PART 1

Essential Practices

1

A Case for Whole Novels for the Whole Class

"That carefully prepared leap of faith my students and I take . . ."

In our second whole novel study of the year, one of my most struggling readers, Hector, had a breakthrough. He is not literate in his native language of Spanish and has major difficulty decoding multisyllabic words in English. He has a bright mind and lots of potential but had resisted putting in the immense effort it would take for him to make progress. He had often dismissed learning opportunities with phrases like "I don't know" and "It's boring." But when he borrowed a classroom MP3 player with the audio tracks of the book, Hector began to follow along in the grade-appropriate novel the class was reading together, *When You Reach Me* by Rebecca Stead.

At the end of the period, the students had a five-minute social break, but Hector did not want to stop listening to and reading the book. Whereas his attitude toward education seemed to have revolved around what he couldn't do and how

much he hated reading, he was suddenly saying to me and the other students, "Don't bother me! This book is really *interesting*!" It was the choice of the word *interesting* that especially called my attention. To be sure, he was happy to be able to read what everyone else was reading and share in the experience; more important, he was experiencing a feeling that was totally new to him in relation to the written word—a feeling of genuine interest.

In this chapter, I make a theoretical and practical case for why I believe the whole novels approach provides a natural and compelling way into reading for all kinds of learners. Struggling readers like Hector, who've been through the gamut of reading interventions, have woken up to literature in the whole novels program, and advanced readers, who often feel marginalized in reading classes that don't challenge them, have found belonging and new directions through this approach. Why this method works and why it's not currently a norm in schools—but could be—are the questions I begin to answer here.

LET THEM HAVE STORIES

Stories are interesting; there's no question about it. We are "the story-telling animals," Jonathan Gottschall shows us in his fascinating book, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (2012). We live for the stuff of stories! We have an innate drive to experience and tell stories; they are part of how we think and relate to the world every moment of our lives. Stories are also an important piece of how our brains learn and remember. Dan Willingham, author of *Why Don't Students Like School? A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions about How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom* (2010), explains, "The human mind seems exquisitely tuned to understand and remember stories—so much so that psychologists sometimes refer to them as 'psychologically privileged,' meaning that they are treated differently in the memory than other types of material" (66–67). Later Willingham notes that in psychological experiments, stories were consistently rated more interesting than any other presentation format, even if the information was the same.

And yet we also have a widespread problem across the United States of students not wanting to read—not even stories. Kelly Gallagher, author of *Readicide* (2009), believes the problem has reached a point of "systemic killing of the love of

reading" (2), and I can't say he's wrong. The coexistence of these two opposite realities suggests one thing to me: when students are asked to read fiction, and this mostly happens for them in school, they aren't really experiencing the stories.

Over the past ten years, it seems as though the whole country has fixed its eyes on the noble goal of teaching all children to read but gotten horribly distracted by its questionably motivated doppelganger: the goal of raising all students' literacy levels a requisite amount each year, as measured on a standardized test. Under the pressure and threats of raising scores, it is easy to lose sight of the reasons we even chose to devote our careers to teaching children to read and the reasons we love to read in the first place.

Even the strongest among us have probably found ourselves on occasion telling students they must read a particular story or random excerpt because someone with greater authority than ourselves told us that we had to do it. Or how many of us, in a moment of weakness, have caught ourselves telling students they won't pass their standardized exam or move to the next grade if they don't sit down and read *right now*?

These scenarios are part of the reality of teaching in the current test-driven educational climate, and they shape our students' school realities even more. Most of us know that students don't learn because they are told to and that standardized test scores do not motivate most of our students on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, the mental frameworks of the testing culture become damaging when we build our practices on them.

To combat this pressure, we need to consciously seek out the deeper motivations, realities, and needs that exist for our students and ourselves. Then we must build our curriculum practices and the language we use with students around these deeper goals.

Humans inherently love and need stories. Why is this hard to see in schools today?

A LOVE SUBVERTED: MY OWN STORY OF READING

Strangely, I don't remember reading a single novel for any middle school English class I took in the early 1990s. I can recall the names of some of the books I pretended to read and can still picture the teacher talking about the important

points of last night's chapter in front of the class. I remember one of my English teachers talking to us about *To Kill a Mockingbird*—a truly great book, I discovered later. I guess I found her lecture irrelevant to my life and whatever occupied my mind at that point. It didn't even occur to me to want to read it. With the information she gave in lectures and assignment sheets that allowed me to search through a chapter I never read for the answers, I was able to do well on the tests, or whatever else was required, without more than reading a chapter here or there. And this was before the days of finding book reviews and summaries on the Internet in seconds flat!

