Democracy & Education

Last Year's Choice Is This Year's Voice
Valuing Democratic Practices in the Classroom through Student-Selected Literature

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Abstract

The authors of this article explore democratic practices in the classroom by using student-selected literature. After multiple class sets of student-selected young adult novels were purchased using grant money, the authors set out to see what happens in a classroom when student choice is at the forefront of pedagogical decision-making and how students resonated with and voiced their experiences reading about those chosen novels. Because canonical texts are often used to help students understand allusions in contemporary texts, one adolescent novel and one canonical novel became the focal points for this project. With democratic practices undergirding this project, the authors argue that using student-selected literature, both adolescent and canonical, encourages agency, invites healthy inquiry, and develops reflective practices and empathy in adolescent readers.

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Infusing Choice

THERE ARE FEW teachers who would deny the potential that student choice has in creating an engaging classroom environment. Choice as a pedagogical teaching tool, and allowing students to make decisions about subject matter, dates back to at least the early writings of John Dewey, one of progressive education's earliest and strongest advocates. When it comes to content knowledge, Dewey wrote, "subject-matter never can be got into the child from without. Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within" (1902/1976, p. 276). Dewey understood the empowering possibilities of what happens when young people are able to generate a list of curiosities and interests on their own rather than having those interests (e.g., subject matter) dictated by the teacher in the room. Dewey wrote those words in 1902 when curricula for American secondary schools were being established by elite university leaders such as the Committee of Ten (Kliebard, 2004) and what should be taught in secondary schools became sacrosanct subject matter. The establishment of a set curriculum for English language arts, and its attendant set of prescribed novels, poems, and plays, can be seen today in any given high school throughout the country.

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To be sure, these required sets of texts have served English teachers well across the decades, and teachers have used these books to inspire future generations of readers, thinkers, and, yes, English teachers. The authors of this article do not dismiss the powerful role the canon has played in shaping the secondary English classroom. In line with Hirsch's work (1983), the canon allowed for Americans to have a common set of knowledge upon which to understand history, language, and culture, with all its foibles, problems, and inconsistencies. This work rang especially true for teachers in rural and urban school settings where commonalities in curricula were key to educational opportunities. What these authors do claim, and what they hope this current project articulates, however, is that student choice in subject matter does, in fact, matter. But how much does it matter, and what happens when it's employed in teaching? In order to understand what happens when student choice of texts becomes the primary factor in making pedagogical decisions, the authors set out to answer the following research questions: (a) what happens when student choice serves as the foundation of situating democratic practices in the classroom, and (b) how are those democratic practices sustained through student voice?

Paying Attention to Voices

During the fall semester, students in the second author's ninth-grade classes were asked to brainstorm a list of titles that they would like to read the following school year, and they took their cue for this brainstorming activity from Miller (2009), who argued that students need to have opportunities for absolute autonomy when selecting the books that they want to read. It is only through such autonomy and agency that students can begin to own the reading process and begin to value reading as an important act of discovery. In line with Miller's advocacy of student choice, the second author offered few parameters when setting up this activity, and during class, students were asked to propose titles as well as rationales for reading those titles in class. Hence, students were encouraged to look at Amazon's Best Sellers in Teen & Young Adult Books list for that year. A group of six to eight students representing multiple backgrounds were then selected to narrow a list of titles that the authors of this article could submit for approval. The student-selected texts were, perhaps not surprisingly, often classified as horror, which is a popular genre among teenagers, and which also might explain why one canonical text, Faulkner's (1930) *As I Lay Dying*, made the list, as the second author also let students know what class sets the school already owned. (The authors speculate that Faulkner's macabre title piqued their interest.) These conversations were lively and engaging, and the second author was overwhelmed by the passion students exhibited at the prospects of being able to read books that mattered to them. A collage of student quotations was compiled by the second author and put on display in front of the classroom for the remainder of that school year. Their choices had been validated through publication.

