use at least a story or two that's not from the text, and I certainly don't feel like I have to teach everything in the text, because it would take me four years to get to them all. But a lot of things are sort of like bedrock stories. [...] I need to teach Washington Irving, and the story by Washington Irving is *The Devil and Tom Walker*. That story is in every 11th grade book ever made, so I use it there (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

All three case study participants agreed that a textbook is meant to be a guide and a resource only; it should not take the place of careful lesson planning on the teacher's part.

Controversial texts.

One day this semester, right before lunch, Mrs. McCartney asked me to step into the hall, so she could show me something. She had a copy of the graphic novel *Persepolis* is her hand, turned to a specific page. She handed me the book and pointed to a panel she wanted me to examine. "What does it look like is happening on this page?" she asked me.

I studied the illustration. There was an image of a man standing over another man, who was on the ground. The standing man was holding his penis, urinating on the man on the floor. I replied, "Umm, one man is peeing on another man... right?"

The scene had no sexual connotations; the urinating man was simply a crude act of degradation and discrimination. However, Mrs. McCartney was concerned that the graphical representation of a penis would raise some objections with her students' parents. She had already begun teaching the graphic novel, but she had somehow missed noticing that image during the preparation of her unit.

After a discussion at lunch that day, and after consulting Ms. Starr, the department head, Mrs. McCartney decided to continue teaching the graphic novel. She predicted that her students would be mature about the penis image, and she would hopefully have no trouble. There were too many positive reasons for teaching the text, and she did not want one controversial image to deter her from completing her unit. Ms. Starr vowed to back her up if any controversy arose. She justified Mrs. McCartney's decision to teach the graphic novel by explaining:

> It's a good book to teach, because it's so topical, it's so of the moment. It's very interesting, too, because she was doing her research, and I was helping her, we were talking through her research on it. It's a country and a region where it's hard to nail down historical fact. There's a lot of argument, and a lot of it is spin. It depends on what country the historian who is telling the story is from. That's eye opening for the kids to see that history isn't something written in stone (personal communication, April 5, 2010).

Although I have not read the entire graphic novel (I did read about four chapters of it for a class observation one day), I strongly believe Ms. Starr and Mrs. McCartney made the right decision by continuing to teach *Persepolis*. It was refreshing to work with bold teachers who could provide logical support for their curriculum choices with no hesitation. This encounter with controversy opened my eyes to how teachers must choose the texts they teach carefully, reflectively and justifiably.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Completing this project has been a journey for me, in which I learned things about myself, I learned things about my future career, and I learned things about the teachers who worked with me. The completion of this project brings me great joy and a sense of accomplishment, but it also brings me a bit of disappointment. There are several things I envisioned about this study that did not quite come to fruition. First, I wanted a larger participant pool. While I do believe the data I collected was more than sufficient to learn about the process of action research and the decision-making processes of teachers, I was disappointed that only 11 teachers were willing to assist me with this project. Second, I *really* wanted a fourth interview subject, especially someone who teaches younger children. I believe the reading needs of sixth graders are immensely different from the reading needs of high school students, or even eighth graders, and I would have enjoyed collecting a deeper perspective of a sixth-grade teacher's practice. Finally, I wanted time to *read* more about this topic. While I do consider my literature review to be a sizable sample of the available sources, there are still so many articles and books to read about the curriculum-making process.

I believe that all my participants, and especially my case study participants, are thoughtful, reflective teachers who truly want what is best for kids, despite their varying viewpoints. By surveying teachers with radically different answers to some of my questions, I learned that there is not a "best way" to be a teacher. I believe teaching is a personal craft, just like playing music or painting or writing. You cannot separate the art from the artist without losing some of its beauty. Teaching is an art that is deeply personal, and what works for one teacher is never guaranteed to work for another.

My viewpoints on curriculum making have changed dramatically with the completion of this study. I went into this project intending to do a very biased study on the strengths of teaching young adult literature and the weaknesses of teaching the classics. However, I have read and listened to some valid, thoughtful rationales on why teaching the classics is still a valid undertaking. My viewpoint has grown to become more moderate, like Herz's, who says teachers should teach YAL *in conjunction with* the classics, not instead of the classics. I still believe the classics are over-emphasized in American school systems, and I do not believe there are *enough* reflective, innovative teachers out there willing to deviate from the norm. I agree with the studies of Carlsen that indicate that we are exposing children to texts more complicated than they are developmentally ready to read, and I agree with Gallo, who says this is why so many adults do not read for pleasure. However, I also agree with Ms. Starr who describes the richness of experience that comes from reading a classic. Before student teaching in her classroom this semester, I do not think I enjoyed Mark Twain nearly as much as I do now.

I am deeply concerned about the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum and how it will be implemented at whatever school chooses to hire me in August. I am quite frightened by the prospect of being told specifically what activities to use in my classroom. That is another regret of my study -- I wish I had found a teacher participant who could describe life in one of the tyrannical schools that Ms. Starr claims exists. In fact, I plan to do this for my own personal information, even though I won't be able to include it in this report.

Despite the flaws in my research design, I am proud of this project and thankful for everything I have learned during the process. I hope this experience will make me a more reflective classroom teacher, and I plan to complete additional action research projects in the future. Here are a few of my ideas for future investigation:

- It would be interesting to ask literature teachers to write professional rationales for their unit plans. By collecting and studying these documents, I may be able to gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum-making process than this study was able to provide.
- I would like to study more specific examples of teachers who use Young Adult Literature in their classrooms. It would be especially exciting to find a teacher who employs Herz's idea of using YAL to "build a bridge" to the classics.
- I *need* to learn more about the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum and the various forms in which it is implemented throughout the state. Are there schools in which the curriculum severely impedes the creative freedom of Louisiana teachers? I do not want to just take Ms. Starr's word for it. I *need* to find this out for myself.

By continuing to research issues relevant to my future career, I expect to grow as an intellectual and as a professional. Hopefully, the next time a student inquires, "Ms. Broussard, why do we have to *read* this?" I will be able to provide a confident, thoughtful response.

ADDENDUM: LEARNING FROM MRS. LENNON

My original research proposal stated that I would seek out four to six case study participants. Unfortunately, I attempted to gain four and ended up with three. My fourth case study participant was supposed to be Mrs. Lennon, a sixth-grade teacher at Sgt. Pepper University Laboratory School. She enthusiastically agreed to participate in my study, but unfortunately we were never able to meet. Instead, I sent her detailed interview questions through e-mail but did not receive her responses before the project's due date.

However, to my great surprise and joy, Mrs. Lennon responded to my interview questions the day after my project defense! She explained that personal family issues prevented her from responding sooner. After studying her responses with great interest, I have decided to write this addendum to discuss her information and its relevance to my study.

Not having Mrs. Lennon's data during the writing process was a sobering experience. I had banked on having four case study participants, and it was difficult to face the fact that I was running out of time, and I could not wait to receive her data. I thought her responses were *so* important to my research, because she is a sixth-grade teacher, an underrepresented population in my study. I have a rich perspective of high school teachers' curriculum choices, but I know less about middle school teachers, especially sixth grade teachers.

Mrs. Lennon's responses provide a closer look at teaching reading to *younger* students; however her classroom context is similar to my other case study participants in many ways. In my e-mail interview, I asked Mrs. Lennon to describe the demographics of her classroom, and she provided the following explanation: "Most of my students are middle class to upper middle class with parents who went to college, some [with] advanced degrees. Most students are reading on or above grade level. A few are below grade level" (personal communication, April 20, 2010).

This is important to note, because like my other case study participants, Mrs. Lennon teaches mostly high achieving students. My project may have benefitted more from obtaining an additional participant who teaches at-risk students.

Nevertheless, I am thankful for Mrs. Lennon's responses, because some of her perspectives are quite unique. For example, Mrs. Lennon does not have a positive view of the Accelerated Reader Program. Unlike many of my study participants, who glowingly emphasized the positive aspects of the program, Mrs. Lennon provided a down-to-earth assessment of AR's pros and cons. She supplied the following critique:

> While I do believe AR initially encourages students to read, I think is eventually limiting. There are so many wonderful books for kids to read and they are not all on the AR list. In my experience students will only read AR books. I feel this limits the books students will read. Also, many teachers require students to take AR tests and give them grades on the tests. Many AR tests ask recall questions about unimportant details from the books. I feel this turns students off to reading. Tests do not create lifelong readers. I want students to learn to love reading. There are other ways to do this (personal communication, April 20, 2010).

Mrs. Lennon also pointed out that the students in her current school, who do not participate in AR, have developed a greater love of reading than her former students at other schools who did participate in AR. This begs the question -- are Mrs. Lennon's current students so enthusiastic about reading, because they have not been stifled by the rigid requirements of the AR program? Or are her students simply pre-disposed to high reading enthusiasm due to their high socio-economic backgrounds and parents with high levels of education? I do believe Mrs. Lennon's critiques of the AR program are valid, however, I question her correlation between

reading enthusiasm and being free from AR restrictions, as her students' family backgrounds are more likely the causes of enthusiasm. Nevertheless, Mrs. Lennon's dissenting opinion -- that AR is not completely positive -- is a crucial viewpoint that begs for further investigation.

Despite Mrs. Lennon's rather naive viewpoint regarding the origin of her students' love of reading, it is clear she is a thoughtful, open-minded professional who is willing to expose her students to the struggles of the "have nots" in society. In her survey response, she wrote, "My students have not experienced racism or discrimination. I think it is important for students to learn history and to appreciate diversity." She elaborated on this statement in her e-mail interview and discussed her yearly "tolerance unit" which includes the texts *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* by Christopher Paul Curtis and *The Devil's Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen. She explained:

> I like to use these two books because I believe we must teach children to be tolerant. As they learn to love the characters in the story, they develop empathy. They are always shocked to learn the atrocities that Jewish people and African Americans faced (personal communication, April 20, 2010).

My high school teacher participants had similar goals, teaching multicultural texts and texts about tolerance, diversity and the struggles of oppressed people. However, it is interesting to note that Mrs. Lennon, a sixth grade teacher, does not believe her students are too young to grapple with these issues, and she finds great value in teaching tolerance at an earlier grade level.