Secretly, however, I was a big reader. My grandmother, Baba, an educator herself, always gave me gifts of the latest and best adolescent fiction. These novels appealed to my own interests. I remember *The Mozart Season*, by Virginia Euwer Wolff, about a girl my age who was practicing Mozart for a big violin audition. I instantly connected with this book because I, too, studied violin seriously and battled the challenge of practicing. I also remember staying up late into the night reading *The Devil's Arithmetic*, by Jane Yolen, about a Jewish American girl, like myself, who asks at Passover why we have to remember the past and is transported to an alternate reality in which she is a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp.

I didn't stay up reading these books because someone would be checking the next day to see if I had read. Nor was I motivated by some abstract notion that I had to improve my reading skills. In fact, no one at school even knew what I read at home. Had I shared more with them, my teachers might have known me better; however, as a middle school student, I was concerned primarily with what my friends and classmates thought. Sadly, I perceived that reading was not a socially acceptable hobby in my 'tween social circle, so I read privately. I talked to Baba on the phone about the books, but I never let them see the light of day in school.

My experience may not resonate with everyone, but the disengagement I felt is no stranger to English classrooms today. Many adolescents don't see their interests represented in the assigned reading they do for school and the tasks tacked on to check their understanding and teach skills with no discernable application. Gallagher (2009) argues that the limiting of authentic reading experiences is one of the key causes of "readicide" (4).

BREAKING FREE OF THE CHIEF THINKER ROLE: PUTTING STUDENTS' INTERESTS FIRST

One of the barriers to authentic reading experiences for kids is what I call "the chief thinker" role, which is when teachers privilege their own questions and interpretations over those of their students. It can be tempting to do, because adults do know more about the world than children do, and part of our job is to impart some of our knowledge to students. Also, many of our own teachers positioned themselves as chief thinkers, and it can be difficult to find models who truly depart from this one.

However, we can't teach by doing the thinking for the students. If we do, we discourage them from connecting authentically with the world the author has created, effectively robbing them of this experience. Under these conditions, students become insecure about their own thinking (perhaps asking themselves, *Why can't I understand this book the way my teacher does?*), especially if they don't have people like my grandmother in their lives to validate their thinking behind the scenes. For a child's interpretation of a work of literature to be measured against that of an adult is not only unfair, but also misunderstands what the act of reading fiction actually involves.

At its core, a literature program must answer and be propelled by the desire humans have to experience stories of all forms, the nature of which changes over the course of a reader's life. (More on this in Chapter 2.) Often teachers' efforts to improve students' technical skills in reading seem to stray from this crucial aspect of a reader's development.

When we read fiction, our intention goes beyond comprehension. It is a deeper, highly personal process. In *Fiction and the Unconscious* (1962), Simon Lesser, a psychologist and literary critic who studied and wrote extensively on the psychological impact of literature, explains the phenomenon:

> Fiction accomplishes something more miraculous than [a formulated understanding]. It *involves* us in the events it puts before us, without permitting us to become aware of the nature and extent, or usually even the fact, of our involvement. The emotions fiction arouses in us are evidence of this: they are too powerful to be explained solely on the basis of our cognitive reactions, conscious and even unconscious. (189)

If we read only to comprehend, we would read every text with equal interest and with little or no response. But as both teachers and readers, we know this is hardly the case. On the contrary, we read fiction to gain experience. Under the right conditions, we take great pleasure in the process, which allows us to inhabit the lives of others: we can journey to foreign lands, solve murder cases, get swept up in great love affairs, and confront our worst fears. Much like the compelling virtual worlds of games (though there are key differences in the use of imagination during reading versus video games), these opportunities provide a powerful incentive for children and adolescents to read fiction.

Without student motivation to experience a story, our efforts at teaching comprehension through fiction are dull, and our attempts to engage students in literary analysis lack purpose and context.

Back to Hector, and his comment, "Don't bother me! This book is really interesting!" The feeling he had at that moment is more compelling than any achievement goal we can set for kids. We must keep that reality front and center in the literature classroom, no matter what other priorities we have for our students.

WHY STUDY WHOLE NOVELS AS A WHOLE CLASS?

