Nontraditional Texts and the Struggling/Reluctant Reader

When students struggle with reading, any number of factors can be to blame. Sadly, almost two-thirds of eighth- and twelfth-grade students read below proficiency and are lacking in skills necessary for future success (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Moreover, as students get older, the visual composition, content, and amount of print in reading materials changes.

For example, the use of illustrations, photographs, and other cues used to support the younger reader in making meaning declines as students reach higher grade levels; in other words, reading becomes more text-based than visuals-based for older readers (Smetana, 2010). When struggling or reluctant readers enter middle school, they usually lack interest and motivation in reading and have already fallen behind, experiencing the “cycle of failure” that decreases their chance of achieving reading success as an adult (Shaw, 2008). Subsequently, as young adolescents get older, they need to be able to analyze what they read and perceive themselves as active users in order to comprehend texts (Frey, 2010).

Fortunately, there are new kinds of texts that mix, mingle, and combine genres and media in new ways (Elster, 2009). Essentially, nontraditional texts tend to borrow features from graphic novels and comic books, integrating various sizes and font styles, including handwritten text, art drawings in sequential panels, thought balloons or speech bubbles containing character dialogue, and other symbols (Frey, 2010). These books usually include different combinations of layouts and text lengths, thus using print and visuals in ways that reflect changing readers’ interests (Elster, 2009).

One example is Ellie McDoodle (Bloomsbury) by Ruth McNally Barshaw. Its part-diary, part-graphic-novel format integrates handwritten text with a preponderance of diagrams and black-and-white sketches. Captain Underpants (Blue Sky Press) by Dav Pilkey, another chapter book series, mixes unusual text conventions with humor, high levels of reader interaction, and comic-book-like sketches of characters. In addition, Stephan Petrucha’s Tales from the Crypt (Paper-cutz) graphic novel series is considered beneficial for students with learning disabilities in that they provide visuals that weave pictures and information into multiple text functions (Smetana, 2010, Frey, 2010).

Literature that integrates print and visual features in unusual or nontraditional ways makes the reading task easier for young adolescent struggling readers because they contain images that support text to reinforce meaning (Frey, 2010, Smetana, Odelson, Burns, & Grisham, 2009). While critics may debate the literary quality of such texts, one thing is certain: they are contributing to young adolescent struggling readers’ interest and pleasure in reading.

The idea for this project began while I was observing middle level students at the university reading clinic. Many were devouring Diary of a Wimpy Kid (Amulet Books), the first in the Wimpy Kid series by Jeff Kinney. The book’s format combines laugh-out-loud humor depicted by cartoon-like stick figures and vignettes, with
handwritten text involving the everyday school and family life of Greg, a sixth grader. Wimpy Kid books are clearly marketed to young adolescents; they feel like a real journal, even including pieces of scotch tape on the cover displaying Greg’s stick-figure picture. Some consider them male-oriented, but girls seem to relate to the universal themes, humor, and vernacular tone as well. (See other Wimpy Kid book titles at the end of this article.)

While I was not impressed with the books at first, comments such as these from students around the clinic changed my mind:

“Wimpy Kid books are awesome!”
“These books are so funny.”
“Can I read another one of these?” Students were laughing out loud, exchanging off-handed remarks, and recommending the books to others, before and after tutoring sessions. Students who enroll in the clinic are mostly English language learners (ELLs) or students whose first language is not English, and they tend to have difficulty with vocabulary in texts. Their reading comprehension is also usually two grades or more below grade level. Therefore, to witness students voluntarily reading such books was quite impressive.

This article expands on the dialogue and current phenomena surrounding Wimpy Kid books. I discuss how teachers can increase their knowledge base and capitalize on integrating such books into classroom instruction, especially instruction related to students’ vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Stanovich’s theory (1986), the “Matthew Effect,” and the notion that “as the rich get richer, the poor get poorer” are all reflected in the broader context of literacy development (Cunningham, 2006). Research also indicates that students who have repeated exposure to specific vocabulary experience an improvement in fluency (Topping & Paul, 1999). Allington (1984) has shown that the more students develop an interest in reading materials, the more practice they get and the fewer problems they encounter with reading later on. Ongoing research into motivation to read should be extended by listening to our struggling students’ voices; their perspectives can contribute to our understanding of their motivations to read, especially as it relates to their out-of-school experiences using nontraditional texts such as the Wimpy Kid series.