Here are some additional gems provided by Mrs. Lennon which I found particularly interesting and relevant:

- "I'm not a textbook teacher. I find them confining and stressful. I currently do not have a literature textbook."

- "I feel there are too many units in the Comprehensive Curriculum. I prefer to teach longer more in-depth units rather than short units that just touch on concepts."
- "The students love going to the movies. I have done this trip before with other books. I find that it is a great way to teach the students to write a comparison contrast essay. The students were surprised that they enjoyed the book more than the movie. Some were really disappointed with the movie and some were almost angry. It didn't follow the plot of the book."

This last comment is referring to a field trip to see *The Lightening Thief*, a movie released in February based on a novel by Rick Riordan. This novel is the first installment of Riordan's bestselling *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series. I decided to read this novel after watching several students at Abbey Road Middle Magnet (Mrs. Harrison's school) devour the series, and I wanted to read what the students were so excited about. I found it especially interesting that Mrs. Lennon taught such a new, popular novel, and I asked her to elaborate on this experience. She responded:

> I used *The Lightning Thief*, because I saw it as a way to get students to read a genre, fantasy, that they might not normally choose. Also, it encouraged those reluctant readers (especially boys) to read. The students really enjoy reading the same book. They discuss it and trade notes. It also fit nicely with our hero unit and the Greek unit in social studies. [...] Most students devoured the book and then the rest of the series (personal communication, April 20, 2010).

After reading Riordan's novel, I can see how it could be especially useful to teach within a Greek mythology unit, as it is overflowing with interesting names and facts pertaining to mythology. The inter-disciplinary approach Mrs. Lennon is describing -- connecting a text in a

literature class with "the Greek unit in social studies" -- was not mentioned by any of my other study participants, even though inter-disciplinary learning is a hot topic in educational studies. I applaud Mrs. Lennon for "thinking outside the box", coordinating with the social studies teachers in her school, and not being skittish about teaching a popular, new novel, even though it does not carry the label of "classic." Mrs. Lennon's responses indicate that she is a creative, contemplative teacher who believes in curriculum innovation. Inquiring about her classroom practices was a worthy, enriching experience for me.

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APPENDIX A - TEACHER SURVEY

1. Please provide your name, school, what grade levels and subjects you teach, and a preferred method of communication (e-mail, home phone, cell phone, etc.), so I can contact you if I have any questions about this survey.

2. As a teacher, how free are you to choose which texts you teach versus basing your lesson plans on a school-mandated curriculum?

3. What decision-making processes do you follow when choosing which texts to teach?

4. Please provide a list of three to five texts that you have taught or will teach in great detail.

5. How do you define literary canon?

6. Of the texts that you teach, what percentage of them would you define as canonical? What percentage would you define as non-canonical?

7. What are some of your favorite texts to teach and why?

8. What components of classic texts set them apart from modern, popular texts?

9. Does your school participate in the Accelerated Reader program? If so, explain how the program is implemented in your school and how students respond to it.

10. Do you teach any young adult titles in your class? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B - TRANSCRIBED TEACHER SURVEY RESPONSES

1. Please provide your name, school, what grade levels and subjects you teach, and a preferred method of communication (e-mail, home phone, cell phone, etc.), so I can contact you if I have any questions about this survey.

Note: Only grade levels and subjects are included here.

Participant 1 - 11th grade English III, gifted, honors, great scholars, American Cinema
Participant 2 - 6th grade Reading Writing Workshop
Participant 3 - 10th grade English - Gifted
Participant 4 - 9th grade English I
Participant 5 - 9th and 10th grade English I and II
Participant 6 - 9th grade English I
Participant 7 - 11th grade English III
Participant 8 - English I GS/Honors - 9th grade; English II GS/Honors - 10th grade
Participant 9 - 8th grade English
Participant 10 - 7th and 8th grade literature
Participant 11 - 6th grade literature

2. As a teacher, how free are you to choose which texts you teach versus basing your lesson plans on a school-mandated curriculum?

Participant 1 - I have to teach American literature, but I am free to choose individual texts.
Participant 2 - I have great freedom in choosing texts. I do base my units on the state curriculum (GLE's) but I choose the texts to use and how to teach them.
Participant 3 - I feel very free to choose my own texts. As long as GLE's are met and I stay within the framework, my department chair and administration are open to my teaching works I choose.
Participant 4 - The 9th and 10th grade curriculums are flexible if we stay within the specified genre.
Participant 5 - Very free.
Participant 6 - The school does not mandate a curriculum, but the parish/state does. It is more of a guideline than a set of commandments. Teachers still have a fair amount of freedom in choosing texts.
Participant 7 - Somewhat free. If I teach something not in the textbook I need to make sure relative GLE's and benchmarks are applicable.
Participant 8 - We are to follow a curriculum; however, we can choose any text that falls into the required curriculum genres.
Participant 9 - We are free to choose our texts as long as we follow the curriculum guidelines on genre and topic.
Participant 10 - In my earlier years teaching, we, the teachers, were able to choose the texts that we wanted to use and we were free to choose novels of our own choice. When our long-time principle retired, the school went to the Core Knowledge curriculum which specifies what materials to teach.

Participant 11 - I am free to select my texts with the final approval of the principal. The principal has only turned down one selection – *To Kill a Mockingbird.* That was turned down due to parental concerns. GLE's mandate the curriculum not the textbook.

3. What decision-making processes do you follow when choosing which texts to teach?

Participant 1 - I want the texts to be of literary merit, to represent different periods and diverse groups, and to have themes which are applicable to modern life.
Participant 2 - I think about texts that are well written and will enable me to easily teach the skills/concepts required in the curriculum/GLE's (plot, figurative language, etc.). However, I also choose texts that cause students to think. I want the students to relate the texts to real life. I often choose texts that promote tolerance.
Participant 3 - For me, choosing world literature is important. Students move on to American and British Lit, so I want them to have some world lit in 10th grade. I then consider what I believe the students will enjoy and find relevant. I also consider how well the texts lend themselves to discussion of big ideas that allow a lot of opportunity to move beyond comprehension.
Participant 4 - I select books based on availability, interest-level, reading level and thematic connections to the units.
Participant 5 - Reading level of book, interest level, length.
Participant 6 - First, I consider the interest level of the students. Then it comes down to availability of materials and other logistics.
Participant 7 - I follow the GLE's and include texts I think are interesting and appropriate.
Participant 8 - Vocabulary, subject matter, genre, and student appeal are used.
Participant 9 - Will the students find it interesting? Does it help me meet the GLE's, and does the story lend itself to interesting activities?
Participant 10 - I choose texts that contain authors whose works I admire and find interesting. I also choose literature that I think will spark an interest in reluctant readers.

Participant 11 - Time management is the first consideration. I also look at the curriculum for the grade level. It is best to fit reading into the year rather than try to build the year around the reading. The textbook has a wealth of short stories and poetry to incorporate.
4. Please provide a list of three to five texts that you have taught or will teach in great detail.

Participant 1 - *The Crucible, The Glass Menagerie, The Scarlet Letter, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Huck Finn, As I Lay Dying*.
Participant 2 - *SEEDFOLKS, The Watsons go to Birmingham 1963, The Devil's Arithmetic, Hatchet, The Lightning Thief.*
Participant 3 - *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisnernos, *Persepolis* by Marjana Satrapi, *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, *Othello* by Shakespeare.
Participant 4 - *Romeo & Juliet, Black Boy, Night, The Chocolate War, The Contender, Speak*.
Participant 5 - *A Lesson Before Dying, Night, Anthem, Make Lemonade, Angela's Ashes*.
Participant 6 - *The Gift of the Magi* - short story, focus on irony. *Romeo & Juliet* - drama unit. *Night* - nonfiction, relates history and current events to ELA.
Participant 7 - *A Rescue, The Great Gatsby, The Open Boat*.
Participant 8 - *Othello, the Moor of Venice, Night, Of Mice and Men, Daniel Half Human, Romeo & Juliet, Animal Farm, Make Lemonade, To Kill a Mockingbird.*
Participant 9 - Works of Edgar Allan Poe - *The Tell Tale Heart, The Raven,* and his poems. *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis, *Romeo & Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *Call of the Wild* by Jack London, *Nothing But the Truth* by Avi.

Participant 10 - *The Pearl, The Outsiders, The Giver*, *The Diary of Anne Frank,* and *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

Participant 11 - *The Hobbit*, *Number the Stars*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, "The Raven" by Poe.

5. How do you define literary canon?

Participant 1 - Classics that a knowledgeable person would be familiar with; books that are widely and regularly referenced, books that offer new insight each time they are read.
Participant 2 - Those books or works of literature that are the most important to study.
Participant 3 - Those "classic" texts - usually old - that are widely accepted to be "important" by people who know literature.
Participant 4 - The "classics" - Shakespeare, the Romantics, the Transcendentalists, etc. The *Odyssey*.
Participant 5 - The focus of literature that is deemed important or interesting and beneficial to an educational system.
Participant 6 - A literary canon is a collection of literature that is generally regarded as necessary. Meaning most students of the language arts should study these well-known texts. The epitomic example of various literature.
Participant 7 - Literary works most important or popular for a specific time period.
Participant 8 - Books in the literary canon are usually older texts, written by American or British authors that scholars have studied and have been taught in high schools and/or colleges for many decades.
Participant 9 - Classic works of literature that have remained relevant and are actively studied many years after they are written.
Participant 10 - I define it as literary works that are similar based on the time period they were written or important to a particular place.

Participant 11 - Works that have stood the test of time through generations are considered literary canon.
6. Of the texts that you teach, what percentage of them would you define as canonical? What percentage would you define as non-canonical?

Participant 1 - 100% canonical
Participant 2 - 60% are canonical; 40% are not.
Participant 3 - I would say I teach mostly non-canonical texts, though the more modern texts that I teach are widely taught in other places. *Things Fall Apart*, for example, is a required reading in many Northeast states. I do teach a Shakespeare play and a Greek tragedy, which I would consider canonical.
Participant 4 - 10% canonical; 90% non-canonical.
Participant 5 - 75% canonical; 25% not.
Participant 6 - I would say that it is about 50/50. The nonfiction and poetry units are not canonical as much as the epic and drama units.