Independent reading programs, where students select their own reading materials, have done a lot to connect students with developmentally appropriate books and create classrooms full of readers. I'm compelled by the richness of Donalyn Miller's practices as a teacher of reading, revealed in *The Book Whisperer* (2009), and I've learned from her classroom, especially when it comes to my own practices around students' independent reading. If I were a parent, I would be thrilled for my child to be in her sixth-grade English language arts class.

At the same time, I would not want my child's entire English language arts education to be structured around independent reading, as some proponents of reading workshop models suggest. The main argument against whole class novel studies has been that one book will never meet all the needs of a whole class of students and that the traditional methods of teaching whole class novels are flawed. While it is a challenge to select books and work with them in ways that benefit all students, I believe there are needs that whole class novels can serve, which pure independent reading models don't.

Even Miller writes at the end of *The Book Whisperer*, "Yes, students benefit from the deep analysis of literature that a thorough look at one book provides." She adds, "You create a common literacy experience to which you can make future connections, and reading a book together fosters community among your students and you." But, she qualifies, "There needs to be a balance between picking a book apart to examine its insides and experiencing the totality of what a book offers" (127). In her suggestions for alternatives to traditional practices, she calls for a rethinking of the whole class novel.

The whole novels program, which I have been developing over the past ten years with Madeleine Ray of Bank Street College of Education, is a radical rethinking of how to engage students with works of literature using the novel as the primary literary form. In the whole novels program, we honor the nature of the literary art by having students look at the whole work, not breaking the experience into little pieces. Through the work, we create an intellectual community that is socially relevant for students and gives them opportunities to build the critical-thinking skills, creativity, and habits of mind they need in the twenty-first century. The shared experience capitalizes on the drive of adolescents to connect to their peers and construct knowledge together.

To hear from students about their experience in the program, visit https://vimeo.com/61677466 for video 1.1: Student Voices in Whole Novels.

Madeleine Ray distinguishes between a literature program and a reading program in her Children's Literature course at Bank Street College of Education. She writes the following in a course handout:

> A literature program focuses on the reader's response to the literary work and not on reading skills per se . . . In reading we emphasize code breaking; the specific meaning of words in sentences . . . these are denotative activities and skills . . . Literary "skills" . . . are mainly connotative. The reader, through experiences with various fictional works, builds awareness of varying levels of quality in writing; of imaginative power in the author's ability to tell a story that [continously] engages the reader; of uniqueness in style through the use of language, and

the unity of the world of literature as old plots are reimagined and permutated into new stories.

We build on the human desire to enter a virtual world by structuring a literature program in a way that protects the reader's experience of the story. Children should experience compelling works of literature that in their conflicts and themes are relevant to their development, and in their use of language and other craft elements are aesthetic works of art. The experience becomes intellectual when students can share their varied responses in a community forum and begin to study the ways in which authors are able to use language to provoke certain responses in their readers. We look at the ways in which those responses differ for each reader and what those differences mean.

These critical analysis skills are central in the Common Core State Standards, but teachers are struggling to figure out how to achieve them in ways that engage students at their level. Whole novels provides a way to bring about critical analysis quite naturally. Perhaps ironically, I've found that the key to helping students take a work apart for close analysis is letting them read the whole thing first. Figure 1.1 shows how the interaction between student and text works in the whole novels program, leading to critical analysis of the work.

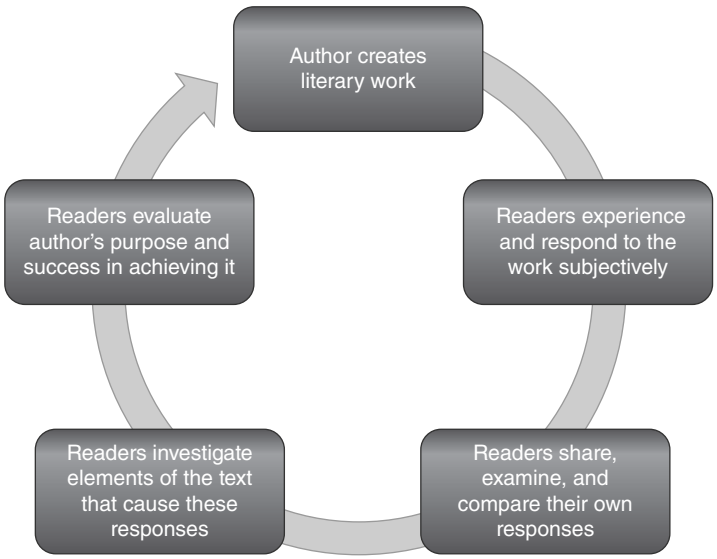

Figure 1.1 Whole Novels Reader Response and Analysis Cycle

WHY WE READ THE WHOLE BOOK FIRST

Imagine going to see a movie in the theater. You've heard good things about this movie, and you feel that special movie theater excitement when the lights go down and the movie begins.

