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Readers, Texts, and Contexts in the Middle

Re-imagining Literature Education for Young Adolescents

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Becoming a reader, as other authors in this section have shown, is often an unpredictable journey, usually marked by uncertainty and, if you're lucky, well-timed guidance. No time is more uncertain for being a reader than during the middle years of young adolescence, when engaged literary reading seems to wane for many youth, while becoming the refuge for others. Thomas Crumpler and Linda Wedwick open up the pathways to reading with an analysis of recent research on readers' approaches to literature, the literary content of particular relevance to this age group, and descriptions of the highly engaging forms of drama that can accompany reading in school and library settings.

When defining adolescence, a wide range of ages is typically included. For some researchers, the generally accepted age range for adolescence is 10 to 20. However, this generous age span is problematic when considering the changing nature of "physical and cognitive development on youth literacy practices" (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008, p.110) and the changing contexts from primary school to middle school to high school that often mark significant shifts in adolescents' interests, experiences, and responsibilities. While we recognize that certain continuity exists between elementary and secondary-aged readers (such as identifying with characters in a story), there is value in focusing on a narrower age range, 11–14 specifically, for interpreting research and for considering how to engage young people in literary reading. In this chapter we focus on the dimensions of reading experience, especially social contexts and individual engagement, that can be formative for readers who are leaving behind episodic, humorous fiction and entering into a more critical and exploratory approach to book selection and interpretation. We begin with brief portraits of three readers and analyze these through the lenses of identity, social and cultural expectations, and motivational differences among readers.

The second section focuses on the characteristics of texts that have been viewed by critics, scholars, and educators as particularly well-suited to middle grade readers. We examine these characteristics in order to establish

a sense of distinction for readers as they move into the transformative period of young adolescence.

Finally, we describe pedagogical approaches, especially dramatic processes, that support and extend readers' engagement in and interpretations of story worlds that may, at first, seem distant or confusing. Using several examples, we describe active, inquiry-based, social approaches to literary reading that enable young people to live inside worlds, rather than looking in from the outside.

Readers and Reading Inside Social Worlds

Some studies of adolescent readers have claimed that students' interest in reading declines in middle school. McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995), for example, found that students attitudes toward reading steadily declined from early elementary to middle school. More recently, Greenberg, Gilbert, and Fredrick (2006) claim the results of their study "indicate that middle school students show a significant lack of interest in reading and a lack of reading behavior" (p. 168). This survey research examined the responses of 1,174 middle school students from both rural and inner-city schools. Although their questionnaire was somewhat limited in complexity, participants' mean score for interest in reading was 2.42 on a 4-point Likert scale.

Despite this evidence, we know that middle school students' motivation to read is much more complex. Defining the parameters around a middle-level reader means taking into consideration the unique characteristics of early adolescence, their varied developmental characteristics, how they define reading, how they participate in reading as socially and culturally positioned people, and how they perceive their access to and comfort with unfamiliar ideas and perspectives represented in literature. For the past decade, researchers are more cautious in labeling adolescent students as unmotivated or non-readers. Not only do we need to consider both in and out of school practices; we must also consider their view of reading and their reader identity.

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) recognized that studies of young adolescents' attitudes toward and interests in reading were limited and few examined the instruction that may contribute to students' interest in reading. In their study, 1,765 sixth-grade students responded to a questionnaire about reading in their language arts classroom. The results suggest a mismatch between school structures, such as mandated curriculum and instructional approach. Additionally, they realized that motivation to read is not an "all-or-nothing construct" (p. 366).

More recently, in a study of 584 urban minority middle school students, Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) found that 72% of the students reported that they engage in reading as a leisure activity. A majority of the students who engage in leisure reading report that they do it for fun, and magazines are usually their material of choice. Both of these studies confirm that readers' attitudes are multidimensional and fluctuate based on the context. As the reading portraits presented below suggest, young adolescents' attitudes toward reading are deeply tied to contexts and purposes, as well as their beliefs about how books "talk" to you.

Katie, a seventh grader, says that "reading is something you do in your spare time, for enjoyment, to learn, and to find out what other people think about different topics." Katie reads for pleasure all the time. She likes contemporary realistic fiction the most, such as *The Lottery Rose* by Irene Hunt (1976) and *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech (1996), but she admits that she will read anything. She rarely abandons books because even if she is not all that interested in the book, she "doesn't mind finishing it just to see what happens." In her language arts class, she is routinely finishing one book and checking out another. She also reads all the texts assigned in the other classes but only because she wants good grades. Katie's understanding of reading distinguishes between what she reads for school assignments and what she reads for pleasure. Her definition of reading does not include any reading that she might do for a school assignment.

Steven, on the other hand, understands that reading has a variety of purposes and exists in a variety of contexts, including both in and out of school. He defines reading as "a way of being communicated to. Sometimes reading is needed to find important information. Or, sometimes it is just for fun." Steven primarily selects fantasy texts for pleasure reading, including series such as the *Redwall* series by Brian Jacques.

In contrast, Bailey, an eighth grader, believes that "reading is when you are looking at words and saying what they are/say." Although he does not have a "reader" identity, and does not show much interest in reading novels, he uses a variety of comprehension strategies (such as making connections and asking questions) to understand texts that interest him. When asked, Bailey cannot name specific book titles of what he has recently read.

These three readers show three very distinct reader identities and three different definitions of reading. To complicate matters further, teachers and students may also conceptualize reading and what it means to be a reader differently. Williams (2004) suggests that young children believe that all reading both in and out of the classroom counts towards making them readers. However, by middle school, "reading becomes more connected to work and the demonstration and assessment of knowledge" (p. 687), so young adolescents' conceptions of their identities as readers change.

Describing oneself as someone who does not like reading does not necessarily mean that a young adolescent does not read or lacks fundamental skills for reading (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007; Strommen & Mates, 2004). According to Ivey (2001), middle-level reader differences can be viewed from two distinct and related dimensions: differences between readers and complexity within individual

readers. Differences between readers include the wide range in ability that is both academic and cognitive. In addition, a multi-case study of sixth-grade students found that "individual middle level readers were multidimensional as readers, and their abilities and dispositions toward reading varied with different contexts" (p. 66).

Along with their perceptions of classroom-based reading, it is also important to understand how adolescents interpret reading in other parts of their lives. Moje et al. (2008) found that adolescents' social networks such as informal reading and writing groups and more organized reading groups became spaces "that allow racial or gendered identities to be constructed or enacted" (p. 132). Their longitudinal research challenges traditional views of reading practices among adolescents that describe them as indifferent or unmotivated. These findings help to explain why the readers described above think about reading very differently. Indeed, their reader identities are unique, multidimensional, and contextualized.

We take as further evidence of these nuances in reading interest, Tatum's (2008) analysis of the social and political contexts informing young African American males' reading choices. Tatum demonstrates, through interview data and evidence of students' literature-based writing, that racially based biases and judgments both in and out of school often collide and constrain reading interests for many students—particularly if they grow up in communities of high poverty.

In one case, Tatum (2008) focuses on a young man from Chicago whose choices of texts were mediated by racist experiences such as being pulled over by white police officers who assume the African American occupants possessed drugs or other illegal substances. These phenomena of "driving while black" and other "devaluing" situations are "often overlooked by literacy models that are solely grounded in cognitive reading processes" (p. 172). Tatum argues that these cultural experiences become texts that mediate other literacy practices (e.g. selection of books) for adolescent readers. Further, literate identities, for many African American males are informed by performative popular cultural texts such as hip hop music and rap lyrics. Tatum argues that these texts are key to the social networks that African American males inhabit, and that, as literacy practices, they exercise profound influence on the identities the young men enact as part of a more relevant and successful form of literacy experience outside of school.

Moje et al. (2008) contend that we need to know more about relationships between literacy practices outside of classrooms and school-based literacy, as well as how they are mutually constitutive. We believe this is particularly important for middle-level readers because they are involved in constructing and performing identities that are linked with, yet, challenge and transform traditional cultural understandings of literacy. What are the best contexts for successful literature instruction, and how are those spaces constructed and negotiated by and with middle-level students? As instructional walls become more porous through technology and students become more attuned to their roles in a global economy, how do constructs of middle-level readers, middle-level novels, and instructional practices shift?

Engaging Middle-Level Readers

From 2005 to 2007 nearly 80 articles appeared in *Reading Research Quarterly* and the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* that specifically focused on adolescents' motivation and engagement in reading. According to Cassidy, Garrett, and Barrera (2006), literacy leaders agree "almost all the literature on adolescent literacy mentions the importance of motivation or engagement" (p. 35). Case studies included in the journal review may appear to be limited in scope or usefulness in making an argument for improving teachers' knowledge of engagement and motivation in reading the middle years, but according to Hinchman (2008), such perspectives have the potential to influence policy to consider a more diverse range of literacies and texts. Even the most recent studies on motivation indicate that school texts do not match what adolescents want nor need (Pitcher et al., 2007). Clearly, connectedness, or the transaction that takes place when a reader is engaged is imperative for students to develop as readers (Hunsberger, 2007).

Brozo, Shiel, and Topping (2007/2008) suggest that low motivation to read is not unique to young adolescents in the United States. Rather, "youth from across the globe exhibit a similar decline in performance and interest as they move from primary to secondary school" (p. 307). In a recent column of International Reports on Literacy Research, Botzakis and Malloy (2005) asked all International Reading Correspondents (IRCs) to identify the most pressing issues in literacy from their region. The disengagement with literacy of middle school students (grades 5–8; ages 11–14) was the issue most often identified. In response, each IRC sent out surveys to 20–25 people in their regions in order to gather more information about young adolescents' disengagement with literacy. The results across geographic regions showed that both gender and out-of school interests were reported as influential on literacy engagement. Girls were reported to be more engaged in school-approved literacies, but out-of-school literacies were rarely incorporated in classroom instruction. Further, students are more engaged and influenced by new technologies; however, these technologies are not used very often in classroom situations, particularly in areas of high poverty (Botzakis & Malloy, 2005).

In another recent International Report of Reading Research, Malloy and Botzakis (2005) summarize a longitudinal study of 370 students as they transitioned from childhood to adolescence. Schillings (2003) investigated the development of reading comprehension skills as well as motivation to read, metacognitive reading awareness,

and reading achievement based on Guthrie and Alverman's (1999) framework of reading engagement. Participants consisted of 370 students at the end of Grade 6. Findings indicated support of the process of engagement adapted from Guthrie and Alverman (Malloy & Botzakis, 2005).

Finally, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicated that there is a link between engagement and achievement. PISA is a global effort that attempts to assess the reading literacy of adolescents. Based on the results of the PISA 2000 report, Brozo et al. (2007/2008) suggest that engagement is a critical factor in reading achievement and "keeping students engaged in reading and learning might make it possible for them to overcome what might otherwise be insuperable barriers to academic success" (p. 309). Highly engaged adolescents from the lowest socioeconomic indicators performed as well as two other groups in the study: (1) highly engaged youth from the middle socioeconomic status (SES) and (2) medium level engagement from high socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is figured by averaging the value for the dimensions of occupation, education, household income and family income. These studies along with the portraits of Katie, Steven, and Bailey suggest that readers are motivated to read in different contexts. The above study, specifically, calls for a need to change our approach for motivating and engaging students in schools, libraries, and other spaces for reading, especially when students have different goals and social values. With a clearly established link between engagement and achievement (Brozo et al., 2007/2008), we must focus on what we do in the classroom to motivate all students while accepting their unique reader identities and personal preferences.

Defining Middle-Level Narratives

From a policy makers' perspective, in the area of adolescent literacy there is tremendous need for researchers to assist with selecting materials and developing interventions for striving readers (Wise, 2007). Doubek and Cooper (2007) suggest that researchers find out not only why certain texts are chosen, but also explore the process of text selection. Instructionally, there need to be clear guidelines for selecting appropriate texts not just for educators but for non-educators in the community who work with young readers outside of the school context. Wedwick and Wutz's (2006) work with BOOKMATCH, a tool used for teaching self-selection strategies to middle-level students, is appropriate for both educators and noneducators. This tool scaffolds readers as they learn to match themselves to books that are just right for them rather than relying on a teacher, a publisher's assumption of what is just right for a grade level, or a scripted program, such as Accelerated Reader. Thompson, Madhuri, and Taylor's (2008) study of the Accelerated Reader program confirmed other studies that indicate students did not like the limited book selections associated with this program. Students also revealed that they did not enjoy the book selections, and African American students felt there were very few books by black authors or with black protagonists other than books on slavery. Empowering students to choose their own books with a process like BOOKMATCH, may motivate them to continue reading rather than discourage them.

The literature for young adolescents is also evolving from children's literature to adolescent literature. At times, this transition may happen too quickly for some students. Additionally, middle school teachers are forced to consider the explicitness of some adolescent literature for whole class novels or even inclusion in their classroom libraries. In Wedwick's own teaching of middle school students, she had students every year who wanted to censor some books in the classroom. This inevitably led to a debate between those students who believed they should be able to read anything they wanted and those who believed that some books were inappropriate for everyone.

In selecting their own texts for independent reading, these students were expected to consider the topic appropriateness or their comfort zone for a particular text (Wedwick & Wutz, 2006). Students openly discussed that adolescent literature is often at a difficulty level appropriate for them, but that those books regularly have "touchy" topics which they may be uncomfortable reading. While choosing their own books, students ranked topic appropriateness as one of their top criteria for selection. Some students expressed that sometimes they are comfortable with a book's content, but their parents were uncomfortable with them reading a particular book and would not allow it. Of course, parents and adolescents may not have the same perception of what is appropriate. Nevertheless, young adolescents are quite aware of their comfort zone and must be allowed to choose books that match their comfort zone.

Having a way for both teachers and students to identify books in the middle of a children's literature and adolescent literature continuum could be beneficial. Trites's (2000) scholarship in adolescent literature helps to inform an argument for a middle-level genre. According to Trites (2000), the primary characteristic "that distinguishes adolescent literature from children's literature is the issue of how social power is deployed during the course of the narrative" (p. 2). For children's literature, "the action focuses on one child who learns to feel more secure" in his or her environment, "represented by family and home" (pp. 3–4). In adolescent literature, however, "protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are" (p. 4). In adolescent literature, the protagonist figures out how to "negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function" (p. 4).

Appleyard (1990) explains what he understands to be the difference between books for children and books for adolescents:

> The difference is that the juvenile books all deal with an innocent world, where evil is externalized and finally powerless, where endings are happy. The adolescents' books

> deal with sex, death, sin, and prejudice, and good and evil are not neatly separated but mixed up in the confused and often turbulent emotions of the central characters themselves. (p.100)

Books for the young adolescent, then, do not completely reflect the innocent world of children's literature, but also do not position the reader in explicit situational contexts as adolescent literature does. Although books can be a safe place for new experiences before adolescents try them out in the real world, young adolescents are not always prepared for the content of literature for older adolescents.

Drawing on the work of these scholars, and particularly Trites (2000) and Appleyard (1990), the chart in Figure 5.1 outlines a proposed set of criteria that distinguishes middle-level literature from children's literature and adolescent literature by the representation of sex/sexuality, power, and the innocent world.

We understand these criteria as guideposts for theorizing the genre of middle-level literature; they help mark explorations into the genre but are not meant to restrict them. Three texts are used here to help illustrate these distinguishing characteristics of children's literature, middle-level literature, and adolescent literature: *And Tango makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005), *The Misfits* by James Howe (2001), and *Geography Club* by Brent Hartinger (2003).