As Burke (2013) pointed out, "What students want, above all, is to know that they are heard" (p. 109). Quotes from two different students stand out as rationales for the importance of student-selected books. As one student remarked, "Kids won't be as engaged or excited if they aren't reading a book they like. It's easier for kids to be involved when they pick the book. It gives them a sense of responsibility." Another student had this to say: "Books chosen by the students keep them engaged in their education. Not only does it give students a variety in reading material, it teaches them independence and self-regulation." Such student commentary further corroborates what Kittle (2012) argued vigorously in her work—that choice can play a powerful role in helping students cultivate engaged and responsible reading lives.

It was from the list of books that the first and second authors collaborated on a School University Teacher Education Partnership (SUTEP) grant, a source of funding that helps universities partner with local schools with the goal of improving student learning. One of the primary goals of this grant was to provide access to high-interest adolescent fiction, canonical fiction, and nonfiction texts (e.g., Michael L. Printz Award–winning books, ALA-endorsed novels) for all ninth- and tenth-grade students at a high school in Western North Carolina. The funding was approved, and class sets of several adolescent literature titles were purchased. Aside from providing access to high-interest literature for students, this grant allowed for these class sets to reside in the English department's bookroom for other teachers to use in their classrooms. The books arrived the following spring semester, and they were available for ninth- and tenth-grade English language arts teachers to use with their students during the next school year.

Table 1

Class Sets of Books Purchased through SUTEP Grant

Brown, P. (2014). *Red rising.* New York, NY: Del Rey Books.

Green, J. (2012). *The fault in our stars.* New York, NY: Penguin Books.

O'Brien, T. (1990). *The things they carried.* New York, NY: Mariner Books.

Riggs, R. (2011). *Miss Peregrine's home for peculiar children.* Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books.

Yancey, R. (2009). *The monstrumologist.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Detailing the Approach

What does democratic teaching look like? The authors argue that wholesale depictions of democratic teaching are often best articulated at what happens in our everyday practices as teachers. According to Menand (2001), in a democratic society, all voices must come to the table in the decision-making process, even those that might cause consternation and vexation. However, and perhaps more importantly, it also means that no one can opt out. The idea being that what is right and just will prevail at the end of the day. Democratic practices also by their very nature invite a level of uncertainty. This uncertainty needs to be welcomed in the classroom. It would have been easy enough for the authors to select books from among the class sets purchased, but that would have been anathema to how the grant was situated and how the authors wanted to explore a classroom in which choice was the bedrock for pedagogical decision-making. In that light, the authors took a cue

from Menand (1997), who offered that "when we hypostatize knowledge by embalming it in a textbook, we cut off thought from experience, and we damage our relations with the world" (p. xxiv), and we interpreted the cue as an invitation to diverge from comfortable paths of using books we'd previously taught in order to maintain and sustain the democratic principles upon which this project was conceived. By abandoning our comfort zones, we were preparing ourselves to be as open as we want our students to be about reading and to see that

> *comprehending with a critical edge means moving beyond understanding the text to understanding the power relationship that exists between the reader and the author—to knowing that even though the author has the power to create and present the message, readers have the power and the right to be text critics, by reading, questioning, and analyzing the author's message. (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 21).*

With student choice at the forefront of this study, it only made sense to continue the line of thinking that McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) offered. Students were encouraged to be on equal footing with the authors of the literature they would be reading. Just as authors have creative license to produce narratives, students have the right to be creative readers (Emerson, 1983) and be critical connoisseurs of the texts they read. In addition, Garcia (2013) helped the authors leap into the fray of adolescent literature. He argued that perhaps now more than ever students need to be given the tools to evaluate the genre of adolescent literature. Because popular culture can play a powerful role in shaping desire and taste, readers of the genre need to evaluate for themselves the merits of the narratives they read, join in dialogue with the authors, and be able to question the realities presented and whether those realities in any way match their own. Even when readers have choice, one of the tenets of democratic teaching, they need to be encouraged to take that choice further into voicing their ideas based on their chosen reading selections.

Furthering this argument, Bomer (2011) argued, "Because texts often do not come right out and announce their agendas, it is important to teach students critical habits of reading" (p. 111). By employing democratic approaches, teachers encourage students not only to make sense of the world the author presents, but also to make sense of the worlds that are not presented. In other words, based on the characters, settings, and plots offered, what might the author be saying about the norms and values of those characters, and are those characters' everyday experiences like most adolescent readers? As McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) suggested, readers need to ask what's missing, what's not being communicated on the page according to the author's choices, and how those choices are indicative of an agenda that promotes one life preference—say, heteronormative versus other ways of living in the world. A democratic approach to teaching novels, even those chosen by students, can help students not only evaluate their chosen books, but also hone their own critical lens and welcome their voices in making powerful evaluative claims about these books and how these books are and are not representative of their own life experiences (Boatright, 2010).

Documenting Student Voice

To encourage as authentic as possible a classroom experience for the students, the first and second authors were intentional from the onset about which types of data sets would be collected. Over the course of the school year, the students who agreed to participate in the project composed reflections and essays, both informal and formal, on their responses to and experiences with the adolescent novels. They also participated in in-class literature circles (student-led reading groups to discuss their experiences with individual novels), which were observed as a part of the data collection process (Daniels, 2002). The first author, a teacher educator in secondary English education and a former English language arts teacher, observed the second author using the student-selected novels in the classroom multiple times throughout the school year. The second author, a lead teacher and department head of English language arts at a rural high school in the South with over seven years of teaching experience, not only collected artifacts but took copious observation notes on lessons when the student-selected novels were used in the classroom.

While making student voice front and center, as well as a part of data collection, the authors relied on the work of Daniels (2002), who not only advocated for student choice but also acknowledged the work of a teacher to allow for students to have powerful conversations about literature. One of Daniels's signature strategies, book clubs, is an approach that provides democratic spaces for students to choose books and engage in conversations about those books. It is the teacher's role to facilitate these groups, to encourage them not to take an author's narrative as something that can be generalized to all readers, and to engage in a conversation in which their questioning is tantamount to the critical reading of texts that many English language arts teachers endorse in their classrooms.

As student projects and observation notes were collected, the authors decided upon a constant comparative method based on grounded theory for analyzing the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). A grounded theory approach allowed for the data sets to be studied by the authors as they arrived (i.e., when projects were due or as the opportunity arose to take notes on student conversations about the novels), permitting the authors to build their analysis from the ground upward (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first and second authors took individual notes on student artifacts and exchanged emails to share their individual interpretations of the data. Based upon the themes that emerged from the first and second authors' interpretations—such as how students made sense of the literature, how they discussed their ideas about the readings in small groups, and how they valued the collaborative enterprise and one another's ideas—the authors decided upon a critical theory lens to convey what students were and were not doing as they made sense of their experiences and voiced their ideas about the books they chose to read that school year.

It should be noted at this juncture that the authors were not interested in comparing classes in which one class chose what they would read the following school year while another class had novels chosen for them. Rather, this exploratory endeavor was focused on what happened with one group of students by way of

case study (Stake, 2006) and what the ramifications might be for educators interested in allowing student decision to guide content choices from one year to the next.

Navigating the Challenges of Using Student-Selected Literature

As the study commenced, the second author firmly situated her approach to teaching the literature in as encouraging a way as possible: "I wanted to see students as involved in a book as they were when they were six years old sitting on the floor of an elementary school classroom. Somewhere along the way, they lose this fervor for reading." As previously mentioned, required standardized assessments were another issue the authors had to contend with, and as the second author put it, "I have to ensure that they have the hard skills to carry with them to the next grade level, which comes in the form of standards and objectives. So I really had to balance two things: heart and skill." Herein lies one of the roadblocks that teachers may encounter, as the second author did, when teaching high-interest books, and it is a balancing act— the balance of teaching books to which students are drawn and the reality of needing to include test-taking lessons and skills to prepare students for required end-of-the-semester and end-of-the-year assessments. Because canonical texts are frequently used in teaching the literary allusions found in adolescent texts, this study is situated around student responses to two of the student-selected novels: Rick Yancey's (2009) *The Monstrumologist* and William Faulkner's (1930) *As I Lay Dying*. They proved to be the most authentic and data-rich opportunities for the first and second authors to capture and document student voice in the classroom, and they were the two novels that received the most votes the previous school year.

Regarding voices of dissent, which the authors wanted to honor as a part of democratic practices in the classroom, students are generally reluctant readers to begin with, so there was no controversy to be negotiated regarding the selected texts. Often, reluctant readers do not know what they like, so the authors felt confident entrusting a group of representative students to serves as voices for their peers. It should be noted that there were complaints made by two students' parents regarding the horror genre and its potential to be graphic, which is the case with Yancey's (2009) *The Monstrumologist*, and those students were given an alternative reading choice based on similar themes. Furthermore, students chose the order in which they read the young adult novel and the canonical novel (Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*). They almost always chose to read the young adult novel first, which actually ended up helping to scaffold the reading of a classic text.

Another challenge to the study was deciding upon presentation of the student-selected novels given the range of readers in the second author's classroom. In other words, the idea was not to allow all students to run amok with the novels of which their school now had class sets but to take into consideration students' current levels of reading performance, which isn't to say that the high-interest nature of books cannot engage a reader who may be performing at a low reading level. In fact, the opposite is true, and

that's how teachers build skill and confidence in readers. Take Yancey's (2009) *The Monstrumologist*, for example. While the narrator is a young boy, younger than most first-year high school students, his narration is packed with tier two and tier three vocabulary (e.g., National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, from here on cited as Common Core State Standards), such as *indolence*, *deprivation*, *galling*, *predication*, *viscera*, *vicissitudes*, *melancholia*, *recalcitrant*, *hamlet*, and *esoteric*, as well as brilliantly descriptive phrases such as *pious rationalization*, *bromides of shopworn clichés*, and *obsequious deceit*. In no way is this text an easy read. Hence another challenge to this study: because these high-interest, student-selected novels do not skimp on rigor in the areas of vocabulary and comprehension of narrative, the second author again had to be intentional in the implementation of the novels the students read, when to read them, and which students not only would be challenged but in fact wanted to be challenged. To that end, the second author relied on Gallagher's (2004) *Deeper Reading*: *Comprehending Challenging Texts, 4–12* for minor scaffolding, which helped provide students with a framework for thinking and teach root words to assist with difficult vocabulary.

Lastly, the pedagogical reasoning for and other challenges of using a young adult novel coupled with a canonical book wound up working in favor of the study because of curricular requirements at the second author's school. Teachers in this school district are required to collaborate on grade-level teams so that students receive common assessments, common instruction, and so forth. Thus, English language arts teachers must to teach some of the classics, and the best way that the second author could contextualize a canonical text turned out to be to pair it with a similarly themed young adult novel, which only served to complement the research process because the student-selected novels fit in with curricular requirements.

Engaging with Student Voices

With democratic practices at the heart of this study, a miniature cache of student-selected titles at the authors' disposal in the classroom, and a year's worth of opportunities to use these titles in the classroom in as organic a way as possible without disrupting any required curricular or assessment necessities, the authors were ready to allow student voice to dominate what happened in the classroom. As to the nature of what the authors chose to observe, they wanted to know how students responded during class discussions and what their projects looked like. They were curious to know if literature circles worked or did not work for this group of students in this context. These ideas were at the forefront of responding to the larger research questions guiding this study: (a) what happens when student choice serves as the foundation of situating democratic practices in the classroom, and (b) how are those democratic practices sustained through student voice?

For starters, the authors wanted to see if the structure of literature circles helped or hampered how students felt they were able to talk about their self-selected books. Based on the chart of

Table 2

Student Comments on Literature Circles

What types of books should students have to read in literature circles?	How should students be held accountable for outside reading?	If you could design the perfect literature circle, what would it be like?
"Whatever they have an interest in, so they can talk about it and share ideas."	"The classroom as a group should have discussion based on previous reading and participation and contribution in said discussion would be graded. The student would be held accountable and be compelled to contribute."	"A group of people you're comfortable with that you can also stay on task with and share ideas about whatever book or piece we are reading."
"Any type of book."	"They should hold themselves and each other accountable for outside reading. Having to be accountable for myself and having others to push me to read really helped me during the process."	"A free-flowing conversation stimulated and supplemented by annotations taken while reading the text."
"Books that will help students develop an understanding of the world. Students should read books that are referred to outside of the classroom to prepare for conversation in their future."	"I think that the students should be held accountable for outside reading by just letting the class go on. If they do not read, then they will have a very high percentage to make a bad grade. A bad grade is a very sincere punishment in my book."	"No specific roles would be assigned, but all members would collect questions and facts important for discussion."
"Books that are sort of confusing and could be misinterpreted by the reader. So that they will be able to understand the books better and have an overall interpretation of the book that is more well-rounded."	"Reading checks and fun projects."	"The perfect literature circle would involve a group of active participants who offer valuable opinions."
"Young adult, so we can relate to them more and make bigger connections."	"Quizzes that cover major plot events on Fridays."	"Everyone would do a little bit of everything. Everyone would have to lead a part of the discussion. Everyone would find quotes that they liked and explain what the quote means. Everyone would find connections, and so on and so forth."

students' responses to their experiences in literature circles, they mostly voiced approval of the literature circle setting. However, this set of student responses is telling in that the students, while they appreciated the group setting, wanted even more freedom than was available using literature circle roles, such as the questioner, the illustrator, the word wizard, etc. (Daniels, 2002). They wanted to have free-flowing conversations, but most of all, they wanted accountability, not just for themselves but for other readers in the group. Some students thought the literature circles themselves were accountability enough; others wanted more teacher-directed checkpoints, such as reading quizzes. At any rate, these data proved valuable in thinking about how best to allow classroom conversations and student voice to flow without a teacher checking in on their ideas. Analysis of their literature circles conversations also demonstrates that that democratic practices cannot be canned or preordained. If student voice is to dominate the classroom, students want everyone held accountable (e.g., Menand, 1997), and they want more ways to voice their responses to the books they are asked to read in school.

Beyond the forum of where and when students responded was what those responses to the literature were. In the second author's English class, the students read *The Monstrumologist* (Yancey, 2009) and *As I Lay Dying* (Faulkner, 1930) while studying the archetypal hero's journey and literary criticism. The students read *The Monstrumologist* first and were self-sorted into literature circles after each section of text that they read. Students at this school are explicitly taught how to collaborate as part of a schoolwide leadership initiative, which means that students knew how to create their own groups, negotiate roles, and devise lead measures (e.g., objectives that students must attain to reach their goals). They chose their focus, and due to students' comfort with collaboration, the second author rarely needed to intervene. For students to align themselves in manageable literature circles, the groups ranged from three to six students per group. Students were held accountable through self-reflections toward their goals, of which one example was to finish reading a particular chapter/section by a specific date. So, at times, students opted to veer from Daniels's (2002) literature circle roles to collaborate as they already knew how, but the concept of self-accountability and group accountability worked across both models. Moreover, Daniels's roles made sense to some striving readers, including those with special needs, who could connect with Daniels's specificity in what was required to fulfill a role.

Each day at the beginning of class, students stormed through the door demanding answers for questions such as, "Why in the world did Will Henry do that?" They also exclaimed, "I am so glad that John Kearns is not real because if he was, I would . . ." The students were emotionally involved and attached to these characters. Despite not loving the literature circles protocol, what students said during literature circles was illuminating. Their

conversations were charged with incisive wit and imagination, as well as close readings and analysis as proof for their claims. They challenged one another to "go look for yourself on page . . ." Even in these early stages of the study, students were demonstrating, without guidance from their teacher, a sense of empathy for the characters' travails. Because empathy often must be taught, and literature is one vehicle for doing so, the teacher was pleased to witness these students questioning characters' motives and inserting themselves in the novel's universe.