After the second scene, the movie stops. The lights come on, and someone at the front of the theater with a microphone starts asking people what they think about the movie. Why do you think the director made this movie? What is motivating the characters? How will it end? The person in the front then begins taking people's comments about the movie so far.

You try to listen, but you were much more interested in the movie itself than in what random people in the theater think about it. The person at the microphone starts talking about how one of the characters in the movie reminds her of herself when she was young. Someone next to you whispers, "I don't care what these people think about this right now. I came to see the movie!" The two of you begin chatting about other things in an effort to kill time until the movie resumes. Finally, the person in front says, "Well, that's all the time we have for today. Come back tomorrow, same time, same place, to see the next scene!"

Would you come back?

Now consider another scenario. You've just seen a really interesting movie in the theater. When it finishes, the lights come up, and someone in front of the theater with a microphone explains that there will be a brief break during which people are encouraged to visit the concession stands. Then people are invited to discuss the film in special rooms in small groups. The theater will even have the ability to rerun certain scenes, such as the opening scene, to spark discussion. You happen to have an hour to kill until you need to move to your next commitment.

Would you consider participating in such a discussion?

The whole novels method builds on the reader's interest in experiencing the story by allowing students to read the entire book before formal discussions of the work begin. This may seem logical, as in the movie analogy. Adult book clubs use the same structure: members usually take a month or so to read on their own time and then come together to discuss the entire book. College seminars work the same way, using a faster pace of about a week to read a book.

In my experience, however, having spent time in many different English language arts classrooms in public, private, and charter schools in New York City, I have very rarely seen students read an entire novel before being asked to speak or write analytically about it. The standard for whole class novel studies in both traditional and progressive classrooms seems to be that students read and discuss the books chapter by chapter.

WHY NOT DISCUSS CHAPTER BY CHAPTER?

The chapter-by-chapter model parses up the reader's experience in a way that takes a lot of the pleasure out of the process and can even interfere with comprehension. The story is a piece of art that is intended to be experienced as a whole. If we were reading a collection of short stories or poems, we could naturally discuss each story or poem. But a novel is a longer form created to allow readers to more deeply enter an elaborate world the author has developed. The power of the novel comes from the time we spend in these worlds with the characters, experiencing the conflicts, the symbols, and the author's unique style of prose. In the classroom, we can build a social experience of living in the literary world without discussing each chapter.

The prolonged experience in the literary world of the novel is crucial to understanding and appreciating the form. Lesser (1962) explains that in order for a reader to become captivated by the world of a story, "the indispensable condition of such an experience, and the first stage of the experience itself, is a relaxation of the vigilance usually exercised by the ego. A willing suspension of disbelief, a receptive attitude, is essential not only to the enjoyment but even the understanding of comprehension" (192). Reading fiction is a highly personal experience, in which the reader is actively participating. In her article, "Literature: The Reader's Role" (1960), Louise Rosenblatt describes it this way:

> In reading a poem or novel, we are preoccupied with the experience we are living through in the actual reading. We are intimately involved in what we are recreating under the guidance of the text . . . We live through the suspense, the foreboding, the ultimate resolution. The structure of the work for us is the structure of our experience while under its spell . . . No one else can read—i.e., experience—a literary work of art for us. (39)

What happens to a student's experience of a work of fiction—to the student's state of receptive relaxation—when, with the best of intentions, we constantly interrupt with formal requests to evaluate, predict, and express their thoughts about the story while they are busy reading? Are they able to remain receptive to the world the author is creating, when, like overbearing parents, we try to control their experience? When adults read, we allow the author to guide us with nothing but the work of art he or she created. We need to help students develop that special relationship with a text rather than trying to be a third member of the relationship—especially since we are authority figures for students, and they are conditioned to look to us for answers and interpretations. This reality makes it far more difficult for students to relax their egos while they read. We need to step away to allow genuine interaction between our students and novels.

As adult readers, we have a tendency to want our students to "get everything" in the novel, so we don't want to let them read too much without us. When we try to direct a student to discover all of the features of a text during a first reading, Lesser (1962) reminds us that we "may require him to read with a strained alertness, which is inimical to enjoyment" (193). That state of pleasure and relaxation is necessary not only for a student to like a book, but also for a reader to be able to understand the work of fiction. Kelly Gallagher identifies this problem as "overteaching books," citing it as one of the four causes of "readicide."

