Hey, Can You Find Me a Book? Providing Popular Culture Texts to Students in a Title I Elementary School

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Abstract

Popular culture texts, such as texts based on movies, television, sports, and video games are widely desired by elementary students. However, these texts are not always available for students due to limited funding, lack of teacher appreciation for such texts, and sparse quantities of popular culture texts found in classroom and school libraries. Moreover, students who live in low socioeconomic (SES) areas do not have access to many texts in their homes and neighborhoods. Teachers and administrators can bring popular culture texts to low SES elementary campuses by using federal and state funds to purchase texts, writing grants, utilizing community resources, and providing professional development support for teachers about the importance of popular culture.

Keywords: *popular culture, professional development, reluctant readers*

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Introduction

It was the middle of April and a beautiful, cool, spring afternoon. As the announcements twanged through the speaker, Ted and Mark rushed up to my desk on the way to the car rider line. "Mrs. Butler, Mrs. Butler," Mark gasped. "Can you get us *Dragon Ball Z* books? We can't find any, and you've got to help us!"

"I'll see what I can find for you," I promised. After school was dismissed, I visited the local bookstore and purchased several *Dragon Ball Z* books. Mark and Ted were overjoyed. In fact, several weeks later, Ahmed also asked for *Dragon Ball Z* books. All through April, May, and the beginning of June,

the three fifth-grade boys devoured *Dragon Ball Z.*

I served students and teachers as an instructional reading coach in a Title I elementary school on the northeast side of a school district located in a large urban district in Southeast Texas. Many students who lived in the area around the school owned few or no books of their own. Consequently, it was imperative that students were provided with engaging texts to read at school. With this in mind, I questioned, "What are the reading materials that the students are most interested in reading?" Through observing their reading interests, I discovered that the students sought to read popular culture texts, such as *Diary of a*

Wimpy Kid, *Dog Man*, *Amulet*, and *Minecraft*. Students wanted to read popular culture texts.

Popular culture texts are texts that are desired by many people and include texts based on movies, television, videogames, or sports (Buckingham, 2002; Storey, 2001). According to Hagood, Alvermann, and Heron-Hruby (2010), popular culture texts are "production-in use" digital and/or print texts (p. 14). Simply put, production-in-use texts can be defined as produced texts that provide meaning to the user or consumer of the text. Among the students on our elementary campus, students craved texts, such as the *DogMan* series by Dav Pilkey, *Minecraft*, *Spiderman*, and *Lego-Ninjago*.

Providing Access to Popular Culture Texts

Students who live in poverty have less access to books than students from more affluent families/households (Krashen, 2004; Smith, Constantino, & Krashen, 1997). Duke (2000) investigated the literacy levels of first-grade students from low and high SES households and determined that students from high SES households had greater access to books and magazines in classroom libraries, increased opportunities to choose texts and topics for writing, and more time engaged in writing for real purposes. In a more recent study, researchers revealed the vast differences in the availability of children's literature in poor and rich urban communities (Neuman & Celano, 2006). To illustrate, the researchers identified 11 bookstores or stores with children's literature in the affluent community and only four such locations in the impoverished communities (Neuman, 2013; Neuman & Celano, 2006).

Similar disparities also exist between school library and classroom library collections. Students who attend high poverty schools typically have less access to materials and to librarians within their school libraries (Pribash, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011). In fact, Pribash, Gavigan and Dickinson determined that in schools where a majority of students receive free and reduced-price lunches, school libraries contained fewer texts, were closed more often

due to testing schedules and other events, and offered less checkout time than school libraries in more affluent communities. Additionally, Worthy (1996) and Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) reported that middle school students were unable to check out the most popular texts from school libraries and classroom libraries due in part to text popularity, limited numbers of available texts, and lack of funds to purchase additional texts. With this in mind, it became my goal to provide students with access to the types of texts that they wished to read.

Popular Culture Texts in Classroom Libraries

As a literacy coach on my school campus, I added many popular culture texts to our classroom library inventories. Classroom libraries are an integral component of a literacy classroom and should include a significant number of texts from various genres that accommodate student interests (Allington, 2001; Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Krashen, 2004, Miller & Moss, 2013; Routman, 2003). Routman (2003) contended, "It really doesn't matter what kids read as long as they read and enjoy what they are reading" (p. 65). Therefore, my goal was to build the quantity and quality of each classroom library on my school campus each time funding became available. I also strived to incorporate student requests into classroom libraries, such as those made for popular culture texts. When possible, I purchased these texts and placed them in the classroom libraries.