Echoing critical literacy scholar Wilhelm (2008), these students were trying to be a part of the book in a reflective, empathetic manner. Additionally, the gauntlet students raised when challenging each other to see for themselves speaks to students understanding the value of textual evidence when engaging in academic endeavors, which inadvertently helps build test-taking skills to the conversation. Considering the democratic practice of engaging freely in conversation about literature, the students showcased that they could come to the table with their differences, listen with open minds, and talk about the problems they identified in the narratives as a collective group. As another example, students talked about what it really means to be a monster and how monsters are often manufactured entities that represent social uncertainty. Monsters are also often misread and misunderstood by society (e.g., Shelley, 1818/2014), and students acknowledged this contradiction as they worked and learned collaboratively. In Dewey's (1916) phrasing from *Democracy and Education*, this is "education as unfolding," in which epiphanies are celebrated as they happen in real time and do not follow a strict developmental trajectory (p. 61).

After students finished reading *The Monstrumologist*, they began reading *As I Lay Dying*, the canonical text that was student-selected. Because this novel can be a challenge even for more advanced, independent readers (Miller, 2009), the second author scaffolded the reading of the novel with ancillary charts, annotations, and guiding notes, which helped apprentice students to a novel they were already motivated to read and encouraged them to bring their voice to the interpretative process with confidence. Because this high school is situated in rural Appalachia, the students immediately saw connections to many of the challenges and trials the Bundren family went through in terms of poverty, transportation, resource restrictions, judgment of outsiders, and stereotypes of southerners. Because students were able to make these connections, they were able to ask sophisticated questions, such as "Do I judge outsiders like this?" and "Why are stereotypes so harmful," again showcasing the importance of what an empowered reading experience can look like, even when scaffolded by the teacher. Again, Dewey's (1902/1976) words are instructional: "Hence, what concerns him, as teacher, is the ways in which that subject may become part of [a child's] experience" (p. 286). In making subject matter a component of a student's experience, the authors argue, it helps students develop self-reflective lenses on thematic issues in literature, which can translate to how students view their own worlds.

Because of the students' high level of engagement with Faulkner's novel, they welcomed the idea of reading a brief critical essay on the novel, "As Me and Addie Lay Dying" (Kincaid, 1994). The navigation of secondary sources is another standard among the Common Core State Standards for secondary English language arts (2010). Secondary sources help shine another light on literary interpretation, and they help students to augment their own voices when they read essays about works of fiction.

Students could see that other individuals have staked their claim in interpreting Faulkner's work, which added another voice to the democratic conversation. Because of reading Faulkner's novel (1930) in conjunction with Kincaid's literary criticism, students wrote well-developed, organized, and analytical essays about themes that they chose, and they supported their arguments through textual evidence. For example, one student, who experienced a death in the family over the course of the school year, wrote about how humans cope with death: "This book is extremely well worded in ways that are almost poetic, and Faulkner's words help express and explain what happens in the real world, what happens when we lay dying." She continued along this train of thought when analyzing the different ways in which the characters cope with death in the novel. Another student, in addressing how society copes with death, articulately put it this way:

> After all, it is okay to cope with death differently. Everyone has their own perspective on death and how to cope with it. Some people may move on easily like Anse when he gets a new wife and teeth. They may get stuck on it and not want to move on like Jewel when he grieves about them making a scene. Others may not quite understand it or wrap their heads around the fact that they are gone like Vardaman when he compares his mom to a fish to understand. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Again, we witnessed students making candid, honest connections between the novel and their own lives and were making profound philosophical commentary about the human condition. Not only did students use textual evidence to support their ideas, their ideas were about readings they chose to read, and their deep level of investment in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* was palpable across several of their essays. Empathy as a requisite element of democratic practices was brightly on display, and the experience of relating death in a novel to a student's experiences with death among family underscored ideals set forth by Dewey (1902/1976, 1916/1980) and others (e.g., Beers, 2003; Burke, 2013). The seldom-attainable goal of a healthy democracy is a blending of the student and the subject matter, the realization that powerful experience happens when we remove artificial barriers during instruction and allow students' lived experiences, when tapped into by literature, to shape their world views. The student-selected literature became a social environment for students to challenge themselves and each other, and they served as conversation pieces in which many of them were deeply engaged and, if their words were any indication, deeply affected as well.