Listening and Learning from Student Voices

Data was collected based on interviewing five ELLs in the clinic (one girl and boy in grade 5, two boys in grade 6, and one boy in grade 7) about their overall interests in reading. While students mentioned a few books that they liked, by far their favorite books were from the Wimpy Kid series, because they were “very funny” and “awesome” and they were able to read the “whole book” with ease. They also had a lot to say about their understanding of the books and were able to make personal connections in their own lives. In every case, the students were able to discuss in great detail their favorite part(s) of the book and easily point out and recall dialogue that supported the visuals on the page. This response from a student’s favorite part of Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth (Kinney, 2010) highlights this point:

[The student quickly finds the page in the book and points to the picture.]

See this . . . it is so funny because he drops his underwear. It like falls out of his pants on the floor . . . after PE. Everybody sees it.

[The student pauses and searches for the passage.]

Look here it is. I found it, wait . . .

[The student reads it silently and then laughs.]

Isn’t it awesome? It is funny but I’m glad it wasn’t me!

Thus, it seems that highly visual texts are an important way to support reading comprehension, especially for ELLs (Lui, 2004). Interestingly, students were also very curious and appreciative that someone was asking them for their opinions about what they liked to read. More important,
When students were asked if they would be willing to read more books like these in school, they overwhelmingly agreed “they would read more.”

Another indication of students’ engagement was their overall confidence and willingness to speak freely and candidly about the books; they were taking the lead and modeling for others about their reading interests. In fact, although they were all ELLs, they did not appear limited by the text, but instead seemed eager to ask questions about words or phrases if they were unsure.

One student volunteered to show a picture that she had drawn with captions imitating the book’s format. The student dialogue follows.

“I made my own story about Marisa and Jessie and they are in fifth grade like me.”

[The student had drawn two stick figures and large speech bubbles with two girls talking to each other.]

“They are talking about what they want to do after school. They are best friends and have brothers that are a pain just like Greg’s. My younger brother I don’t like what he does sometimes. This is about the dumb things he does.”

Throughout the interviews, the students acted confident and were willing to discuss and illustrate what they knew, something they rarely experienced while in school. Thus, by tapping into what motivates young adolescents to read, we can gain insight into how they are processing what they read.

**Using Diary Book Series**

Because most middle level students tend to avoid literacy tasks that are lacking in purpose and/or personal interests, educators would benefit from becoming more aware of students’ personal uses of literacy and what is important to them (Pitcher, et al., 2007). Book series can increase students’ motivation in reading (Cunningham & Allington, 2011) in several ways:

- Readers may feel more confident because they are already familiar with the author’s writing style, main characters, illustrations, story elements, and book features.
- Reading books by the same author can build students’ willingness to share ideas and opinions with others about what they are reading.
- Books in diary format become “windows to the world,” allowing students to experience new or familiar concepts and ideas by living vicariously through the lives of characters (Norton, 2007).
- In spite of the descriptive language used in chapter books and novels, young adolescent struggling readers may be unable to formulate images or pictures in their heads of what they are reading (Smetana, 2010). Building familiarity with characters, settings, and vocabulary allows students to create a mental context to support understanding.

While diaries and book series are not new, the Wimpy Kid series represents one example offering a unique combination of text and cartoon-like characters that allows access to the text’s meaning through the visual mode.

**Introducing Wimpy Kid Books into the Curriculum**

Springen (2009) refers to the Wimpy Kid books as the “It series” (p. 17). To give an idea of how popular the books are, the Wimpy Kid website has had more than 80 million visitors, which works out to about 70,000 children a day, according to http://www.wimpykid.com. Teachers can take advantage of this enthusiasm by using it to reinforce comprehension and vocabulary. Here are a few examples from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth* (Kinney, 2010).
Comprehension

The Wimpy Kid books are widely known for their humor, yet they also contain some deep-rooted and underlying themes that can be discussed with students on many levels. Themes like relationships between father and son, sense of belonging, taking responsibility, peer pressure, and growing up are threaded throughout the series. Building upon these themes through class discussion can help students make connections to gain a deeper understanding of texts. For example, in *The Ugly Truth* (Kinney, 2010), the theme of growing up presents itself when Greg reflects upon “the talk” he has with his 95-year-old grandmother: “I guess I am not in a big rush to grow up right now. After Gammie showed me what’s in store over the next few years, I think I’m gonna take her advice and hang on as long as I can” (p. 215).