We also have to understand that our reading of a story is colored by our own imaginations and therefore is different for each reader. Contrasting writers with painters, Gottschall (2012) explains that writers "give us expert line drawings with hints on filling them in. Our minds provide most of the information in the scene, most of the color, shading, and texture. When we read stories, this massive creative effort is going on all the time, chugging away beneath our awareness" (5). If we push our own interpretations of fiction on our students, we also push our own imaginations on them, which can shut down their imaginative process of reading the novel. If their imaginative process shuts down, they will lose the ability to comprehend the story. Thus, teachers can easily shoot themselves in the foot as they try to help their students "get the story"!

When we allow students to read an entire novel, they can experience it fully and truly themselves, even though this understanding may be limited to their relatively few years on the planet, as compared with our own.

STUDENT-DRIVEN DISCUSSIONS: MAKING MEANING OF THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE

Armed with their story experience, students bubble over with things to say in a discussion, often surprising even themselves. Though I play a key role as facilitator, students decide what gets discussed and they can say anything they want about the book. I find that they are eager to listen to other students' reactions to characters and issues in the book and use evidence to argue their points. (For more on how I structure whole novel discussions, see Chapter 5.)

In whole novel discussions, students are motivated to reread sections that caused confusion, or were particularly intense, for deeper meaning and alternative interpretations. In the second and third readings of passages during discussions, students naturally become more analytical in a way that does not happen in a first reading. At that point, the work of critical analysis that many teachers labor at doing with students along the way can be done much more efficiently, powered by intense student motivation.

The practice of having students read an entire novel before holding discussions does present some challenges for us, but in teaching, we constantly face challenges and choose which ones to address. This, I believe, is worth taking on

Student Comments about Discussions from End-of-Year Survey, 2011–2012

- "It's good and helpful to share your ideas, and work off of the ideas of others."
- "Even if the literature sucks, it's always nice to discuss with others about the good parts and bad parts. You also find different things within the literature when discussing it."
- "It's interesting to read something and hear new perspectives on it, and also be able to share your own thoughts."
- "I like hearing other people's perspectives."
- "I have always liked debating big ideas with others."
- "It's interesting to hear other people's opinions and let it alter your own."

because it provides meaningful, pleasurable experiences for students and leads to high levels of critical thinking and creativity. When I prioritize the innate drive children have to experience a story, I find that they are willing to work hard to develop the reading skills they need to sustain the work.

It's sort of like my friend who has just fallen in love with someone who speaks only Japanese. Whereas before, he had only marginal interest in learning Japanese, he is now receiving regular love letters in Japanese. He has figured out how to translate them. He seeks help from tutors and spends the time it takes to learn the meaning in the words and to be able to respond. Love of story and membership in a novel community can create the same phenomenon for struggling readers, as it is doing for Hector and others in my classes. In order to create such conditions, we need to believe in the power of the stories we select and allow students to experience them the way their authors intended for them to be read.

BUT WILL THEY READ IT?

In conversations with teachers about the whole novels program, a common concern is that they fear, or expect, that students simply won't read the book. I understand the worry; however, I've spent years devising ways to make sure all my students are able and motivated to do the reading. Here are the keys I have found to making this happen:

1. *A positive expectation.* If we don't believe they will read a book we've asked them to read, then it is doubtful that they will. But if we do believe they will, students will most likely try their best. Conditions 2 through 4 will help you to feel more confident that they will be able to meet the challenge and help them believe you when you tell them they can do it. When students experience the discussion seminars once, there is added motivation to complete the books and participate.
2. *Strategic book selection.* In Chapter 2, I discuss the criteria I have for choosing books for a whole or half class that appeal to students' developmental, cultural, and social interests and appropriately match their reading levels.
3. *A habit of free-form authentic response to stories as they read rather than depending on teacher questioning.* In the next chapter, I share my method for teaching this habit.

4. *A system for holding students accountable for reading.* Although no teacher can force any student to do anything, we use the business of routines, grades, and outreach to encourage students to keep up with assignments. I discuss my system in Chapter 7.
5. *Support for students along the way.* In Chapters 7 and 8, I share the ways I support individual students while they are reading a novel, as well as the whole class, using group activities, supplemental stories, films, picture books, and assistive technology such as audio recordings.

LETTING GO OF PRECONCEPTIONS: THROWING THE BOOMERANG

Another concern I hear from teachers is that their students might read the novel but won't understand all of the subtleties the author has written into it or master the specific standards the teacher has chosen to address in the study of this novel. I have some practices that help ensure students reach certain standards, which I share in subsequent chapters. However, in my own practice, I've come to believe in what I think of as the boomerang phenomenon.

Part of launching a whole novel study is letting go of the preconceptions I have of what I want my students to "get" from a work of literature. I have to let go even of the things I love most about the novel and surrender to the power of the author's craft and my students' abilities to experience the work of fiction for themselves.

This process is like throwing a boomerang. If I throw it well, I can be fairly certain the boomerang will return to me on its own. In my classroom, this translates into my having faith that the students will get what they need or what they are ready to learn at that moment out of the study. I can be artful in how I select the novel, set up the context and conditions for the study, and support my students along the journey, but the real work happens between them and the text.

This may seem to run counter to the basic idea of objective-driven teaching. Don't I need to begin knowing what I want the outcomes to be? I do need to have objectives for the study and for individual students, but when the students begin reading, I need to let those expectations go and focus on working with them

wherever they are. I need to stay open to new ideas and routes. I have found over and over that through the process of reading and discussing the work authentically, students come back around to almost everything I would have set out for them to discover anyway. It's not always in the way I imagine it, but the group is much better when it's not just my thinking fueling the direction. In fact, they usually exceed my expectations in what they discover in the text and the depths they are able to go to in their writing. Of course there have been difficult times where something doesn't go well with a particular student or class, but these difficulties have led to creative inventions that end up serving all of the students in subsequent novel studies.

It's the boomerang phenomenon—that carefully prepared leap of faith my students and I take (because they have to trust me, too)—that keeps teaching literature fresh every year. It keeps me from becoming my own middle school English teacher, who talked about *To Kill a Mockingbird* day after day and never tried to get me to read it myself. It keeps me interested and invested in my students and what they will bring to the work, year after year.

HELPING STUDENTS PREPARE FOR THEIR FUTURE

Another reason I believe it's important to allow students to read whole novels themselves has to do with our role in preparing them for the next steps in their education, whether that is high school– or college-level work. Most teachers I've spoken to agree that the goal is for students to be able to read and analyze complete novels on their own at high levels—and in college, students need to be able to do large amounts of reading in short amounts of time. The Common Core Standards, too, are pointing us toward this in College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard 10 for reading: "Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently." Students also need to be able to share their ideas in discussion seminars in high school and college. Yet even by the end of twelfth grade, many students have never had the experience of reading a whole novel themselves and then participating in sustained discussions about it.

What I have found is that if we select developmentally meaningful books and create the right conditions in our classrooms, we don't need to wait until college or even high school to help students reach this goal. In the whole novels program, not

only do the students know from firsthand experience that they can read a whole book, but they also gain a method for reading, recording responses, and pacing themselves; they know how long it takes them to finish. Ideally, with years of experience and practice reading and analyzing whole novels in a classroom community, we can send students off to college with more certainty that they are prepared for the work ahead.

Beyond college readiness, we want our students to become confident readers, writers, and thinkers. We send a message to them that we believe in them when we demonstrate that they are not dependent on a teacher to cut a novel into bite-size chunks and interpret it for them. Rather, they discover that they can do the work themselves and that what they have to say about it is valuable to the classroom community. Students are aware of the subtle messaging in this approach, and the positivity builds on itself.

Over the school year, students recognize their own growth and specific strengths and needs, and they see that there is room to share their novel ideas in the classroom community. I take a lot of feedback from students throughout the year about the work we do. Once they understand the basic structure of whole novels, there are opportunities for them to influence the curriculum and adjust structures to better fit their needs and interests. Whole novels is a flexible framework, and teachers and students alike can make it their own.

WHOLE NOVELS HAVE REACH

Whole novel studies create a robust thematic framework for my English language arts curriculum, which includes four strands: reading, writing, language study (vocabulary, mechanics and conventions), and classroom life (routines and how we function as a group). Content from the novel studies becomes fuel for reading related nonfiction, as well as poetry, short stories, plays, and graphic novels. Novel studies inspire much of the writing we do, both creative and analytical, which I discuss in Chapter 6. Some writing units don't connect directly to a novel study, such as essays students write about community in September, or a journalism project on the neighborhood we do in December and January—but they build on themes from stories we read and foreshadow ideas that we'll see later in our literature studies.