Reconciling the Realities of Using Student-Selected Literature in the Classroom

Although this study was limited to analysis of two novels that students self-selected, the authors saw in the teaching of Faulkner's

(1930) and Yancey's (2009) books powerful examples of what happens when student choice is validated in the classroom and the student voices that ensue. It also speaks to the challenges of attempting to use, as best as possible, democratic practices in the classroom.

As Dewey (1902/1976) postulated at the turn of the 20th century, the curriculum cannot be something that is external to the student—it must be activated through the interests of the child and internalized. In turn, there's a reciprocal relationship between content and student. One informs the other and brings students to ever-widening ways of knowing the world. This reciprocal relationship, however, often exists in the abstract. We now arguably live, for better or worse, in what Hoffman, Paris, Salas, Patterson, and Assaf (2003) dubbed 'The Standards Period,' and schools are reluctant to allow student choice to guide curricular decisions when end-of-year test scores are inevitable and could affect local and state funding. Gallagher (2009) lamented this reality as well but argued that we can and must blend student interest with a standards-based pedagogy. Despite these obstacles, the authors were able to begin to respond to the research questions that guided this study.

Regarding the research question about what happens when student choice serves as the foundation of situating democratic practices in the classroom, the authors observed tremendous amounts of student engagement. Because these students selected *The Monstrumologist* (2009) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930) the previous school year, they knew their teacher was paying attention to what they wanted to read when they returned to school the following year (Miller, 2009). Their conversations were rich and engaging, and they were able to problematize the novels they were reading by realizing agency and searching for alternative perspectives (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). As students' conversations unfolded, they talked about not wanting to judge others based on their backgrounds, demographics, and education; they addressed the importance of family but that family roles cannot be static; and they questioned whether the metaphor of monsters in society is ever used to categorize others unfairly.

Literature circles (Daniels, 2002) were one opportunity for students to voice ideas in a safe, small setting, but as suggested previously in this article, the protocols proved too restrictive, and students wanted more control of the conversations they were having. Democratic practices are messy and recursive, and although student choice was at the center of this study, as were their voiced responses to the texts, it was difficult for the authors to relinquish control of the curriculum. Yancey's (2009) *The Monstrumologist*, in particular, proved a challenge, as the authors themselves had to read the novel several times over the summer in preparation for the upcoming school year.

As to the research question about how those democratic practices are sustained through student voice, validating student voice cannot be underscored enough, especially from a critical literacy perspective. Through the outlet of students-led literature circles, which were collaborative in nature, students demonstrated empathy with the characters, asked questions of the authors, and engaged in open and honest discourse about their understandings of the novels. As one student remarked when writing about poverty's vicious cycle, "William Faulkner emphasizes how the South isn't as good as what it seems by showing how the Bundrens struggle from poverty. For example, this quote shows how poverty is a huge part of the Bundren family by saying, 'But those rich town ladies can change their minds. Poor folks can't'" (Faulkner, 1930, p. 7). This quote resonates with how powerful a connection this student was able to make when it comes to issues of class differences in a democratic society, who has access to the wealth of that society, and the problems that capitalism causes in impoverished areas of the United States. As with this quote, it was inspiring to see students wrestling with important issues that have a profound impact on their way of life in the rural South in the second decade of the 21st century.

Allowing for a student-driven curriculum was the first step in opening the door to a classroom situated in democratic practices. Students demonstrated engagement with their chosen novels at a level not often seen with students reading such challenging books. Moreover, students, knowing that their voices mattered, took risks in what they shared about their connections to the novels; showed respect while other perspectives were shared; and exhibited compassion and empathy when talking about how the issues in the novels reflected their own lived experiences. Regardless of the limitations of this case study, such as the second author's responsibility to teach test-preparation skills, which sometimes interrupted the flow of teaching the novels, the authors argue that when educators teach with democratic practices at the core of a teaching unit, students can see the importance of participating in a democracy on a microcosmic level. And for students, this early foray into education through democratic practices, principles, and ideals is a critical first step in understanding our fragile and complicated democratic society.

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