Participant 7 - All are canonical. We teach English in chronological order, and all units of the text are grouped in a time period.
Participant 8 - 50/50
Participant 9 - About half are canonical, and half are not.
Participant 10 - Maybe less than 50% are canonical.

Participant 11 - The actual books that I assign are 75% canonical. This doesn't include the short stories and poems in the textbook itself. Poetry from the textbook would increase this percentage to 90%.
7. What are some of your favorite texts to teach and why?

Participant 1 - *As I Lay Dying, Their Eyes Were Watching God, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* - Each is very rich in themes and issues to discuss and apply to life. All have language that is both rich and unorthodox.
Participant 2 - *SEEDFOLKS* - this is not a book my students would choose to read for pleasure, but they grow to love it. I enjoy watching students grow to love great writing. *The Watsons go to Birmingham* - my students have not experienced racism or discrimination. I think it is important for students to learn history and to appreciate diversity. As students grow to "know" the characters in the novels, they can relate to the experience those characters face. I enjoy the responses and discussions that occur during these novels.
Participant 3 - I don't teach anything I don't personally enjoy, and I like them all. Ones that I don't enjoy or students don't respond to get pulled after a few times. I love teaching *Othello,* because the students get into it, and I have lessons that involve film and performance. I like teaching *Things Fall Apart*, because it lends itself to many discussions of values and culture. I like *The House on Mango Street*, because it leads to some wonderful creative writing.
Participant 4 - Young adult fiction - students easily relate to it.
Participant 5 - *A Lesson Before Dying* - entertaining, relevant, easy to understand, powerful. *Night* - powerful, historical, easily understood, well received.
Participant 6 - I love to teach *Romeo & Juliet*, because the students enjoy it, and they can relate to it. I also enjoy teaching *The Odyssey*, because of all the fun activities that can go along with it.
Participant 7 - *The Great Gatsby*. It is just an interesting book that I loved, so I like to teach it.
Participant 8 - I love teaching *Othello,* because the themes are universal, the plot is compelling, and students can relate to the situations since they apply to any time period.
Participant 9 - My favorite thing to teach is Edgar Allan Poe. I love having the students compare his poetry to his short stories. He was an interesting guy, and the students really get into studying him.
Participant 10 - Some of my favorites have been the works of Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I think it is interesting to read literary works from long ago, but yet the themes can be applied to our society in the present. I also think these authors appeal to middle school age students. The surprise elements keep the attention of the reader.

Participant 11 - I love teaching *The Hobbit*. Even before the movies, students were just drawn to the imagination of Tolkien. Their discussions easily included the elements of literature and morals of today. *Number the Stars* has a simple plot using younger characters and a happy ending to explain the evils of WWII. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a great history lesson and leaves a lasting impression on the youth. This story reminds us of how precious our lives really

are. Students seldom stop to think about the price that has been paid for their freedoms. This gives them the opportunity to look deeply at their own values. “The Raven”, and other Poe works are interesting teaching. Students do not recognize the verse and interpretation requires them to think outside their comfort zone. His works exercise their imagination
8. What components of classic texts set them apart from modern, popular texts?

Participant 1 - They often are less accessible as the themes and language are more challenging. Classic texts don't have easy or resolved conflicts. Classics can be read multiple times and only get better. Modern, popular texts are often only worth one read. Their pleasure is transitory.
Participant 2 - They remain classic over time. The components that make them great continue to interest people over time. The plot, complex characters, language, theme remain great. Popular titles may be well written, but may not hold the interest of generations to come. Often the themes are trendy. Also, popular titles aren't always unique.
Participant 3 - I would say that vocabulary is one - classic texts tend to have higher level vocabulary. They also tend to differ in style. In some cases this makes them less accessible to students. Other than that, it is tradition.
Participant 4 - Classic texts are generally richer in artistic language. The classics are written often times with more complex language.
Participant 5 - Deeper meaning for yesterday and tomorrow. More difficult to understand and maybe to relate to.
Participant 6 - Whereas modern, popular texts are more interesting and accessible to students, they do not provide the same level of literary scholarship as the classic texts.
Participant 7 - Modern texts may have more liberal topics.
Participant 8 - Time periods, protagonists and diction are usually representative of older eras whereas modern, popular texts are often dealing with present day and center around teen protagonists.
Participant 9 - They have more sophisticated vocabulary usage, and they are about subjects that remain relevant despite the time period.
Participant 10 - I think the vocabulary really sets them apart and at times makes it more difficult for the average student to read. I think the fact that themes from the classics still apply today and that makes them more enjoyable.

Participant 11 - Generally the lessons are timeless and the story was captivating in the manner told in classic texts. We like reading about different eras and how people lived in the past. These pieces have received much credibility and validity over time and through generations. Also, people used the written word much more frequently and elegantly in the past.
9. Does your school participate in the Accelerated Reader program? If so, explain how the program is implemented in your school and how students respond to it.

Participant 1 - Yes. This is our first year. We are only implementing it with 9th and 10th due to cost. Each day of the week, students read 20 uninterrupted minutes in a class. Monday is English, Tuesday is social studies, etc. Student receive a grade in each class for having a book and reading. Their test scores are a grade in English. Each child has to pass their tests with an 80 percent or his/her point ranges are based on reading assessments.

Participant 2 - No, we do not believe in this program. I have taught at schools that use this program, and I can honestly say my students read more for pleasure than the students I taught at schools with Accelerated Reader.
Participant 3 - Yes. Our students are to read 20 minutes each day in one of their classes. They have 6 week and semester goals for tests and are graded both on points earned and test averages. Most of my students enjoy it; some are caught up in competition. I see them sharing books and talking about them more frequently.
Participant 4 - Yes. It's implemented with flexibility. Some teachers enforce the point goals and quizzes. With my inclusion students, I encourage reading but don't make them finish a book. They may write weekly reading letters to show their understanding of a text.
Participant 5 - Yes. Students read 20 minutes a day in a different class each day. Tests are given by English teachers along with semester goals. Students are receiving it well, but it does take some adjustments and consistency.
Participant 6 - We just started AR this semester. After students took the STAR test, they were allowed to check out books. Now students read in one of their classes for 20 minutes a day and take AR quizzes on their own time or during English class.
Participant 7 - Yes, but not applicable to my grade level.
Participant 8 - Yes, we do AR. Many honors, gifted and GS students do well since they already enjoy reading; however some reluctant readers in traditional and honors or gifted classes may not be meeting goals on time. Everyone in 9th/10th grade takes STAR tests to determine reading level and are assigned goals to reach depending on skill. Everyone reads in school for one hour per day.
Participant 9 - Yes, the students respond very well to AR. It is mandatory to read AR books during the first 15 minutes of English class every day. All English teachers participate in this, so those 15 minutes are quiet reading time for the entire hallway. The students are expected to reach an 85% comprehension average on their quizzes. Very few students fail to reach this goal, and the ones who do are usually very close to it.
Participant 10 - Yes, we do participate in the AR program. The students are required to read books and achieve a passing score while at the same time accumulate a certain number of points designated by the individual teacher. Tests can be taken in the library or in some classrooms.

Participant 11 - The AR program is mandatory. The program is set up by the librarian and grades entered by the reading teacher. Students receive a project grade each quarter which is based on their STAR reading level, comprehension, and reading goal. Students do not like the program and lose sight of the intended objective - read more to improve comprehension and fluency. Students take test without fully understanding or completing the text just to reach their goal points.
10. Do you teach any young adult titles in your class? Why or why not?

Participant 1 - No - limited time, academic focus, college prep curriculum.
Participant 2 - No, I teach 6th grade. I teach what I consider to be adolescent literature. Most young adult titles are not appropriate for 6th graders. I do use some modern/popular adolescent lit titles.
Participant 3 - I do not teach YA titles, mostly because my students are gifted, and they are not challenging for them. If I found a YA title that fit into my goals, I would not be averse to

teaching it. Many of my student read YA titles for AR. I did have a book club one year that chose YA title, *Speak*.
Participant 4 - Yes - Recently *Speak, Bronx Masquerade, The Killer's Cousin, The Contender, Slam!*, etc. I teach YA to keep students interested in what we're doing in class.
Participant 5 - Yes. The students really relate to them, and the reading levels are appropriate for all.
Participant 6 - Yes I do, because YA literature is generally of higher interest to the students.
Participant 7 - I may, but I have not, because those books usually reach a "cult" status and the students would have strong positions already -- they may not be open to different components of the book, or studying the book in literary form may demoralize their personal value of the book.
Participant 8 - Participant left this question blank.
Participant 9 - Yes, because students love YA books, and I want them to learn how to love to read just like I do.
Participant 10 - Yes, and that is my favorite genre to teach. I hope it provides an opportunity for students to engage in reading that will eventually turn them into lifelong readers. I try to expose them to authors who spark the interests of young adults with themes that appeal to the middle school mind.

Participant 11 - No, I do not teach young adult titles in the class. Basically, the maturity level of the students drives this decision.

APPENDIX C - TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEWS

Group Interview with Ms. Starr and Mrs. McCartney

Me: First I want to get a little bit of background information about each of you. How long have you taught? Why did you go into teaching? How long have you taught the subject you're teaching now?

Ms. Starr: I've been teaching for 22 to years, 20 of them at this school, and for 20 years I've taught American Literature. Why did I go into teaching? I was a pre-law major, and I changed majors several times. My friend wanted to be a teacher, so I went to one of the introductory classes with her just to kill some time, and I found it very interesting. I got drawn into it that way. It always seemed sort of natural for me if I was going to be a teacher to be an English teacher, because that is what I was interested in.

Mrs. McCartney: This is my 15th year teaching, and it's my 9th at this school. I've been teaching mostly English II for all of that time. My first year I taught drama and one English II. I started out in high school wanting to become an elementary school teacher. I took a couple of classes and realized that I didn't find it interesting, and I don't have the personality for it, so I changed my major to English, because that's what I always loved and didn't know what I wanted to do. But then I heard about the Holmes Program and decided to become a teacher that way. I knew teaching was something that I'd like to do. I always played teacher when I was a kid, and when I thought I wanted to be an elementary school teacher it was because I wanted to teach kids how to read. But I had an instinct that my personality wasn't suited for the little ones.

Ms. Starr: For me it was always content. I never thought that I didn't like elementary school aged kids, but clearly I'm better suited to teach secondary content. I got a bachelor's degree in secondary English education, and then I got my masters degree, while teaching, in straight English.

Me: I wanted to know a little more about the summer reading program here or what you do for summer reading.

Ms. Starr: I think a principal from about 10 years ago or so, she said, "Oh, y'all need to do summer reading. Other schools do summer reading." We hadn't previously done summer reading. So when we started doing summer reading, we envisioned it as an extension of our classroom subject matter. So for about eight or nine years, summer reading was broken down by traditional, honors and gifted for each grade, and it was all very academic, all very scholarly, classics, canonical readings. Then we started to read more in the past few years about how people are starting to move away from that, and summer reading should be more about enjoyment and pleasure and encouraging the pleasure of reading rather than just thinking about it as an extension of the classroom. So last year we redid the list for the first time. We didn't delineate traditional, honors and gifted. We didn't stigmatize any books. We put them all together. We got away from the concept that in 11th grade, because you teach American literature, it all *has* to be American and in 12th grade, because it's British literature, it all *has* to be British. We tried to move away from that, although we've met with some resistance to that idea. And now I don't think of them as texts that I just couldn't get to during the school year. I

think of them more of things that I found pleasurable, so the kids would find them pleasurable. So we get a lot of different reading levels in there without stigmatizing any particular books as being for one group of kids as opposed to another.

Mrs. McCartney: We were giving multiple choice tests on the books, and we went to doing more project-based assignments. We tried to include a balance of classics and young adult titles as well as fiction and non-fiction.

Ms. Starr: Yes, and in the past it had been almost exclusively fiction, and we started thinking about non-fiction as a real option. Some kids really gravitate towards non-fiction more.

Mrs. McCartney: And we also put in more choice. There were more books to choose from per grade.

Ms. Starr: And we tried to include some books that might be more interesting for boys and some for girls. We also tried to stay away from books that had recent movies or big name movies made about them.

Me: How many books are on the list?

Ms. Starr: Nine or 10 per grade. So it's a lot more open-ended than the one we had before. Whereas before we had some pretty books on there.

Mrs. McCartney: Some pretty dry stuff.

Ms. Starr: It's not really that they were dry. They were too difficult for them to understand outside of the context of a classroom.

Mrs. McCartney: Yeah, I think one of the 10th grade books was *Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Ms. Starr: And *Beloved* was on the 11th grade list. It's a great book, but it's extremely difficult, so the kids who read it didn't know what it was about. They were like, "I kinda liked it, but I need someone to tell me what it meant." So there were some books that would have been better within the confines of a class, so you could explore the richness of them, but kids find them overwhelming by themselves.

Me: So in a situation in which a student has a very dense classic and is exploring it independently, how does that differ from exploring it within the confines of a classroom. What do you do to help them understand it?

Ms. Starr: Well first of all, most informally, you benefit from a lot of people picking at it in a class setting. It's not me talking about it, but you have other kids talking about it. I think that is sort of the hallmark of a classic that year after year after year kids point out things that I've never seen before. That is what makes it so rich, because it can be mined so fully. You benefit from hearing a lot of voices at the same time, trying to unpack it together. But certainly we do group activities, and I try to make at least a portion of every novel unit about them figuring out the novel without me telling them. And then there's always a portion of a novel where we come together as a group, and I do speak as the expert on the novel, certainly with input and feedback from them. Also, when you go to teach any good novel, there's so many things you could talk about, so I don't necessarily do the same thing every year. One year when I taught *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* I focused heavily on folklore elements, and we did a lot of online research

on folklore. This year we worked more specifically on language, and we talked more about her literary devices and her language.

Mrs. McCartney: And if it's a really good book, you can't possibly talk about all of the things there are to talk about.

Ms. Starr: Exactly. And for years that's how I have determined whether a book is worth teaching year after year. There are books that I've taught, and I liked them, and the kids liked them, but there wasn't the same richness. There were not a whole lot of things to keep picking at and keep talking about. We read it, we got it, and that was it.

Mrs. McCartney: I've dropped a couple of books for those reasons, too.

Me: Can you give me an example of when a student pointed out something about a text that you'd never seen before even though you've read it dozens of times?

Ms. Starr: I can give you a great example. For years and years and years I've taught *The Scarlet Letter* by Hawthorne, and I've taught *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner. And I am ashamed to say that I never caught the parallels between those novels until the kid pointed it out. And there are lots of parallels. Both of the main female characters have an affair with a minister. One of them names her child Pearl. The other one names her child Jewel. Both of the minister characters are symbolic of extreme hypocrisy, of being self serving, of displacing blame. So once the kid opened up that door, we were able to mine that vein extensively. And later I went on to read more about Faulkner and found out he was a big fan of Hawthorne and saw himself as "mining the recesses of the human heart" just like Hawthorne did. So I think it was very deliberate him calling to mind this other classic in his novel.

Mrs. McCartney: One that I can think of is when I was teaching *Othello* one year, a student pointed out to me that every act ends with a rhyming couplet except for act 3, and I had not noticed that. I point that out every year now. See how everything is of balance, where the plot is the most tense? It is an incredible thing to point out. In that act, everything is in turmoil. There's no nice way to wrap it up. It's the most intense part of the play. Everything is out of kilter at that point.

Ms. Starr: Even the poetry.

Mrs. McCartney: Yes, it obviously was deliberate, but I didn't notice it, because there are so many things to notice.

Me: So I'd like to move on to talk about Accelerated Reader. You've indicated this is the first year for AR in your school. I'd like to discuss what decision-making process the school went through to decide to implement it. Also, you mentioned in your survey that only half the students participate in it -- only 9th and 10th -- due to cost. Can you elaborate on that?

Ms. Starr: It's a program that people have talked about for years, and we've always thought about whether we wanted to implement it, but we've gotten a lot of mixed reactions. Some people have said it's the best thing since sliced bread, and other people are like, "No, no, it forces kids to read and makes them hate reading." So we got a lot of different opinions, but we never really had enough money, because for years and years we weren't a Title 1 school. It's quite expensive. This year we got an extraordinarily large pool of Title 1 money, because we took in

students from a high school that recently closed for renovations. So not only were they were Title 1, (we've been Title 1 for only two or three years) they were Title 1 and "in decline" which means they got *extra* Title 1 money. So we had a *huge* pool of money. And then we got a new librarian who is a huge fan of AR. So it's something we talked about repeatedly, but we never did have the money to come to a decision about it.

Mrs. McCartney: And we never would have implemented or thought about implementing it in the way that it has been implemented without the librarian who came to us from the other high school.

Ms. Starr: The librarian came from the other school, which was desperately trying to pull up its test scores. And it did successfully pull up its test scores, by the way. Had it not been closed, it would not have been a school in decline this year. We also got an English teacher from this school who is a big fan of AR. So when they came to our school and had these ideas, and we had the money to do it, we all got on board and decided to do it.

Me: What would you say are the pros and cons of the program just from the research you did?

Ms. Starr: Some people say if you make it count as part of the students' grade, instead of promoting a love of reading, it actually discourages children from reading. But a lot of people who reported that to me were people who had their kids in private schools where they were being pushed. But the difference here is instead of reading it outside of school and heaping more work to their already large body of homework, we actually are giving them time to read at school. The provision that we've made is that they will read for 20 minutes every day. Each subject area has a day, so English is Monday...

Mrs. McCartney: ...social studies is Tuesday, electives are Wednesday, and math and science are Thursday and Friday.

Ms. Starr: So on Wednesday they actually read for 40 minutes, because they have two electives.

Mrs. McCartney: Right, and the elective has to be 50 percent or more 9th or 10th grade, so some of them don't if they're taking a higher level elective.

Ms. Starr: But that makes it less of a chore for the students, because they have this quiet time at school to do it, and it's not in addition to all their other homework. I think that's how you counteract *that* complaint, that it's a burden for the kids. And at least so far they've seemed to sort of welcome the peace and quiet of 20 minutes a day. They seem to be pretty excited about getting to read.

Mrs. McCartney: And some of them are doing fantastically with it and are doing it faithfully, but I think some of them, unfortunately, are not keeping up with the same books. So they are reading 20 minutes, but they are not getting into something, they aren't taking the tests they need to and there are some issues with that. Partly it's because it's a new program. They aren't accustomed to it, so if we keep doing it, that will help. And some kids are going to try to find a way around whatever requirement you give them no matter it works. But most kids like it. And I, for the most part, really like it. I think some of them could be doing it with a little more fidelity. I'm frustrated, because I don't think all the teachers are implementing it the way they need to be. But overall I'd say I really enjoy it. It helps *me* to keep reading, because I have over an hour

every day on Mondays to read, so I get into a book, and I'll want to take it home and finish it. I'll tell the students about what I'm reading.

Ms. Starr: And the idea is for the teacher to read with the students, although we are having some small problems with implementation. It's supposed to be a totally quiet time in which everyone is engaged in reading. The other thing is they get a participation grade in each class for having their book, settling down and reading. And they also get a grade in English for the AR tests.

Mrs. McCartney: They get 100 points every six weeks for meeting their goal. And then they get 100 points for their average on the tests, so that encourages them to actually pass their tests and not take a bunch of tests and do poorly on them.

Me: Are there any plans to extend it to the upper grades?

Ms. Starr: I would like to extend it, but I don't know if there will be money. That will be our concern. We would definitely like to extend it to 11th and 12 grade.

Mrs. McCartney: You have to pay a licensing fee per student.

Ms. Starr: It's quite expensive. But as a person who isn't directly involved, because I don't teach any 9th or 10th graders, I do see *way* more students reading -- reading in the hallways, reading before class. I see lots and lots of kids carrying books, so that's exciting.