In *And Tango Makes Three,* sex and sexuality are focused on the concept of family—specifically on same gender adults who are the caregivers in one family. Families are first described traditionally when a boy and a girl penguin become a couple. They build a home together, the girl penguin lays an egg, the couple takes turns warming the egg until it hatches, and the families become mama, papa, and baby. However, the male penguins, Roy and Silo, have no interest in the girl penguins, and the two of them do everything together, such as swimming, singing, walking, and nesting.

When the other penguins prepare their nest to hatch an egg, Roy and Silo follow their rituals, but without an egg, no baby penguin is hatched. The zoo keeper provides Roy and Silo with an egg, and the two penguins take turns sitting on the egg until it hatches. When Tango is born, the three of them live happily as a family. Tango has two daddies. Roy and Silo enact power by hatching the egg in their nest and taking care of Tango. Together they experience both a sense of self and a sense of family. The innocent world is represented in the plot as the focus is only on the happiness of all the characters. Roy and Silo do not experience ostracism by being a non-traditional family, and they experience the same happiness as all the other penguin families. There is essentially no evil in the story.

In the middle-level novel, *The Misfits* (Howe, 2001), sex and sexuality are evident in the harmless crushes the characters have on different people in their lives. For example, Bobby has a crush on the older Pam and the very shy Kelsey. Skeezie has a crush on Steffi, the older waitress at the Candy Kitchen. Joe has a crush on his classmate, Colin. Joe's gay identity is explicit, but he dreams only of

	Children's Literature	Middle Level Literature	Adolescent Literature
Sex/Sexuality	Focus is on gender roles/constructions; Implicit rather than explicit	Sexuality is viewed as innocent and harmless; perhaps even comical. The potential of its power is not fully understood.	Characters deal explicitly with issues of sex and sexuality; "experiencing sexuality marks a rite of passage that helps them define themselves as having left childhood behind" (Trites, 2000, p. 84).
Power	The reader learns to feel more secure in immediate environment (Trites, 2000). The protagonist's struggle enacts personal power and a sense of self (Trites, 2000).	The reader learns that there are social institutions that have varying levels of power over them. The protagonist's struggle propels her/him forward on an identity quest and empowers him/her to continue the exploration.	The reader learns to negotiate the levels of power in social institutions (Trites, 2000). The protagonist's struggle is more on an institutional level, and he/she is more likely to be disempowered by the social institutions in this struggle.
Innocent World	Social injustice is rectified. Evil is externalized and powerless and endings are happy (Appleyard, 1990).	Social injustice may exist but individuals have the power to overcome it. Evil can be internal and external. The protagonist learns to overcome the power of evil rather than understand it to be powerless.	Social injustice is a fact of life and difficult if not impossible to eradicate. "Deal with sex, death, sin, and prejudice; good and evil are not viewed as binary opposites but tied up in the turbulent emotions of the characters" (Appleyard, 1990, p. 100).

Figure 5.1 Characteristics of literature by category

holding hands with someone he likes. The comedic also plays a role in the characters' sexual awakening: DuShawn likes Addie so he hits her with spitballs and puts a whoopee cushion on her chair; Bobby finally works up the nerve to call Kelsey, but he hangs up twice when someone answers, and then keeps telling Kelsey that there is something wrong with his phone; Addie thinks she and Colin are going together because he showed up at the flagpole, gave her a compliment, and told her he'd get a soda with her another time; and Skeezie becomes speechless when the older Steffi flirts with him.

In terms of power, the gang of five experience struggles with the institutional powers of school and social status. They want to create a third party to run for student council, but they are repeatedly met with barriers from the teacher Ms. Wyman, the principal Mr. Kiley, and the larger institutional power of the two party governmental system of the country. However, the gang of five is granted permission to create their third party, the No-Name Party. The gang also believe themselves to be on the lower end of the social status, but they have each other, which empowers them. Even though they don't end up winning the election, they are still empowered by the experience and learn that each has "the freedom to be who you are without anybody calling you names" (p. 266).

Characters in *The Misfits* understand that evil exists. They have all been called names at least since the third grade. But, together, they learn to overcome this evil, or at least to fight against it. By not winning the election, they recognize that evil has power, but they learn that they can overcome it. They learn that they can stand up for themselves, and they believe that they have the power to make a difference.

In *Geography Club* (Hartinger, 2003), sex and sexuality become much more explicit. For example, Ms. Toles, the health teacher, teaches the students how to use condoms, demonstrating on a cucumber. The high school students in this novel describe sexual encounters as though sex in high school is a matter of fact. For example, Jared says, "she was begging for it, squirming around like a baby," and once he "started going at her, she couldn't get enough" (p.181). Russel Middlebrook, the novel's protagonist, is a gay teenager who occasionally visits gay chat rooms, and eventually experiences sex with another boy from his school. Russel's coming to terms with his sexuality is an explicit plot feature throughout the book.

However, while Joe in *The Misfits* does not hide who he is, the gay characters in *Geography Club* recognize the loss of power and social status should they reveal themselves. Russel learns that one's fear of exposure is more powerful than any other emotion. Kevin, Russel's boyfriend, knows that the power that comes with his social status as a popular jock is more important than being true to himself and being associated with the gay Russel. At the end of the novel, the institutional power seems to win. The Geography Club is defunct, and even though a Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance is formed, the gay members are content with the rest of the student body believing they are the "straight" members and Brian Bund is the one gay member of the club.