The theme of peer pressure resonates throughout the series, as reflected in the entry where Greg attends an overnight school event and students start to misbehave: “See, this kind of thing I can’t stand about boys my age. When it comes right down to it, they’re a bunch of wild animals” (p. 156).

Having conversations with students can be integral to the reading process by providing a lens on student thinking (Smetana, 2010). Students can also increase their level of understanding by reflecting on these themes through journal writing, participating in think-pair-share activities, or engaging in small-group or class discussions. In addition, by sketching their favorite scenes—integrating embellished speech and sound balloons as exhibited by the student mentioned earlier who shared her picture during the interview—students focus on details and sharpen comprehension. Classroom teachers can use the books as visual support as they engage young adolescents in learning various aspects of the reading process and introduce new literacy practices through thinking, writing, and discussing books as a group (Ranker, 2008).

Vocabulary Development

During the interviews in which students were asked to read their favorite part, they would sometimes struggle with a word or phrase they weren’t sure about. Since some of the language in the books might be considered slang (e.g., I’m gonna) and sarcastic, these terms and other idioms can be particularly challenging for ELLs. Yet, they often hear these phrases in social contexts during informal conversations with peers. Teachers can assist students’ language acquisition

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

**Podcast Episodes That Highlight the Visual**

The article provides many suggested graphic novel titles. The ReadWriteThink podcast series *Text Messages* (http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-series-text-messages-recommendations-adolescent-30214.html) shares even more. Episode 15, “An Introduction to Graphic Novels,” provides some background about graphic novels as well as specific recommendations of fantasy epics, memoirs, biographies, and adventure thriller stories, all presented in the form of a graphic novel.


Episode 44, “Visual Texts for Teens,” identifies a number of books written for teens that incorporate visual material in ways that can challenge and stretch older readers. Listen in to hear about newly published middle grade and young adult fiction, graphic novels, biographies, travel memoirs, and informational books, all of which use visual material in ways that enrich the text’s meaning.

http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/visual-texts-teens-30826.html
by discussing examples from the book to model correct Standard English; frequent mini-lessons on the idioms they have encountered in their reading will support students’ understanding of the subtleties and nuances of the English language. *The Ugly Truth* (Kinney, 2010) contains many unusual expressions—“cool factor” (p. 10), “major popularity points” (p. 10), “totally lucked out” (p. 10), “a bunch of cronies” (p. 11), “it kind of irks me” (p. 13), and “It’s totally foolproof” (p. 71)—that can help students recognize different interpretations of language. In addition, the books provide ample examples of analogies, singular and plural nouns, and contractions to help build grammar and word structure.

**Reflecting on Student Voices**

Clearly, young adolescents are engaging with multiple forms of texts outside the classroom, especially if they find them interesting and relevant to their lives. As Cunningham (2006) reminds us, “Reading volume represents a complementary and important mechanism that may begin to compensate for low reading ability” (p. 5). Thus, when reading is focused on traditional textbooks selected by teachers, or texts that lack visual support, we limit ourselves as teachers and our students as readers (Pitcher, et al., 2007).

No matter what educators think about book series or other kinds of nontraditional texts, their popularity is a powerful indicator of what young adolescents are reading, and they represent a valuable tool in working with English Language Learners. More important, there is great potential in what we can learn from listening to what all young adolescents have to say about their reading habits. More important, there is great potential in what we can learn from listening to what *all* young adolescents have to say about their reading habits. Teachers can expand upon students’ interests by integrating these new forms of literature as additions to, rather than replacements for, the reading and language arts curriculum, thus opening a new gateway for those who struggle with reading.

**References**


Voices from the Middle, Volume 19 Number 4, May 2012

Fingon | Nontraditional Texts and the Struggling/Reluctant Reader


Books in the Wimpy Kid Series by Jeff Kinney (Amulet Books)

Diary of a Wimpy Kid (2007)
The Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book (2008; revised 2011)
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw (2009)
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days (2009)
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth (2010)
The Wimpy Kid Movie Diary (2010; revised, 2011)
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Cabin Fever (2011)

Joan C. Fingon is a professor of education at California State University, Los Angeles. She can be reached at jfingon@calstatela.edu