Mrs. McCartney: I had one day with my third hour. They had something to do, and then they finished it. Without me telling them, they all just took out a book and started reading. They were silent for the rest of the period. I asked my student teacher if she had told them to do that, and she said no. Everybody just took out a book automatically, and the last 15 minutes of class they spent reading. As a teacher, it's also great to be able to tell the students to take out their AR books if they finish an assignment early, so there's always something for the early finishers to do that directly benefits them.

Me: OK, this one is more for you, Mrs. McCartney. I thought maybe you could elaborate a bit on the graphic novel that you're teaching this semester (*Persepolis* by Marjana Satrapi) and why you chose it? Specifically why did you choose this graphic novel, and how is teaching a graphic novel different from teaching a regular book?

Mrs. McCartney: I chose this one in particular mostly because of the content and it being about Iran. I try in 10th grade to do as much world literature as possible, because they are going on to do all American or all British. So it's really the last chance to get anything from other cultures, which is why I teach *Things Fall Apart, The House on Mango Street,* etc. And it's also, like *Things Fall Apart*, written by a person of that culture, which is nice. I was teaching *The Good Earth*, but *The Good Earth* is about China but is written by an American, so it's about getting the most authentic voices that you can find that are also accessible to the students. I found the difference with teaching a graphic novel is I've really had to teach them how to read it and how to look at it. It's such a quick read that you could read it and not think about it, so I had to really look at the images and think about how can I ask them to analyze the images? What kind of questions can I give them? What kind of background? I had to do a lot of historic background with this because of understanding what's going on, so there was a lot of research involved in that for me. I also researched graphic novels in general, so I'm teaching them about the different

kinds of panels, different kind of word and text interactions and all that kind of stuff. It's to show them a different kind of style. It's not really a genre, because it can be fiction or non-fiction, but it's to show them something different. A lot of them do read graphic novels, so I thought, "Let's study it." Instead of thinking it's just this easy thing, there's a lot of work and thought that goes into them. I think like doing a film unit, when you're engaging them in something visual, which a lot of them respond to, they are more interested and feel more comfortable analyzing images sometimes than words. I found that a lot of the film terms that I taught them in the cinema unit also people use in reference to graphic novels, like close-up, medium shot, long shot, establishing shot, angles, all that kind of stuff is also part of this. So it was a nice overlap with the film unit. There are certainly some issues with this book. It has some very strong language, and there's the issue with the image (Mrs. McCartney is referring to a panel in the graphic novel depicting a man urinating on another person, and there's a drawing of a penis. She was concerned whether this image would cause a controversy at the school, but after discussing the issue with other members of the English faculty, she decided to continue teaching the graphic novel anyway). So there is that, but I think it's going to allow us to talk about a lot of things. This is the first time I've taught it, so I've run into all kinds of issues that I didn't think about, but I do intend to keep teaching it and try to iron some of those things out.

Ms. Starr: And I think it's a good book to teach, because it's so topical, it's so of the moment. It's very interesting, too, because she was doing her research, and I was helping her, we were talking through her research on it. It's a country and a region where it's hard to nail down historical fact. There's a lot of argument, and a lot of it is spin. It depends on what country the historian who is telling the story is from. That's eye opening for the kids to see that history isn't something written in stone. It does shift depending on viewpoints and perspectives, and it's a very modern story. The other thing I would say is that even though a lot of people make the assumption that when teaching graphic novels you're catering to the kids' interest in the visuals, there are a lot of kids who resistant to visual novels. For example, I don't like them. It would be a lot more of an effort for me to read that book. So for some kids you're teaching them a whole new skill set as well.

Mrs. McCartney: When I teach film, it's something they think they know about, but you can show them, "Look at all that goes into it," and that is more analysis for them, because they are discovering new ways to look at something.

Ms. Starr: So it's pushing some kids, and it's also encouraging some kids who don't like the written word as much as the visual. But I think it's both, and it's a good book for that reason.

Mrs. McCartney: I also think this is a region that a lot of people have preconceived notions about. So it's very nice to put a human face to it. You might say, "Oh the people there are like this." Well, no. The regime there is like this, but the people struggle just like any people struggle. So that's been nice, and it also got me interested in reading other things from the same time frame about Iran. What I can give the kids when I'm done with those books is, "If you liked this, or if you're interested in this, here are some other memoirs about the same place and the same time period."

Me: You both gave me a small list of some of your favorite texts to teach, but I thought maybe you could choose one and elaborate more on why it's your favorite. Also, what are some of the activities you do along with it?

Ms. Starr: Well, *As I Lay Dying* is probably my favorite, which I'm not going to get to teach this year, because I'm too short of time. But *As I Lay Dying* is my favorite, and it's my favorite for so many reasons. Some of the activities I like to do with it -- it's an epic of sorts. This family, their mother dies, and they have to go through lots of obstacles in order to bury her in a neighboring town. So we talk about the epic, and the elements of an epic journey and the hero of an epic. We've done several different activities. One activity that I liked a lot was for a couple years I had them interview somebody in their family, and they had all the stages of the epic. They had to find someone in their family to interview and tape it. They had interview questions with the answers typed up and everything. Then they transformed their family member's story into an epic, and it could be a mock epic. It could be something comic or something very serious. Some of the best writing I ever got from students was from that, but it depends on where it falls in the year. I've got to have a chunk of time to get that done, because it takes several weeks. One kid wrote a hysterical one about his mother's search for the perfect barstool, so they are able to take liberties with the story so it fits the classic elements of an epic. Some other kids wrote some of the most moving stories. One kid's parents had escaped Vietnam. They went down to the river to escape by boat, and they got underneath the pier just in time with their boat. Every other family who was trying to escape was massacred, and his parents got out. It was very moving. One kid wrote about returning to India to find his parents the perfect door for their life in America that represented Indian culture, and it was incredibly moving. Unfortunately I've only done that like three times, because I don't have enough time left at the end of the year. Last year we were short on time, so what we did instead was the kids either did a cartoon or a video and made an epic from scratch. They didn't interview anybody. Some of those were also quite good, some were very funny. Anything other than that, I just like the book, because it's challenging, it's in like 54 monologues, it's out of chronological order, it's stream of consciousness. So there's a whole lot to talk about. There's a whole lot to unpack.

Mrs. McCartney: And that's the kind of text that they couldn't, well, very few of them could pick it up on their own and get it.

Ms. Starr: And they love it at the end. A lot of them hate it while they're reading it, but usually at the end they love it, partially because they feel so much sense of accomplishment that it started to make sense to them, that they started to get it, and they pieced it together.

Mrs. McCartney: It's hard for me to choose, too, because if I don't like something then I'm not teaching it, because there's no way to teach something well that you don't enjoy. And then you have to consider do kids enjoy it? I've had to drop books that I liked that the kids just didn't respond well to....

Ms. Starr: I'd just like to interject. As a new teacher, though, just because you don't enjoy something the first time, doesn't mean you'll never enjoy it. I mean, there were some things I came to love that I didn't think I would. I didn't like the Transcendentalists very much when I

first started teaching. I hated them, actually, but I had to teach them. They are sort of a required part of American history and American literature, but over time I really grew to love them, so...
Mrs. McCartney: Well, I have a lot more flexibility teaching the 10th grade curriculum, so it's easy for me to pick up or drop something. I don't have certain timeframes that I have to do. But I'll also say, when I first started teaching *Julius Caesar* was *the* Shakespeare play that you taught, and it's not my favorite play, but I can teach it and enjoy teaching it. Well, at least Acts 1 through 3. I had some kids enjoy it, because I found a way to enjoy it. So she's right, but when you get to the point when you have enough experience, and you've been teaching the same things long enough, if you find one selection not flying, and you find something you like better, then you can replace it.
Ms. Starr: And you can always substitute. Like, I really need to teach something from F. Scott Fitzgerald, but I don't necessarily have to teach the stories in the textbook. It's a weird balance. There are novels that you teach, and you think, "There's nothing wrong with that novel, and I liked it fine," but there wasn't a richness of experience, so I cut those novels out. I think there needs to be a balance of letting yourself try stuff enough, because you don't know what you like when you first start teaching. You haven't taught enough to know, so be open to that, too.
Mrs. McCartney: But I would say my favorite thing consistently to teach is *Othello*. I love it, because the kids get into it. It has themes which they can *all* completely relate to. It has the most intriguing villain of any story ever, and it's this love-hate thing they have with him that really makes the play. I also love it, because I do such a variety of activities with it. I do a lot of comparative film analyses both comparing film versions to each other and comparing film versions to the text.
Ms. Starr: And we do a film connection with *As I Lay Dying*. We watch *O Brother Where Art Thou,* which is kind of a comedic spin on the epic.
Mrs. McCartney: So I love that, and I also have them do performance. We do tableaus and just a variety of different things. We do some of just reading it aloud, but we do a lot of different things, so I think the variety of different activities with the same text is one of the reasons why I like it so much. And I can get the kids *really* into it.
Me: If you were to pick one or two major goals, personal goals as an English teacher, what would those be.
Ms. Starr: I guess my most important goal as an English teacher is to make kids think beyond the page, beyond the screen, beyond the frame. Basically they need to become informed viewers, informed readers, and they should never accept at face value anything they read or see. That's what makes them a better citizen, a better human being. It makes for more richness of life.
Mrs. McCartney: I really want kids to find things that they like that they didn't they were going to like, to try new things. For me, I didn't think I could write poetry, but I wrote this poem, and it's pretty good. I didn't think I would like a graphic novel, but this one was pretty cool. So to me one of the key things is to challenge them in the same way, but also to have them push themselves. Take risks! It's one of the things I tell them with writing. Just try it! Because I think *so* many kids have anxiety around reading and writing. You give them a poem, and they think,

"There's something here I'm supposed to know." If they don't know it immediately, they shut down, and they don't want to try, because they think there's some kind of secret hidden answer.
Ms. Starr: Those two things, what I said and what you said sort of convene at the idea of them finding their voice; finding the confidence to say, "Well no, I don't believe that political idea" or "I can read this poem and understand it." All of that is about finding their voice in writing and in speaking and in thinking.
Mrs. McCartney: Another goal that I think we all have, particularly with their writing, is for them to try and do. I tell mine the first day of the year every year you do not get better at reading and writing without reading and writing. If you don't do what you're supposed to do, you will not progress. That's all on you. I can help you, but you're the one who actually has to do the work. I feel good if they can get to the end of the year and see some kind of growth.
Me: How much of the decision making process of choosing the texts you teach in your classroom have to do with materials available? Do you ever feel limited by money or materials available, or is that really not an issue at this school?
Mrs. McCartney: It really hasn't been an issue at this school. We will always find a way.
Ms. Starr: We'll make it happen. Well, there have been times when money was very tight, and it was hard to get the money, but we've always found a way to get it.
Mrs. McCartney: When I first started here one of the reasons why I would teach something is because we had copies of it, so it was like, this is what has been taught, and this is what you have on the shelf, and I'm like "OK, let me try that."
Ms. Starr: That's what I did when I first started teaching here. What we had is what I taught, and then I found out what worked and what didn't work for me. I also used the older, more experienced teachers as a point of reference. I asked them what they taught, and I pretty much taught the same thing until I got enough experience to choose for myself.
Mrs. McCartney: And I teach *Things Fall Apart* here, because that's what I was told to taught in New York. It was on the required reading list there. I taught some things because I had to and some things because I wanted to, and you don't *ever* want to spend a whole year doing something new every time, because then you just run yourself crazy. I didn't really love *Julius Caesar*, but I didn't have anything to replace it with, so I'll kept teaching *Julius Caesar* until I found *Othello*. Then I thought, "Let me try that!" But I'm not going to change out everything every time.
Ms. Starr: I think flexibility is key. I had some decisions to make. I usually teach *Huckleberry Finn* a bit earlier in the year. I didn't teach *Huckleberry Finn* last year, but I did teach *As I Lay Dying*. I'm at this point where I have critical authors I haven't covered, like I haven't talked about Hemingway, and I can talk about Faulkner with a short story. Not with the richness I could a novel, but I have to be flexible about what to cut and what not to cut. I don't want to do *As I Lay Dying* and do it an injustice. It's better to cut it and do something else well.
Mrs. McCartney: For example, *Metamorphosis* is something I taught for 3 or 4 years, but I cut it, because the kids universally hated it. But I started it, because we had copies of it, and I liked it fine. But I ask the kids at the end of every year what was your favorite selection? What was your least favorite selection? If I had to cut something next year, what would it be? What I got from

those every year was that kids liked *Metamorphosis* the least out of everything we did. So why keep teaching something that they don't like, and I'm not able to make them like it. I replaced that with something else. But I did do it for 3 years before I finally let it go.

Ms. Starr: You gave it a fair chance. I call that giving it a fair chance. Like I did a Hemingway novel for the first few years that I taught. What I had found with Hemingway is that I could teach Hemingway as effectively with short stories, and I find his novels, a there's certain spareness to the novel. You know, we get it. Life sucks. For me it was very important to incorporate some women, so those are some changes I made, because I was part of the generation in which women writers became very important. Whereas teachers older than I am were never trained to teach any women. For example, Zora Neale Hurston came "in vogue" while I was a graduate student, so that's somebody I incorporated based on my personal experience.

Mrs. McCartney: I think you also have to think about your scope of your whole year. You don't want to be teaching just random things that have no connection. You should be able to make connections between all the novels you teach. There are connections between *Antigone* and *Othello* and *Othello* and *Things Fall Apart*. I like to find something that ties back in with something else that I'm doing. Also, I have the idea of I want world literature, so you have to narrow things down. You can't just go in as a new teacher and say, "I'll teach whatever I like!" Where do you start? You have to have some kind of framework, and you have to have a reason for teaching the things that you teach. You don't just sort of have randomly picked selections.

Ms. Starr: All of the novels that I teach can be tied together. There are threads that tie them all together, and I think that's important, too.

Me: How do you feel about the textbook that you're using in your class? How much do you use the textbook as opposed to outside texts? And how do you feel about this particular textbook versus any other textbooks you've used in the past?

Ms. Starr: I liked the textbook that I used when I first started teaching the best. I like this one fairly well. I was on the textbook committee for it. I think it was the best of what we have. But for one thing it's too damn big. The size of it is just prohibitive. I use the text, but I'm not married to the text. In almost every unit, I use at least story or two that's not from the text, and I certainly don't feel like I have to teach everything in the text, because it would take me four years to get to them all. But a lot of things are sort of like bedrock stories. In 11th grade it's a little bit different from 10th and 9th, so I need to teach Washington Irving, and the story by Washington Irving is *The Devil and Tom Walker*. That story is in every 11th grade book ever made, so I use it there. But for people like Fitzgerald there are three or four stories that get regularly anthologized, and I use different ones depending on what I feel like doing. There are excerpts and poems from different people that I like better than some that are in here, so I just use it for convenience when the story is there. If it's a story I want, there's no point in reinventing the wheel, but if it's a story I don't want, I certainly feel free to give them something else.

Mrs. McCartney: I like the selections from this textbook fine. I like this textbook much better than the one we had prior to it. I mostly teach short stories out of that book. Basically I keep myself to the short stories in the textbook, because running off short stories is prohibitive as far

as the number of copies and stuff, and there are usually enough good stories that you can pick and choose from a text. Poetry, sometimes I use poems from the text, and sometimes I don't. There's nothing easier than giving kids a poem on a piece of paper, so that's open. And obviously there's the novel. For drama, I don't teach *Julius Caesar* anymore, and that's in the text. Sometimes I teach *Antigone*, which is in the text, but sometimes I teach *Oedipus*, sometimes I teach *Medea*. It just depends on how I'm feeling or how many years in a row I've taught one of them.

Ms. Starr: I do teach *The Crucible* which is in the text. So that helps me by not having to have copies of that.

Mrs. McCartney: I do use it, but basically we haven't touched it this semester.

Ms. Starr: Yeah, that's how I am, too. If I want to give them something else, I give them something else.

Me: How do you feel about the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum? Do you think that anything should be changed? Or do you think that it holds true to what *you* think students need to learn?

Mrs. McCartney: The Comprehensive Curriculum is really... The only thing to me that it dictates is what order we do things in. Like short stories, poetry, novels... for 10th grade, anyway, and it has activities. The activities are based on the GLE's, which we have sort of independently of the curriculum. Those are the things we were supposed to be doing anyway. Some schools say you have to do those activities. This has never been one of those schools, so as long as you're meeting GLE's, the activities are up to you. In a sense, I don't object to the Comprehensive Curriculum as a "This is what you ought to be covering" idea. My objection to it would be if someone said prescriptively, "You are going to do this activity and this activity and this activity" because that's just irritating and wrong.

Ms. Starr: But that's how it was formulated to be like day-by-day, tell you what to do, but the people who wrote it didn't know that. For example, in 12th grade, for example, they had eight activities to do with the epic, and some schools were making them do all eight activities. To me I don't think it's user friendly. It's too busy. To me a curriculum is a barebones skeleton. So if they said, "You need to cover a local color artist at this time and you need to cover this at this time." I don't have a problem with what they say we need to cover in 11th grade, and I don't have any problem with the order. I don't have any problem with them including activities to help me teach. I think that's wonderful. But to me the way it's written is very busy and disconcerting.

Mrs. McCartney: Right. I don't use it much, but if I was a new teacher, I would really appreciate those activities, because I think they're valuable if they're done well.

Ms. Starr: And there are a lot of mistakes in it, too. For example, in local color, Kate Chopin writes a lot of local color stories, but the story that they had for her wasn't a local color story. So it made it hard for teachers to try to figure out what that was all about.

Mrs. McCartney: I was involved in re-writing at one point the 10th grade, so what I tried to do, and the woman I worked with, we tried to make general activities that you could adapt to any story or anything. A lot of them were like, "When you read this story, do this."

Me: What are some ways that students struggle with texts? What are some components of texts that give students trouble, and how do you help them?
Mrs. McCartney: I would say for gifted, the main problem I have is them *not* reading. It's not that they don't get it when they read, but getting them to read. If they read it, they would get it, but sometimes they just don't.
Ms. Starr: Yeah, the No.1 problem is them not reading.
Mrs. McCartney: Or them wanting to read Cliff's Notes, or not really wanting to read. Now after that I would say when things are structurally different than they are accustomed to, that's the biggest challenge.
Ms. Starr: Like stream of consciousness or if you have a story told out of chronological order.
Mrs. McCartney: I read *The House on Mango Street* with them, which is a series of vignettes that connect, but it doesn't have a plot. So I have to warn them, "This story will *not* have a plot, and you have to sort of roll with that." That they find very disconcerting.
Ms. Starr: And I find, overall, that their vocabulary isn't particularly good, and I find vocabulary to be challenging for them. I try to think of new ways to help them get better with vocabulary. A lot of their vocabularies are hurt, because few of them are readers, and then they are bad about making up definitions of words that have no bearing on the actual work.
Mrs. McCartney: Or they will read a word and *not* look it up.
Ms. Starr: You can sometimes not know a word and it's not a big deal, but if it's a pivotal word or a pivotal phrase... For example, if you get halfway through *The Scarlet Letter*, and you haven't looked up *ignominious*, then you've got problems, right?
Me: You mentioned that you as gifted teachers choose text differently than a traditional teacher would. Do you have any elaboration on that? How would your decision-making process be different from a traditional teacher?
Ms. Starr: Reading level is important or the level of vocabulary. For example, the gifted teacher is teaching *Frankenstein*, but the traditional teacher is not. *Frankenstein* has a very high...
Mrs. McCartney: It has one of the highest Accelerated Reader levels there is.
Ms. Starr: It's at a very high level, and she felt like even if the traditional kids would be interested in the subject matter, the vocabulary of the text would just be prohibitive. They would have *such* difficulty reading it that it would shut them down. So she was looking for something that would have some of the same concepts and ideas, so what she's going to try is *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It is a much smaller text, but it has a lot of the same principles about science gone awry and how much should man interfere with nature? She can do those same kind of topics but maybe with not such a daunting text for the kids.
Mrs. McCartney: I would say while interest level is important to us, it's less important than to traditional. I would say high interest, or young adult novels would be much more appropriate for regular.
Ms. Starr: Because with gifted kids, we're not really struggling with any inability to read or comprehend, but in regular they are. With traditional, you have to worry about the kids being interested to even attempt it, because they're *so* scared of reading.

Mrs. McCartney: We can tell the kids, here's the book, you can have it read by this day. You can't really do that with traditional. You have to make sure they are understanding it. We can hand them most books with confidence and know that they will understand content. We're looking at what does it provide beyond the content, because we're going to go so far beyond the content.
Ms. Starr: And I can take my students, and I can say, "*As I Lay Dying* is going to be the most difficult book you will read all year, and let me tell you why it's going to be difficult," and I can set that up for them. For most of my students that would be more of a challenge than an obstacle. Some of the ones that don't read *anything* will read *As I Lay Dying*, because they want to prove that they can read it. Whereas a traditional student would be more reluctant to read something that difficult structurally.

Interview with Mrs. Harrison
Me: Give me a little bit of background information about how long you've been teaching. What made you want to become a teacher? How long have you taught this particular subject and grade?
Mrs. Harrison: OK, I've been teaching for 32 years. I have been teaching this particular subject and grade for 5 years, I've had 8th grade ELA and literature. Before that I guess I spent maybe the last total 16 teaching English and literature, and before that I was teaching English, and in the first 10 years I spent more time teaching social studies and math.
Me: If you could describe your purpose as a teacher in one or two major goals, what are your major goals when teaching?
Mrs. Harrison: My purpose as a teacher. I would think my major goals when teaching are to produce literate people who will go out and continue to learn on their own.
Me: Can you tell me about your perception of the Accelerated Reader program. What are the strengths, weaknesses, and how do students respond to it?
Mrs. Harrison: Yeah, I am a big advocate of the Accelerated Reader program, because I think with most kids, if given the choice, they're just not going to read, because it's just another thing they'd have to do. Most kids would tend to just take the easy way out, and by requiring them to read, I would say that 90 to 95 percent of them find out that they have a love of reading, which they may have never found out otherwise. If I didn't require any kind of reading at all, I would have a few kids who would still read, but I would have this whole group who wouldn't. I have this tiny little group over here that would do it whether it was required or not, I have a tiny little group over here that still don't do it unless I stand over them with a whip and a chair, and this big group of kids in the middle who wouldn't do it if they didn't have to but find out that they love it. I don't have to push to say, "OK, you need to read." When I say, "OK, we're going to have some extra reading time today," they're like, "Yes!" I think that AR validates that, because they read, and they get credit for it. I think that the fact that it's on a computer, even though it's the same thing as a paper and pencil test would be, you put it on a computer, and a kid thinks it's way neater. It does give them some validation. It's like, "I did read the book, and look, I did well on

the test!" It is rare for me to have any student who doesn't achieve at least an 85 percent on a test. Very rare. Out of 51 kids last nine weeks, I only had two who didn't achieve at least 85 percent, and they were at an 83. I do think it is very validating, because they do well, and they see that, and it makes them want to do well again, because like anybody, it's fun to take a test if you know the answers.

Me: You have quite an extensive classroom library.

Mrs. Harrison: I added a new bookshelf!

Me: Oh, good! OK. So I wanted to know how you choose the books that you include in your class library.

Mrs. Harrison: Sometimes I choose them based on what I can catch on sale. I also keep a running wish list from the kids, and that was one thing I was really able to add to this year. In the past I had been able to buy a few things that they wanted, but it was one of the things I vowed I would do with my National Board money. Now watch them go and cut it, and stomp that right now, but since I was getting that extra money, I had more leeway in what I could spend. I probably spend an average of $100 to $150 per month on books that they just ask me for, popular books. And I just keep a running tally. When I get three or four or five books on the list, I go to the bookstore, and I buy more books for them. So I really try to buy what they want. Then I weed my library fairly often, too. If I see some things never being checked out, I'll pass them on to the other grades. I gave hundreds of books to the sixth grade teachers, because I spent so many years teaching sixth grade, and my eighth graders weren't interested in those same titles.

Me: Choose one of your favorite texts to teach, and tell me a little more in depth about why it's your favorite, and what kinds of activities you do with it.

Mrs. Harrison: Probably my favorite thing to teach is umm... everything. Umm, gosh, seriously everything. We're getting into a drama unit, and I'm about to teach Act 1 of *Romeo & Juliet*, and that is so much fun to teach, because the copies that I have show the Shakespearean language on one side, and then they show the [modern] English on the other side. We'll read Shakespeare, and we'll try to figure out what it is, and then we'll read it in [modern] English and see if we were right. It doesn't take more than 10 or 15 pages into it where they don't even need the [modern] English anymore. I don't like it when teachers go straight to the [modern] English one. It's like, you'd be surprised that kids can actually do a lot more with the older language than you would think. I also love teaching Edgar Alan Poe, because you can teach a short story and a poem and compare those two, and I like doing compare-contrast between different types of literature, so they can see how that is. I have some really good short stories that we do in our mystery unit that are a lot of fun to teach, because I really have never taught a story that wasn't fun to teach, because the kids get into it no matter what it is.

Me: How do you feel about the class textbooks? How much do you use them?

Mrs. Harrison: Our curriculum is not based on that book. For example, we spend the first six weeks of the school year on mysteries, and there's not a single mystery in our literature book. So that's a $75 book that is totally useless for the first six weeks of school. I could do without a textbook very easily. In fact, I was on the textbook adoption committee for the parish, and for a

while, we discussed not even getting a new textbook. But they wouldn't let us spend the money on any other materials, so if we didn't buy the textbooks, we'd have to give the money back, and they couldn't see doing that, so we got new textbooks. I end up using them, half a dozen times throughout the school year maybe? That's it.

Me: How do you feel about the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum in general?

Mrs. Harrison: I can see it's a pretty good thing. I miss doing the things that I like to do, and I think that's one of the faults of it. I know that I had an awesome mythology unit, and I thoroughly enjoyed teaching it, and there's something to be said for that, because when you have a teacher that has a specialty of something, and they love teaching it, it's going to come out to the children as a really, really vital learning experience. You're so into it, and you have so much depth of knowledge about it. But I can understand the need for a Comprehensive Curriculum, because certain people are like, "I like to teach this, this and this." Well what if the kid has a series of teachers who like to teach the same things. Well then they just get the same thing over and over, and we also have a very transient population, not at this school, but in the parish. I think that makes a whole lot of sense, so they are not starting off the school year at this middle school, and they are doing mysteries, and they go to this other middle school, and guess what, they're doing mysteries. Then they move again, and they're doing mysteries, and they never get anything else. It makes everybody go along on a continuum, so I don't have a problem with that. I don't mind somebody telling me the topics that I need to do. I like how the curriculum gives me the freedom to choose how I'm going to go about teaching the GLE's. That is something I would *not* like if someone said, "You have to teach this *this* way." I think that robs me and the children of a good experience, because it's not mine if I'm trying to teach it that way. If they want it that way, then anybody off the street can come in and teach a canned curriculum. To me they pay me to be creative to teach what they want me to, but I don't have a problem with them telling me what topics to teach.

Me: What are some ways that students struggle with reading a particular text. What are some ways you've seen them struggle, and what are some ways you address those struggles?

Mrs. Harrison: With some of my readers, vocabulary acquisition is an issue. Just not having that good background and not being exposed to good vocabulary at home, just very basic speech going on at home, they have more of a difficult time when we're reading something that does have more specific vocabulary. That causes them problems, because they don't understand that, but I think one of the best things is to establish that open feeling in your classroom that they can ask me what something means. Sometimes they'll raise their hands during AR and point to a word and say, "I don't know that word." I let them know that happens to me, too. We were reading something the other day, and I was like, "I don't know that word." That kind of makes them feel free and say, "Oh, I can ask about that. She's not going to think that I'm stupid, because she doesn't always know what everything means either." It's a growing thing for us together to increase our vocabulary. I also try to make sure that I speak to them using higher vocabulary acquisition. I said something yesterday, I can't remember what it was, and I used a word, and a couple of the kids said at the same time, "What does that mean?" I told them, and they were like,

"Oh, OK." I made sure I used it again, but I think that by speaking very well with them, it helps them be able to improve their reading. I'm very fortunate being in a magnet situation. At this school that is probably my biggest drawback, vocabulary acquisition. At other schools I've taught in classrooms where the students couldn't even break down a word. They didn't even know phonics. They had such huge gaps. It was a lot harder.

Me: How much of your decision-making process of what texts you teach is dictated by whatever materials are available. Do you ever feel restricted by money?

Mrs. Harrison: At this school I'm really fortunate. I mean, somewhat yes. We just went into a novel unit, and we said, "OK, let's go look and see what we have class sets of or what we can borrow class sets of." We are very fortunate at this school. There's never been a time when I wanted something that I didn't go to the office and they didn't find a way to get it for me. If I want a class set of something then the money is there for me to be able to spend it. We collect a fee from the kids, and it's there within reason. So not too much. And that's kind of unusual. Over my 32-year career, I taught in schools in which we had nothing but the discarded textbooks from the "nicer" schools. I found a story in something I had one copy of, and I learned how to make my own booklets, and you just have to be willing to take the time to do everything.

Me: Since you have previous experience working with non magnet students, can you compare and contrast what kind of subject material, what kind of reading, what kind of texts would you use with lower level students compared to here?

Mrs. Harrison: Same thing.

Me: You'd use the same thing?

Mrs. Harrison: I'd use the same thing. You just have to work harder for them to get it, but I'd use the same thing. I don't think you should go find everything real easy for them. As far as the materials that I'd use, I was using a lot of the same materials. As far as how I'd teach, I taught exactly the same way when I taught at a Title 1 middle school. Gosh, my kids' average reading level was probably third grade, and I still did the same type of activities. I still did a lot of the same station work. I expected the same amount of them no matter where I was. It just took a whole lot more out of me to get them there than it does here. Here I can spend a whole lot more time planning creatively and thinking about how to make whatever we're doing better rather spending a lot of my time in a punitive way, standing over, watching you to make sure you would finish. As soon as I would look away, the students would put their pencils down and want to just stop, but they wouldn't as long as they know I was watching. I couldn't even help an individual student while looking him in the eye. I listened to him, but I was scanning the classroom, watching, watching, watching all the time.

Me: Can you tell me more about the novel unit you just did?

Mrs. Harrison: We first of all went to the book room to see what novels we had. In fact, one teacher wanted to do a book that we didn't have. We couldn't get copies of it. It was going to cost a whole lot of money to buy it, so she decided to go with something that we had. That was an instance in which you use the materials you have available. So we went in there. We had a bunch of books none of us had read. I decided I wanted to offer a classic, because we have that little

niche of kids who really pride themselves on their reading level. So I read *1984*, which I had never read before, and I read *Call of the Wild*, and that's the one I decided to do. My student teacher read *I am David*, which is a non-fiction piece. They said we could do that in the novel unit, because we checked, but she actually found several errors in the book and had some concerns about the length of the book being able to covered in the same amount of time, since we all gave ourselves three weeks to teach the unit. Then, the new teacher just wanted to do something we'd done before, so he did *My Louisiana Sky*. The other teacher read several books that we had never done, and she ended up doing a mystery book, *Killing Mr. Griffin* by Lois Duncan. My student teacher ended up doing *Nothing But the Truth* by Avi. Each one of us did a PowerPoint to try to "sell" our book. We didn't have our names attached to the PowerPoints. Each teacher in class one day showed all four of them. So we said, "OK, choose a novel. Rank it 1, 2, 3. If you got to pick, what would you pick?" Well, because of the subject matter of her book, and because of her awesome computer skills, everybody wanted to read *Killing Mr. Griffin*. Her PowerPoint was very suspenseful, so they all wanted that one, but they couldn't all have that one. But not all of them. Just like I predicted, some of them picked the classic, because they wanted to. Unfortunately, one of the things that really made them pick was the quality of the PowerPoint. One of the books wasn't chosen as much, because the PowerPoint was not as good, but we ended up with fairly even groups. We capped out at 25 per group. The *Killing Mr. Griffin* book had 25. The rest of us averaged at about 16 to 18 per group. That effectively lowered the student-teacher ratio, even in the group of 25, because she's got 28 in her last class. Everybody to get your first choice, you had to have an A in the class. We went with higher averages get your first pick, and we went down from there, so every kid with an A average got first pick. Everybody else got their second choice. We didn't have to go to third choice for anybody. It was really neat. The projects we came up with were so awesome. As usual one of us would talk about what we were going to do, and that pushed the rest of us to think a little higher out of the box. So we all ended up with some really cool projects. The *Killing Mr. Griffin* group did this giant book, and it had all of these flip out parts, and it had all of these cool parts to it. She incorporated a journal into her book. I did an informational cube. Since I was doing *Call of the Wild*, they had to pick a breed of dog and investigate it and create a survey about dogs. We created a big poster board cube. And my student teacher, her book is done in a series of real documentaries. There are newspaper articles and letters and memos, and all this kind of stuff. She gave them a blank book, and they had to create their own story that had to take place over a week of their life. It could be real or fictional, and they had to include some of those same kinds of things. They did text messages back and forth on whatever the issue they talked about. It came out really well, too. Overall I think it was a very effective unit.

E-mail Interviews with Mrs. Lennon

Me: May I have a bit of background information about you? How long have you been teaching? Why did you decide to be a teacher? How long have you been teaching the subject/grade level you are teaching now?

Mrs. Lennon: I have been teaching 15 years. 10 years in local public school system and 5 at Lab.

I have been teaching 6th grade Reading Writing Workshop for 3 years.

I think I was born a teacher. My mom is a teacher, and I saw the impact she had on so many children and their families. I thought about going into a more lucrative profession, but teaching always pulled me back in. One day early in my college career, I met a lady whose son had my mother as a teacher. She introduced herself to me and told me that every other teacher had given up on her son, but my mom didn't. My mom taught him to read. That day sealed my fate.

Me: Could you describe your classroom context a bit? What are the social backgrounds and ability levels of your students?

Mrs. Lennon: Most of my students are middle class to upper middle class with parents who went to college…some advanced degrees.

Most students are reading on/above grade level.

A few are below grade level.

Some students have been identified….ADD, ADHD, Anxiety, Slow processing, Gifted.

Me: If you could sum up your purpose as an English teacher into one or two major goals, what would they be?

Mrs. Lennon: To teach students to be lifelong learners who read and write competently, enjoy reading, are able to think and learn independently, and question the world around them.

Me: In your survey you indicated that your school does not participate in the Accelerated Reader program, and you commented that your students read more for pleasure than those at schools in which AR is implemented. Would you mind elaborating a bit about your criticisms of the AR program and why your school has chosen not to use it?

Mrs. Lennon: While I do believe AR initially encourages students to read, I think is eventually limiting. There are so many wonderful books for kids to read and they are not all on the AR list. In my experience students will only read AR books. I feel this limits the books students will read. Also, many teachers require students to take AR tests and give them grades on the tests. Many AR tests ask recall questions about unimportant details from the books. I feel this turns

students off to reading….tests do not create lifelong readers. I want students to learn to love reading. There are other ways to do this.

Me: In your survey you listed a couple of your favorite texts to teach. Could you choose your absolute favorite and elaborate on why it is your favorite and what activities you plan for your students to go along with the text?

Mrs. Lennon: I can't choose my favorite. I like the ones that I listed for many different reasons. For each book that I use, I write a broader unit. For example, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham and The Devil's Arithmetic* are part of my tolerance unit.

Activities:

Research discrimination during WWII and Civil Rights Movement; write a script and create and iMovie

Read poetry from Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights Movement/perform.

Using above poems, videos, songs, speeches, and research, write a found poem.

Use materials from Holocaust Trunk – Holocaust Museum.

I like to use these two books because I believe we must teach children to be tolerant. As they learn to love the characters in the story, they develop empathy. They are always shocked to learn the atrocities that Jewish people and African Americans faced.

Me: Do your students have required summer reading lists? If so, what decisions go into making the lists?

Mrs. Lennon: Yes, we do require summer reading. I choose one book for RWW and SS and Science choose one book. I choose a book that my students can handle reading on their own, that is well written, and that most students will enjoy. I have used *Hatchet* for the last couple of years. I like to have students read the same book so I can refer back to it throughout the year. I use it to introduce concepts (plot, character…) that I teach.

Me: When choosing the texts you teach, how much of your decision-making process is dictated by whatever materials are readily available? Do you ever feel limited by money or materials, or is this mostly not an issue at your school?

Mrs. Lennon: I do think about materials that are available, but I have never been shy about asking for materials that I need. Money is an issue at every school, but I have found that if you ask and can support your request, money can often be found.

Me: How do you feel about your class textbook? How much do you use the text book, and how much do you deviate from it? How does this textbook compare to any other textbooks you may have used in the past?

Mrs. Lennon: I'm not a textbook teacher. I find them confining and stressful. I currently do not have a literature textbook. However, I do have a grammar handbook, *The Write Source.*

Me: How do you feel about the Louisiana Comprehensive Curriculum? Do you feel it meets the needs of the students? Is it restrictive to teachers at all? Should any changes be made?

Mrs. Lennon: The Comprehensive Curriculum was meant to guide student learning, but many schools are using it much more literally. I think it is fine as a guide, but teachers must decide what their students need to be successful. This might include skills, lessons, or units that are not listed in the guide. I do feel there are too many units in the CC. I prefer to teach longer more in-depth units rather than short units that just touch on concepts.

Me: What are some of the ways that you've commonly seen students struggle with reading and interpreting texts? What aspects of texts give students trouble? How do you address these struggles?

Mrs. Lennon: ESL students often interpret texts literally. They have difficulty with figurative language, symbolism, and reading between the lines. ESL students can answer recall questions, but have difficulty with higher-level questions. Some of the things I do are:

Direct instruction of skills using mini-lessons

Thinking aloud – sharing my thoughts and what I do as a reader

Literature circles – students share their thoughts/ideas

Discussion Boards on Moodle – students share thoughts/ideas (most prefer this way)

Practice

Me: This last question is more of a personal interest to me. I saw that you listed *The Lightning Thief* as one of the texts you taught this year. Also, your student teacher mentioned that you took your students on a field trip to see the movie. I have not yet seen the movie, but I did read the book, and I really enjoyed it. Will you describe why and how you taught this text? How was the movie going experience for your students? How did your students respond to the text?

Mrs. Lennon: I used *The Lightning Thief* because I saw it as a way to get students to read a genre, fantasy, that they might not normally choose. Also, it encouraged those reluctant readers (especially boys) to read. The students really enjoy reading the same book. They discuss it and trade notes. It also fit nicely with our hero unit and the Greek unit in social studies. The students love going to the movies. I have done this trip before with other books. I find that it is a great

way to teach the students to write a comparison contrast essay. The students were surprised that they enjoyed the book more than the movie. Some were really disappointed with the movie and some were almost angry. It didn't follow the plot of the book.

Most students devoured the book and then the rest of the series.

Me: I have not seen the movie, but I did hear that it was rather disappointing compared to the book. I hope to read the rest of the series over the summer, but I have only read the first one so far.

As I was reading *The Lightening Thief*, I thought about how the main character is an illegitimate child and so are all of his peers at the summer camp. While Riordan doesn't over-emphasize this detail, and it isn't discussed as overly scandalous or inappropriate, I was wondering how your students responded to that concept. Percy and all of the other members of Camp Half Blood basically come from single-parent homes in which their second parent, the Greek god, is mostly absent. Did the issue of child illegitimacy or second-parent abandonment come up at all in your class discussions? I think Riordan depicts this issue in a lighthearted enough manner that it might not even be a big deal, but I'm painfully curious about whether this topic came up in your students' questions.

Mrs. Lennon: No, I don't know if the students realized that Percy was an illegitimate child. They did however discuss that Percy didn't know or see his father. Many said that this would be difficult. We did not discuss this book as in-depth as we do other novels. I think if we had, it would have come up.

When we read *SEEDFOLKS* in the fall, one of the characters was a pregnant teenager and many topics came up. They didn't mention the term illegitimate but used unwed or unmarried. Of course some also mentioned abortion which I didn't touch!