The innocent world is problematic in adolescent literature and injustices are prevalent. Topics like sex and drinking are positioned as sinful in the world of the novel, and characters deal with "real" consequences of their behavior. Russel learns that good and evil are not simply opposites. When Brian Bund is being tormented in the cafeteria, Russel says that he'd like to help him, but "it wouldn't have made any difference anyway" (p. 9) because he risked being a victim as well. Later, when Russel starts hanging around with the jocks, he too, teases Brian, even though he knows it to be wrong. When other members of the Geography Club invite Brian to join them, Russel votes no because he doesn't want to risk losing Kevin.

These three texts present unique characteristics and demonstrate the need for a middle-level genre. In children's literature, the protagonist experiences personal power. In the adolescent novel, protagonists struggle on more of an institutional level and they discover that they are more likely to be disempowered by the social institutions. The middle-level novel propels young adolescents forward on their identity quests and empowers them to continue that exploration. Trites's (2000) distinction between the *Entwicklungsroman* "which is a broad category of novels in which an adolescent character grows, and the *Bildungsroman*, which is a related type of novel in which the adolescent matures to adulthood" (p. 9) shapes our thinking about this identity quest. Middle-level novels are *Entwicklungsromane*, not *Bildungsromane*. Growth novels are not punctuated with graphic language and sexual how to, although there may be a sense of sexual awakening within the protagonist.

Overall, we believe work by these scholars and researchers, along with our newly defined characteristics, support our claim for recognizing texts for the middle-level reader as a viable category, situated between literature for children and literature for older adolescents. We acknowledge that the category we are arguing for may not encompass the experiences of all readers, and that particular groups of readers may find other types of texts engaging on a personal or political level (Enciso, Wolf, Coats, & Jenkins, 2010). However, we believe that identifying texts for middle-level readers has educational value. In the next section, we explore instructional contexts in which middle-level literature can be brought to life through meaningful, interactive experiences.

What Instructional Contexts are Most Likely to Engage Middle-Level Readers?

In this section, we focus on instructional research that suggests successful practices for teaching middle-level literature; we also argue for an expansion of research

on teaching the middle-level novel that is informed by innovative pedagogy—particularly process drama. We believe that process drama, the practices of using dramatic structures as tools facilitate response to literature, offer new opportunities for thinking about research on teaching literature for middle-level readers. The work of the New London Group (1996) helped crystallize the notion of multi-literacies into a pedagogical frame that emphasized the concepts of design and literacy work for re-imagining "social futures" for learners. This approach offers a powerful heuristic for researchers and teachers who want to explore how middle-level readers draw on multiple sign systems (Siegel, 2006) as they respond to and construct understandings of literature. We argue that particularly promising are studies that draw on process drama to engage readers in complex meaning making around literature. In this chapter, we situate process drama in a larger context of reader response research; however, we also acknowledge that others would view it differently.

Readers Responding in the Middle-Level Classroom: Categories for Interpreting Middle-Level Reading Engagement

Early research by Appleyard (1990) discovered that becoming a reader and responding as a reader are developmental processes. He argued that to understand readers' responses to texts, we need to move beyond cognitive explanations of development and consider sociocultural factors. According to Appleyard, as readers mature, their attitudes, intentions, responses, and use of reading shifts along five roles: player, hero and heroine, thinker, interpreter, and pragmatic. He generated his concepts from a narrative analysis of three "instructive accounts" (pp. 23–25) of young readers and extrapolated his categories of role from these examples. Young adolescents fall between and among the characteristics of reader as hero and heroine and reader as thinker. The reader as hero and heroine imagines herself as the protagonist who solves the problems of the world through competence and initiative. The reader as thinker looks to literature to discover authentic roles for imitation, ideal images, and values and alternative values and beliefs. The shifting nature of these roles is related both to young adolescents' emerging identity and their cognitive development, as well as the situational context of middle school and their social practices.

This shifting of readers' responses is also documented in Galda's (1992) four-year study of students as they moved from fourth grade to seventh grade. The results showed significant differences in students' responses as they grew older. Students read two novels each year (one realism and one fantasy) and discussed those novels with the researcher leading the discussion with open-ended questions. Students' responses during these discussions and individual interviews with the researcher were classified into categorical and analytic responses. The results indicated that students' responses changed from primarily categorical to more analytic, and "their preferences and understandings about reading literature became increasingly complex across the four years of the study" (p. 132). Although these students are not rereading the same texts, their experiences over time are contributing to the increasing complexity of their cognitive processes.

More recently, studies have concluded that adolescents have little critical response to texts (Beach & Freedman, 1992; DeBlase, 2003; Garner, 1999; Pace, 2003; Pearlman, 1995; Smith, 1992). Still, these findings do not imply that students lack the cognitive capacity for understanding ideology. The reader's social stance or subject position plays a salient role in the thinking readers do about the texts. Considering young adolescents' emerging identity, their need to explore alternative roles, the complexity and variability of their developing cognitive ability, and their shifting reader roles, these characteristics are distinctly different from those of childhood and those of later adolescence. This difference is related to the inchoate nature of young adolescent identities and a need to "try on" different selves in ways that are safe for middle-level readers. Therefore, middle-level texts will need to provide opportunities to interactively respond and explore some of these same distinct characteristics. However, young adolescent readers will also need instruction on how to read a novel and how to critically analyze ideology.