Whole novel studies create many occasions to integrate technology into our processes, from Google Docs journals shared between reading partners and online discussion forums, to students who research authors' lives online or make film spin-offs of books. I also collaborate with colleagues to create interdisciplinary connections between our novels and content from history, art, and science classes. Skills we practice in relation to novel studies in English transfer to tasks that students encounter in other subjects.

In these ways, students are always moving in and out of the literary and real worlds, responding to the various experiences, drawing comparisons, and discovering patterns. In *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood* (1991), J. A. Appleyard of Boston College describes the act of reading as "primarily an encounter between a particular reader and a particular text in a particular time and place, an encounter that brings to life the story, poem or work in question . . . the story is an event that has roots both in the text and in the personality and history that the reader brings to the reading" (9). By extending "the roots and branches" of the novels we study to interact with our students' life experiences, history, other texts, other disciplines, and the world around us, students can have stories—and much more.

PARTS OF THE WHOLE

My Annual Curriculum Map

A map follows of my annual curriculum for my current eighth-grade English language arts classes; it shows the books that we read throughout the year and how I balance reading and writing while working with whole novels. All novel studies lead to writing, but not all the writing we do derives from a novel study. The year-long thematic content, however, builds through all units, whether they are focused on whole novel studies or something else.

This map is an example, not a prescription. It has elements that I think would work for other eighth-grade classes, but it has been designed with my current population of students in mind. I've had to make significant changes to my own curriculum choices to respond to the strengths, needs, and interests of populations I've taught at each of three schools and from one year to the next within the same school. It wouldn't be a good idea to apply this curriculum to another population without first considering the needs and strengths of the students there.

Finally, in this big picture map, I've focused on some aspects of my curriculum over others. I've articulated the reading and writing skills of my curriculum partly because they seem most relevant to this book, partly to conserve space, and also because they more easily align with language in the Common Core English and literacy standards. There are other important pieces of my curriculum that are not well represented in this map. One aspect is the large amount of listening and speaking students do in my class and as part of whole novel studies. Two other underrepresented pieces are the explicit teaching of writing mechanics and the study of vocabulary through Latin roots. The map therefore includes many, but not all, of the content and skills I teach in a year.

Annual Eighth-Grade English Language Arts Curriculum Map

1. Classroom Community (September)	2. Language of Setting (October)	3. Four Types of Conflict (November)	4. Journalism Study (December–January)
Thematic Focus Class community Difference/belonging Balance: give and take Self-awareness **Texts (read aloud)** *The Hundred Dresses* "Harrison Bergeron" *The Giving Tree* Student survey data **Skills** Classroom routines Authentic response Three kinds of thinking Discussion protocol Reflecting on work **Independent Reading Cycle 1** Selecting books Literal, inferential, and critical (L, I, C) sticky notes Reading habits **Writing** Community principles essay Weekly reflections **Writing Skills** Improvisational drama to brainstorm Narrative versus argument essay Select the form that best supports your content Paragraphing	**Thematic Focus** Home/environment Identity/dreams Sexism Writing as freedom **Whole Novel #1** *The House on Mango Street* **Literary Focus** Theme Setting Symbolism **Other Materials** *Martian Chronicles* Documentary: *The Latino Project* (HBO) **Skills** Analyze descriptive and figurative language Identify themes Write L, I, C notes Discussion habits Analyze author's purpose in narrative structure **Writing** Vignettes project **Writing Skills** Word choice Descriptive language Figurative language Develop a theme Peer feedback	**Thematic Focus** Home/environment Cultural identity Conflicting worlds Discrimination **Whole Novel #2** *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* **Literary Focus** Setting Four types of conflict Character development **Other Materials** Film: *Smoke Signals* *American Born Chinese* *Flight* Articles on reservation life **Skills** Identify and analyze a conflict Make connections across texts Close reading **Writing** Conflict miniproject Conflict story In-class essay	**Thematic Focus** Environment Community Diverse perspectives Journalism **Texts** *Our America* Articles and reviews Survey data Interviews Independent reading cycle 2 **Literary Focus** Nonfiction structure, purpose, audience **Reading/Research Skills** Problem-solve vocabulary words Identify structure and purpose in nonfiction Ask questions Read for information Identify bias Do an Internet search Evaluate sources Conduct interviews Conduct surveys Analyze data Identify multiple perspectives **Writing** Feature article Vocabulary miniproject

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1. Classroom Community (September)	2. Language of Setting (October)	3. Four Types of Conflict (November)	4. Journalism Study (December–January)
Assessments Reading levels Quiz on three kinds of thinking Assess sticky note responses in independent reading Essay: assess content/ diagnose writing skills **New York State Common Core** Reading Standards 1, 2, 3 Writing Standards 1, 3, 9	**Assessments** Sticky notes (L, I, C response, theme identification, close reading of language) Participation in discussions Vignettes (description, figurative language, theme development) **New York State Common Core** Reading Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 Writing Standards 3, 5, 10, 11	**Writing Skills** Support claims with textual evidence Organize essay Develop an original character and conflict Write dialogue Choose point of view **Assessments** Sticky notes: L, I, C response, conflict notes, connections Conflict analysis In-class essay: structure and evidence Story: dialogue, conflict, point of view **New York State Common Core** Reading Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9 Writing Standards 1, 3, 4, 9	**Writing Skills** Write a hook Show multiple perspectives on issue Provide background information Quote from sources Structure logically Revise for flow **Assessments** Feature article: content, organization, style and mechanics **New York State Common Core** Reading Standards 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9 Writing Standards 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10

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5. Family Influence (February	6. Power Structures (March–April)	7. Poetry of Resistance (April)	8. The Hero's Journey (May–June)
Thematic Focus Family Independence Culture African American history **Whole Novel #3** *Nobody's Family Is Going to Change* **Literary Focus** Character Point of view **Other Materials** *The Rock and the River* *The Dream Bearer* *Like Sisters on the Homefront* *Anya's Ghost* Essays by Amy Tan Assorted poems **Skills** Strategies for challenging text Identify complex versus flat characters Point of view Analyze character Analyze author's purpose Identify mood **Writing** Fictional scenes In-class essay "I Am From" Poem	**Thematic Focus** Oppression Resistance Counterculture Sacrifice **Whole Novel #4** *The Chocolate War* **Other Materials** Film: *Swing Kids* "The Lottery" *The Book Thief* "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" **Literary Focus** Protagonist Antagonist Archetypes Moral dilemma Tone **Skills** Infer plot Reread Identify shifting point of view Recognize allusions Identify archetypes Make connections across texts **Writing** Moral dilemma monologue Critical essay on multiple texts	**Thematic Focus** Resistance Heroism Self-expression Fantasy/reality **Materials** Film: *Pan's Labyrinth* Selected poems *The Life of Poetry* (Muriel Rukeyser) **Literary Focus** Poetic devices Poetic forms **Skills** Read poetry aloud Recognize poetic devices Recognize poetic forms Analyze figurative language Take notes on challenging texts **Independent Reading Cycle 3** Note new interests Increase stamina **Writing** Original poems Book reviews	**Thematic Focus** Journey Trials Transformation Home **Whole Novel #5** Journey book clubs (in this final unit, students lead their own whole novel studies, and have their choice of among several journey-themed novels): *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* *Parable of the Sower* *The Alchemist* *Somewhere in the Darkness* *Ship Breaker* *Where the Wild Things Are* *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* Interview with Joseph Campbell **Literary Focus** Plot structure Setting Character Theme **Skills** Recognize plot arch Recognize stages of the journey Critique author's use of literary elements Lead discussions **Writing** Journey stories

Annual Eighth-Grade English Language Arts Curriculum Map (*Continued*)

5. Family Influence (February	6. Power Structures (March–April)	7. Poetry of Resistance (April)	8. The Hero's Journey (May–June)
Writing Skills Organize essay around an argument Quote from text Use line breaks Revise poem **Assessments** Sticky notes: L, I, C, mood, say "what?" notes Discussions Literary essay "I Am from" Poem **New York State Common Core** Reading Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 Writing Standards 1, 4, 5	**Assessments** Sticky notes Formal paragraphs Monologue Critical essay **New York State Common Core** Reading Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9 Writing Standards 1, 4, 5, 9, 10	**Writing Skills** Find inspiration for poetry writing Write metaphors Revise for rhythm and line breaks Revise for economy of language **Assessments** Reading-level assessments Book review Poetry discussions Poetic devices quiz Collection of original poems **New York State Common Core** Reading Standards 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 10, Writing Standards 3, 5, 6, 10, 11	**Writing Skills** Outline journey Use dialogue, description of actions, interior monologue Develop hero Develop settings Develop conflicts Choose point of view **Assessments** Student-led whole novel discussions Journey stories **New York State Common Core** Reading Standards 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 10, Writing Standards 3, 5, 6, 10, 1