COMING OF AGE: A LITERATURE BASED TEXT SET

Overview and Rationale of Text Set Topic

The average physical age of my 9th Grade English class is 14 to 15 years of age. Some students may be just entering puberty and others may have begun as early as 10 years old. The transition period between childhood and early adolescence becomes confusing for students as puberty brings rapid physical maturation involving hormonal and bodily changes. In addition to physical changes, their cognitive development has reached the formal operational stage which surfaces between 11 and 15 years of age. Jean Piaget states that during this formal operational stage, young adolescents are thinking more abstractly, idealistic and logically--they are beginning to think about thought, speculate about possibilities, and use deductive reasoning to solve problems. The combination of puberty and Piaget’s formal operational stage only adds further confusion for most 9th Grade students--situations involving family and friends that once seemed simple become complex and require more physical energy and thought. These situations often involve a transition or “coming of age” for the child who is becoming an adolescent. Although typically associated with a rite of passage based on age such as American girls and boys celebrating their 16th birthday (driver’s license) or 21st birthday (legal drinking age), in literature, this coming of age is marked by a story depicting a child’s passage from innocence to experience or knowledge, in which the child usually pays the price of pain or disillusionment. It therefore seems appropriate to incorporate this very real aspect of their young transitioning lives as part of their literature lesson. The text set I chose includes various nonfiction stories depicting...
character or characters who, by the end of the story, have developed in some way, through the undertaking of responsibility or by learning a lesson. The students, either drawing upon their own experiences or those of family and friends, may be able to identify with the characters in the readings, but if not, at least question the feelings of confusion and uncertainty in the literature.

The intent of the text set, in terms of the Virginia Standards of Learning 9.3, is that as a result of the readings, students will actively learn and “explain the relationships between and among the elements of literature, such as “protagonist and other characters, plot, setting, tone, point of view, theme, speaker, narrator.” The text set will augment, not replace the English textbook during the Assistance and Reflection stage to help all students, particularly the struggling readers, form a vocabulary for talking about and making meaning of literature.

**Summary of Text Set Items**

The target audience for these readings are 9th Grade English students whose average age is 15 years. However, based on the average chronological age of a 9th Grade student (15 years), texts were selected to accommodate readings levels from 4th to 12th Grade. This range will give all students an opportunity to actively participate in the literature lesson based on their reading level. Books with pictures were not included in order to continually introduce vocabulary to all students.

**BELOW GRADE LEVEL TEXTS:**

**Readability: Grade 4.** *Joy School*, by Elizabeth Berg, is a story of the pain and intensity a first love can bring. A 13-year old girl, Kate, has lost her much-loved mother and must move to another town with her sometimes abusive father. The new school is unaccepting and she makes few friends until she meets and falls in love with Jimmy, a 23 year old garage attendant who is married, a father and not about to leave his family. Most students will relate to those emotional
feelings of first love and/or with the grief of losing a parent. Qualitatively, the book size, 208 pages, seems appropriate for Grade 4 reading and the font size, approximately 14, makes the text a comfortable visual read. The word choices are short and simple, which also contributes to easy reading. Chapter titles are missing which might make a struggling reader feel less organized in thought.

**Readability: Grade 4.** *Bang!,* by Sharon G. Flakes, is a story of a young teenage boy, Mann, whose younger brother’s death in a drive-by shooting, triggers the father’s quest to teach his remaining son the instincts of survival. The father first abandons the remaining son in the woods to fend for himself (a lesson received by boys in African tribes) and then abandons him again in a violent city to again fend for himself. Although somewhat harsh on the surface, students will gain an appreciation of another culture’s coming of age ritual meant to help a young man find out what kind of man he wants to be. Qualitatively, the book size, 298 pages, seems appropriate for Grade 4 reading and the font size, approximately 14, makes the text a comfortable visual read. The book is narrated by the young teenage boy and uses slang such as “ain’t” which only adds to the authenticity of the setting. The chapters are numbered sideways on the page which gives some credence to the chaos of the situation.