Shifting Practices

How middle-level readers respond to and engage with literature has been a trend in recent research (Almasi, 1995; Alverman et al., 1996; Lewis, 1997; Evans, 2002). These studies have established how understandings and interpretations of literature can be mediated successfully through literature circles and other discussion groups. Together, they are salient for recognizing the importance of highlighting social interactions as significant features of literature instruction for middle-level readers.

Recent scholarship has investigated how response to literature is culturally situated in specific contexts and how readers' responses to literature may be transformative—helping them see literary texts and their own meaning making practices differently. Galda and Beach (2001) chart the development of response to literature by reviewing scholarship in three areas—text, readers, and contexts. Based on their synthesis of work from the 1960s though the late 1990s, they contend that research on response has been informed by sociocultural theory. To deepen their pedagogical understanding of how middle-level readers respond, Beach and Meyers (2001) focused specifically on a group of 15 seventh-grade girls responding to a young adult novel in an after school book club. Their findings suggested exploring responses to the novel through dialogue journal entries helped these middle-level students unpack and question traditional roles of women in society.

Brooks's (2006) investigation of how African American middle-level readers respond to and interpret texts that include authentic representations of their own ethnic group was theoretically situated within a convergence of reader-response scholarship. She frames her inquiry by arguing for separating reader response categories proposed by Beach (1993): textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural; and selecting experiential and cultural as the most potentially generative for examining how this class of students responded to a group novels selected by the researcher and the librarian at the school where the research was conducted (Brooks, 2006, p. 375). Brooks defines experiential as significant for readers of African American literature because it focuses on "the value of life-text links" and cultural as how readers "draw from historical, discursive, ideological and social contexts (p. 376) in their responses. The list of novels for the study included *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988), *Roll of Thunder Hear my Cry* (Taylor, 1976), and the *House of Dies Drear* (Hamilton, 1968).

Brooks's analyses of responses during literature discussions indicated that textual features across novels (e.g., forging family and friend relationships, confronting and overcoming racism, surviving city life), could be used to augment effective literacy instruction with middle-level readers. What was particularly significant in Brooks's study was her implication that middle-level African American reader's responses to and understandings of the novels listed above were tied to student's culturally specific knowledge, yet were also complex. Pedagogically, this supports our argument that we need innovative instruction that both honors the cultural background of the middle-level reader and creates avenues to explore individual complexity across literary texts.

Other research (Juzwik & Sherry, 2007) has examined how the use of teacher oral narratives promoted specific categories of response in a seventh grade classroom and also enhanced class discussion of literature. Additionally, Stone (2006) looked at how students used the development of picture books as a way to mediate and respond to relationships between school culture and their communities and found that this type of genre-specific writing response opened dialogues for teaching critical literacy. These two studies suggest that culturally constructed textual features and a literacy practice like oral narrative foster more complex and potentially identity shaping responses in middle-level readers.

Others have built on this body of scholarship to consider how constructs of power, gender, and identity mediate reader's construction of meaning (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Cherland, 1994; Smith, 1992). Clarke's research (2006), for example, investigated literature circle discussions as spaces where fifth-grade girls were positioned and positioned themselves along narrative and cultural story lines. Findings from this study challenge researchers to think more carefully and deeply about relationships within engagement with literature, and how teachers can "create situations in which power and positioning become normalized" (p. 77). These patterns can reify traditional patterns of dominance in classrooms, and create opportunities for some students' voices to be squelched. In the next section we detail the power of drama and its pedagogical use with middle-level readers and argue that this approach brings together reader, text, and context in potentially powerful ways.

Drama and Readers' Response to Middle-level Literature

Identifying middle-level literature creates opportunities for teachers and students to select books that resonate for a particular category of reader; using drama as a pedagogical tool can shift instruction so that a student's "whole being" (Crumpler & Schneider, 2002) is engaged in the study of that literature. Wagner's (1998) survey and synthesis of research studies about using drama in language arts provided evidence for how process drama could impact students' learning and engagement. In the area of drama and literature instruction, the work of Rosenblatt (1938/1983, 1978) is conceptually salient. Scholars built on her theories and extended them to explorations of literary understanding (Steig, 1989), argued for how literary texts encouraged readers to enter fictional worlds (Benton, 1992), and developed performative theories of responding to and interpreting texts (Iser, 1989, 1993).

More recently, researchers have argued for the importance of literary theory for underpinning literature instruction with adolescents (Appleman, 2000; Soter, 1999; Sumara, 2002). Based on the works of these authors and others, researchers have explored how process drama can serve as a pedagogical tool to augment and enrich literature instruction and challenge traditional interpretive stances with readers (Crumpler, 2006; Gallagher, 2001; Medina, 2004; Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998). In this chapter we conceptualize process drama as using methods of teacher in role, student in role, tableaux, and other dramatic structures to promote learning (O'Neill, 1995).

Heathcote and Bolton (1995), as well as more recent work, have investigated possibilities for drama as response to literature (Edmiston, 2003; Edmiston & Enciso, 2003; Wolf, Edmiston, & Enciso, 1997). Wolf (2004) delineates between "text centered" and "text edged" drama as interpretive work in which an author's words are either central to creating a performative event such as reader's theater and classroom theater or, on the other hand, tableaux and unwritten conversations, which stray further from the text. Key to both approaches is the concept of "critical space" in which teachers and students step out of a dramatic sequence of instruction with literature to examine how roles were taken up and critique the creation of the fictional experience.