When funds were not available to purchase popular culture texts for school and classroom libraries, I devised other means to place texts in the hands of students. One way I achieved this was through resourcing efforts. For example, upon a student request, I searched my personal classroom library first. If I did not have the text, I checked the school library next. If the text was unavailable in the school library, I looked for it at the public library. If the text was available in the public library, I checked the title out in my name and made it available for

students. In cases where the text searches proved fruitless, I purchased the text myself at local bookstores, library book sales, or thrift stores.

I also wrote a number of grants to secure more popular culture texts for students. For instance, one grant provided six e-readers for every fifth-grade classroom. Reluctant readers in these classrooms were able to select texts to upload to the e-readers, which were mostly popular culture texts. Another grant I secured garnered fifth-grade students a field trip to a local bookstore. Funding from this grant also enabled each student to select two books to keep and read over the summer.

Additionally, community volunteer organizations provided students with many new popular culture texts. For example, volunteers from a local hospital visited students every month, read a story, and then distributed brand-new books to every student in the classroom. Many of the books the volunteers brought to our campus were popular culture texts. Although students on our campus did not have the same access to texts as schools in more affluent communities, I pursued multiple ways to overcome this discrepancy.

Professional Development for Popular Culture Texts

As an instructional reading coach, I provided professional development for teachers on our campus. In our district, all instructional coaches met with teachers in Professional Learning Communities (PLC). At the beginning of every PLC meeting, I modeled book talks, which are brief book commercials designed to entice students and teachers to try new texts (Kittle, 2013; Miller, 2009). Through book talks, I introduced new popular culture texts to teachers and modeled how they might use similar book talks for the same texts with their students. During PLC meetings, I also focused on other ways for teachers to support the use of popular culture texts, such as providing time, choice, and multiple ways of responding to reading.

Another way I supported teacher growth with understanding the importance of popular culture texts was through summer book clubs for teachers. When funding became available, I purchased current professional books focused on topics, such as reading/writing workshop, reading aloud, and student choice and voice with selecting text. For example, fifth-grade teachers enrolled in a summer book club for *The Book Whisperer* (Miller, 2009). As teachers read and discussed this text, they developed a common goal of providing students with more time and choice during daily independent reading.

In a similar manner, teachers read and responded to graphic novels in another book club. Each teacher who enrolled in this book club acquired a new respect for graphic novels. One teacher shared, "Reading the book was an eye opener. I should have read a graphic novel sooner on behalf of my students. I'm looking forward to reading the sequels." Indeed, summer book clubs provided teachers with enriching opportunities for professional development and reflection.

Popular Culture Text Discoveries

Sometimes, popular culture text discoveries occurred fortuitously. For example, I met after school and during lunch with several fourth-grade boys who were reluctant readers. One day, these boys mentioned their love for professional wrestling. This sparked a discussion about wrestling, specifically about a professional wrestler named Undertaker. As the students talked, I noticed they were engaged, excited, and possessed a plethora of background knowledge. I knew nothing about wrestling, and they were excited to teach the teacher! The students also taught me about Undertaker's *kayfabe*, his fictional backstory (Oliva & Calleja, 2009), and his notorious finishing moves, such as the Tombstone Piledriver. Although I was thrilled that these boys knew so much about wrestling, I was disheartened to think that this knowledge was probably not valued in the classroom.

My discussion with the four boys about wrestling inspired me to capitalize on their extensive knowledge with popular culture texts. First, I purchased several wrestling biographies for well-known wrestlers, such as John Cena, The Rock, and Sheamus. I then incorporated these popular culture texts into subsequent meetings with this group of boys. During one of our after school sessions, the boys decided to compose their own popular culture text, which included aspects of the informational text, biography, poetry, and rap genres. After the boys completed their popular culture text, they shared it with their parents and classroom teacher. They also began to read the wrestling biographies I acquired during independent reading. Before long, fellow classmates noticed that these boys were voraciously reading these texts and expressed an interest in reading them, as well. Fortunately, we were able to add more wrestling biographies and informational texts about wrestling to classroom libraries.

Closing Thoughts

Elementary students from all backgrounds love to read popular culture texts, and all students deserve the opportunity to access such texts on a regular basis. The purpose of this paper was to provide ways in which teachers can provide popular culture texts for students in their classrooms. In this paper, various strategies and ideas to provide popular culture texts among low SES students were described, and I demonstrated how teachers and administrators can make a difference in students' literate lives. Providing students with books they love is like Neverland—never easy, never inexpensive, and never ending. However, these efforts are definitely worth the investment.

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