**Readability: Grade 4.** *Missing May,* by Cynthia Rylant, is a story of a twelve-year-old girl, Summer, who, when her Aunt (May) dies, seems to lose a little bit of herself and her Uncle when he becomes depressed. It is only when she and her Uncle leave their West Virginia trailer in search of the strength to go on that they release their grief. Students will enjoy the wry humor of two people searching for the meaning of life and death and finding the power of love. Qualitatively, the book is organized in two parts, each giving a struggling reader a hint of what is to come. For example, Part One, entitled “Still as Night” connotes the death of May and Part Two, entitled “Set Free” connotes a positive turn in an otherwise sad book. The book is narrated by the young girl who uses short, simple words to convey complicated, emotional feelings. The book size, 88 pages, is short and would easily accommodate a beginning Grade 4 reader.

**Readability: Grade 6.** *Number The Stars,* by Lois Lowry, is a story of a ten-year-old girl, Annemarie, and her family’s efforts to smuggle Jews out of their Nazi-occupied homeland to safety in Sweden. She has several encounters with Nazi soldiers and is sent on the dangerous mission of being a courier one night during an escape. Students will not only learn some of the history behind German-occupied Denmark, but come to understand the true meaning of bravery from someone so young. Qualitatively, the book has a balance of narrative and dialogue which gives the story more depth and would hold a struggling reader’s interest. The sentence structure and word choices are simple and to the point. Each chapter has a number and title which entices the reader to continue. The book size, a small paperback, with small font size, approximately 10, gives the book the impression of being longer and above Grade 6 level reading.

**Readability: Grade 6.** *Shizuko’s Daughter,* by Kyoko Mori, is a story of a twelve-year old girl, Yuki, whose mother commits suicide in Japan, and a father who marries his mistress of eight years. Her father becomes more distant with Yuki and her stepmother more domineering. She is
also forbidden by custom to see her mother’s family which only contributes to her adolescent years being spent in protective, unchallenged isolation. Some students may feel empathy or sympathy for this young girl’s plight, both in losing her mother to suicide and losing a father to another marriage. Qualitatively, the communication between characters in the book seems to reflect the vagueness of language favored by the Japanese. The concept of the story is presented inductively, as the reader follows Yuki’s struggle to cope with the loss of her mother and piece together some meaning for her mother’s death. The book’s Table of Contents is chronological with titles which gives the reader some sense of ultimate resolution.

Readability: Grade 7. *The Boys of San Joaquin*, by D. James Smith, is a story about a twelve-year-old boy, Paolo and his cousin Billy, who get caught up in a search for money missing from the local Roman Catholic church and the ultimate question of conscience. Students will enjoy the antics of Paolo and his cousin as they discover things about themselves, family members and people in the community they thought they knew. Qualitatively, Paolo’s narration of the story reads much like *Huckleberry Finn* or *Tom Sawyer*—simple but poetic words. The tone and manner of expression, for example “I have a reputation for stretching things toward the interesting, . . .” entice the reader to continue. Although there is no Table of Contents or chapter headings, a list of who’s who at the beginning of the book helps the reader keep track of Paolo’s huge family.

AT GRADE LEVEL TEXTS:

Readability: Grade 9. *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen, is a story about a thirteen-year-old boy, Brian, who is the only passenger on a small plane flying to see his divorced father when the pilot has a heart attack and the plane crashes in the Canadian wilderness—his only survival tools are his clothing, a windbreaker and a hatchet his mother gave him as a present. He manages to survive for 54 days alone in the wilderness by exhibiting patience as he builds fires, fishes and hunts for food and makes his home under a rock overhang. He also learns to survive his parents’ divorce. Students will enjoy the adventure in his survival story and also appreciate the strong will of someone so young to survive what life has placed before him. Qualitatively, the book’s third person narrative and Brian’s interior monologue pulls the reader into the story. Since the narrator carries the story, chapter titles are not included nor are they needed. Although the book has a readability level of Grade 9, the sentence structure and words are short enough that it could be attempted by a Grade 5.