Using such a framework, a teacher could use text edged drama to explore issues of family or perspectives suggested in the middle-level novel, *No More Dead Dogs*

(Korman, 2000). In this novel, Wallace, who refuses to lie under any circumstances, is an unexpected football success who gets suspended from the team after writing an unfavorable review of his English teacher's favorite novel, *Old Shep My Pal.* When he refuses to rewrite the report, he is forced to attend rehearsals of a school play based on the same book and directed by the same English teacher. Through drama, students working with their teacher in role, can use the fictional world of *No More Dead Dogs* to examine the real conflicts that might arise when someone sticks to their convictions. In other words, participants in a text edged drama can use roles they create to consider biases of teachers, the difficulties of telling the truth, and negotiating peer pressure.

Drama expands practices of literature instruction in classrooms in a variety of ways, including working in role, tableau, and other dramatic structures. Literature instruction that is informed by process drama provides opportunities for a teacher in role to de-center her or himself in the classroom and become a co-learner with students. For example, a teacher could move into role as Wallace, the main character. From this position, she can facilitate conversations between a character from a story and the students; and in this case explore how it might feel to have a group be angry at you, when they represent a group in which you really want to become a member. These (fictional/real) conversations allow the teacher and the students to activate background knowledge, draw on the text of the story, and re-access knowledge about texts they have read in the past while engaged in this interaction.

Crumpler's (2001–2002, 2006) research has argued for the theoretical power of drama for exploring issues of social justice in middle school classrooms and as a form of response to literature. In one study of a sixth-grade classroom (2001–2002), drama was used as a research approach to inquire into how students responded to *Encounter*, Jane Yolen's (1996) recasting of the story of Columbus from an indigenous boy's perspective. In this study, the teacher worked in role to become Columbus and invited the children to talk with her about plans for the island she had landed on in the story. Then stepping out of role, the teacher asked one of the students to become a reporter and interview the rest of the group in role as the ship's crew.

The sixth graders decided to put Columbus on trial so the teacher helped identify defense and prosecuting attorneys and jurors for the courtroom finale. In role as jurors, these children argued over what constituted proof of guilt, and challenged one another about who really understood the story that Columbus and his attorney told in the classroom court. Results from analysis of transcripts of the children's conversations in role indicated that "in *self-spectatorship,* participants' attentiveness to how they are developing a role, positioning themselves in relation to other participants, and the language choices that they make" (Crumpler, 2001–2002, p. 59) can be examined by adopting dramatic orientation to inquiry with students.

Crumpler (2007) has also conducted case study research to explore how a middle-level teacher used process drama to facilitate eighth-grade students' responses to and understanding of *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (Lee, 1960). Results of this study found that the use of the dramatic structures of teacher in role, student in role, tableaux, and writing in role as instructional tactics to foster response, helped students enter the world of the novel and then, as Galda and Beach (2001) recommend, critique and transform the world of Scout, Boo Radley, and the other characters in Lee's classic literary text. Particularly interesting was the teacher's use of tableaux, silent frozen images, which served as a mediator to help students access different meaning systems and tap into what the New London Group (1996) called "the resources for design" (p. 74). Through using these resources, students began to understand the "conventions of semiotic activity" (p. 74).

In other words, they internalized some of the structures of the novel (divisive opinions, the oppressive nature or racism, and the desire for freedom) and were able to translate them into their own literacy practices. In this study the students were engaged in a sequence of process drama activities with their teacher. The teacher, Gloria, stepped into role as a lady from the 1930s, and began to read from an imaginary book of manners, "Being a Lady*.*" She stepped primly to the front of the room and read a passage from her "book," and it became a pretext (O'Neill, 1995) for the dramatic work on that day—its genesis and reason for coming into being. The pretext initiated the use of the tableau (singular for tableaux) in this case. She described the importance of manners and speaking when spoken to, the way legs should be crossed, and how a lady should dress.

After reading in role, the teacher stepped back into her role as classroom teacher and asked the students to write down what would be a gesture or behavior that they believed would represent or serve as an emblem or metaphor for how girls should act at the time in history portrayed in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). Five minutes passed as students wrote. She spoke as herself and asked the students to tell her what they had written down. The students called out their ideas, and she wrote them on the board. This is the list that was generated:

- Having tea with a group of elderly ladies
- Quietly reading a book
- Sitting on a porch waiting for father to come home
- Writing a letter to an aunt at a desk
- Curtseying

The teacher asked the group to choose one idea from the list, and they chose curtseying. She then divided the group in half, and they faced each other in the middle of the room. She explained to them that when she counts to three, they would all curtsey simultaneously. She acknowledged

that there were boys in the room, but they were working in role to represent the 1930s. They created the tableau, as two groups of 10 faced each other and then asked them to "freeze," and then hold their position. The students were in two lines facing each other, trying to hold the concept of curtseying and looking intently at each other at first, and then slowly began to laugh. The teacher told them to relax and moved them into a second tableau.

Gloria invited them to think about a situation that would be totally opposite to curtseying that they could perform via tableau to show a polar contrast to this formal act/gesture. After a few minutes of discussion in small groups, the students decided to present a tableau of a *mosh pit.* A mosh pit is something that happens at a punk or heavy metal concert. People attending a concert gather in front of the stage where the band is playing and will furiously push, shove and body slam each other. The goal is not to hurt one another but to enjoy the music in a less passive way.

For this tableau, the entire group worked together to wrap their bodies loosely around each other, some students were lying down, and some were kneeling, and others raised one leg off the floor to simulate flying through the air. The teacher asked the students to freeze into a tableau. The scene was intriguing as they concentrated to hold themselves still for less than a minute in this image of silent controlled mayhem. Process drama as a mode of response to literature can engage middle-level readers in learning through fostering complex interpretive decisions as they access the meaning system of a novel, their social interactions, and the imaginary world they construct using dramatic structures.

In other studies, research suggested that practices of process drama like tableaux, the creation of silent frozen moments, can act as an image to activate students' thinking and understanding about a particular literary work. Tableaux is a practice that has been used to enhance literature instruction with a variety of age learners (Downey, 2005; Wilson, 2003). Wilson's work with young children suggested that tableaux is a "way of thinking" (p. 375) and linked using tableaux to cognitive and language development literacy instruction. Downey (2005) worked with middle school students, and integrated tableaux into classroom instruction to explore issues of social justice and help students think critically about literature as well as social and historic episodes. She found that students creating tableaux moved to more abstract thinking, going beyond plot to an understanding of theme and metaphor.

Another area of inquiry with drama is performative critical literacy work (Medina, 2004). Medina (2006) draws on Sumara's (2002) work in literary interpretation to examine critical performance literacies with fifth-grade students who were recent Latino immigrants. These students were working in literature discussion groups reading *My Diary from Here to There/Mi Diario de Aquí Hasta Allá* (Peréz, 2002) and working through drama structures such as writing in role and tableaux. The discussion groups provided opportunities for the students who are English learners to create a "common place" (p. 66) through drama where they could better understand characters through their own personal experiences. Clearly, process drama for working with middle-level readers and texts is an area of theoretical and instructional promise.

Reaching Middle-level Readers through Drama

Instructionally, process drama is a potentially powerful tool for engaging middle readers in rich explorations of literature. As we argued earlier in this chapter, research suggests that the identities of middle-level students are performed within various social networks and spaces—including classrooms—and the texts they engage with are mediated in specific ways within those contexts. Teachers who use drama as a tactic to explore literature can ask "what if" (Edmiston, 2003) when they are studying novels and create other possibilities for the direction of a story, bring in alternate characters, and build the "drama world" (O'Neill, 1995) so that learners can take up roles to try out language and perspectives within safe spaces of a classroom or an online environment (Carroll, Anderson, & Cameron, 2006).

Through this kind of work, middle-level readers use both cognitive and imaginary faculties to respond innovatively to texts because they are able to draw on textual, personal, social, and dramatic meaning systems to extend and deepen their understandings of literature. Teachers who bring process drama into their literature instruction create multiple contexts for middle-level readers to engage in rich conversations that generate new learning possibilities with texts. These possibilities may help middle-level students become more confident, critical readers who can re-imagine their own "social futures" (New London Group, 1996). The literature is mediated within the sequence of drama activities so that that the teacher and students co-construct the drama world through working in role, tableaux, and other dramatic structures. This allows possibilities for co-learning, and modeling, and it can involve students in reading, speaking, listening, and writing in response to middle-level novels.

New Directions for Research

In this last section, we consider new directions for research that will help detail and define instructional practices for teachers working with middle-level readers. The three constructs we identified at the beginning of this chapter intertwine, and while we recognize that studies can examine reader, text and context separately, we also call for research that integrates and probes their interconnectedness. Additionally, Hinchman and Chandler-Olcott (2006) have investigated researchers' representations of adolescent viewpoints about literacy and have argued for situating youth in central positions in research studies. However, their work is primarily theoretical, and empiri-

cal studies with middle-level readers are needed to flesh out theoretical claims.

How do we more carefully define middle-level readers in ways that bring their voices into that defining process? Studies that view middle-level readers as co-researchers (Egan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998) and examine how readers position themselves are important for deepening understandings of the literacy practices and preferences of this group. We need longitudinal studies that focus on individual readers as well as classrooms and unpack how and why a middle-level reader chooses books for himself or herself. Additionally, we need a better understanding how those texts figure into larger constellations of literacy practices. We need a more finely grained knowledge of of how middle readers use school-based and community-based practices to negotiate literate identities. Finally, we have theorized that process drama as a tool of literature instruction with young adolescents could help them discover intersections of reader interest and social positioning, and we believe such a line of research could provide evidence that would enrich learning in literature classrooms.

In this chapter, we have argued that middle-level readers need an interactive approach to literature education that engages their interests and shifting identities as they move into older adolescence. We also made claims for identifying literature that is particularly interesting and imaginatively evocative for middle level-readers, and we theorized characteristics of this new category of literature based on research with this age reader. These categories are dynamic, and we believe may help young readers choose literature that interests them and provides a catalyst for imaginative thinking. Finally, we see process drama as a mode of response that can help teachers of these young readers step into fictional worlds that they have created with students, and engage in interpretations of literature that are social, innovative, critical, and could transform classrooms into spaces where imagination fuels learning.

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