Readability: Grade 9. *All Q, No A, More Tales of a 10th-Grade Social Climber*, by Lauren Meching and Laura Moser, is a story of a young girl, Mimi, who returns to a New York City School after spending a week in the Dominican Republic doing charity work with her rich friends. She is plagued with typical teen problems such as an unrequited crush, divorced parents and their new relationships and low self-confidence. Most students will find humor in Mimi’s plights as she strives to maintain a sense of identity in high school. Qualitatively, the sentences are longer and some words complex which would might prove more difficult for a struggling reader. The concept of the book, the trials of a middle class team in an upper-class world, is presented in a light and entertaining way.
**ABOVE GRADE LEVEL TEXTS:**

**Readability: Grade 12.** *The Kite Runner,* by Khaled Hosseni, traces the story of an unlikely friendship between a wealthy Afghan, Amir, and the son of one of his father’s servants, Hassan, during the 1960's in Kabul, Afghanistan. They are motherless boys who play together daily. One day when Amir wins the annual kite contest, Hassan offers to track down an opponent’s runaway kite as a prize but gets trapped and raped by neighborhood bullies as Amir stands by too terrified to help him. The friendship is forever changed. Years later, Amir learns that Hassan has been executed by the Taliban and returns to rescue the son of Hassan. Students will learn about the ongoing destruction of a country once rich in culture and beauty. They will also experience the dilemma of loyalty when it comes to friends, fathers and sons. Qualitatively, the book is not written without some cultural and political bias since the backdrop of the setting bears witness to the tragic history of Afghanistan in the past thirty years, from the last days of the monarchy, to the Soviet invasion, and on to the atrocities of the Taliban. The concept of rape in the book is disconcerting and yet pivotal to the ultimate decision of Amir to save Hassan’s son as an attempt at redemption.

**Readability: Grade 12.** *Portrait in Sepia,* by Isabel Allende, is a story of a thirty-year old woman, Aurora, who searches her past to determine where the nightmares that have haunted her for years originated. Her mother died during childbirth in Chinatown, San Francisco and Aurora, raised by her grandmother in Chile, does not know the identity of her father. Memories of her childhood are blurred by traumatic childhood events and it is only after entering a fruitless marriage that she decides to search for the truth of her parents. Students will enjoy the complexity of the familial relationships and the growth of Aurora’s emerging self. Qualitatively, the book is presented in mainly narrative form with some dialogue. The sentences are long and very descriptive with contributes to the higher reading level. This book may be considered a challenge for some students at grade level yet accommodates those students who are avid readers.

**Readability of Text Set Items**

Readability was determined by using Flesch-Kincaid generated by Microsoft Word. In order to obtain the most objective readability level, I inputed four 100-word paragraphs from each text, varying the selections between narration and dialogue. On average, the readability scales presented with each text were on target except for the below grade level texts where shorter sentences and words skewed the numbers at least two grade levels lower.

The preceding texts at were carefully selected for content and readability. The higher the
level of readability, the longer the sentences and more complex the vocabulary. The lower the level of readability, the reverse holds true. The at grade level readability accommodates most of the students. I purposely spread the range of reading over ten grade levels to accommodate every student’s reading ability. Qualitative comments regarding the texts are addressed individually.

**Use of Text Set Within PAR**

In preparation for the topic of the text set, I will read aloud a short coming of age story from Ernest Hemingway’s *Nick Adam Stories* and as a group discuss its implications. This strategy will assist all students, but especially those struggling readers who may not know it is “ok” to read aloud for comprehension. We will then begin the KWL activity to learn as a group what we know and want to know about the topic “coming of age.” The “L” will be completed in the reflection stage.

To assist in understanding the literary terms required by the Standards of Learning, I will provide the whole class with explanations and examples and refer them back to the textbook for further review as homework. In addition, in class I will distribute copies of other short coming of age stories to groups of three and ask each group to first read silently and then, as a group, reach a consensus on the definition of literary terms as they relate to the story. This strategy will assist all students but especially those struggling readers who have difficulty with note-taking and reading comprehension.

Students will read a book from the text set. Upon completion, students will be given an opportunity to reflect on their text with the class as a whole, either in written, oral or visual form. The only requirement is that their assignment include the literary terms required by the
Standards of Learning. The final reflection strategy will be a completion of KWL where we list what we learned from our readings on the coming of age.

Bib entries for Works Cited list:


