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Digging the Common Core with a Helpful Tool--Text Sets

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Joshua*, a 7th grade boy assigned to the summer reading clinic version of “Camp Green Lake” (you remember, from *Holes* by Louis Sachar), did not like to read. Not one bit. He made this very clear to my reading master’s students and me the entire last week of June. He thought reading was worse than digging holes in the noonday sun. You know the telltale signs of a reluctant reader—fooling with friends, avoiding the task, head down on the table, frustration, boredom, sighs. My students and I knew we needed to find a “just right”, accessible text for Joshua. We chose *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) in hopes this challenging yet motivating story about adolescent boys would motivate Joshua to read. We were off to a slow, unhappy start until that most memorable moment when Joshua realized he could connect what he was reading in *Holes* to his favorite computer game. I can still hear his incredulous voice, “Do you mean, I can talk about how my computer game is like something in the book?” After I replied yes, Joshua pressed a bit more. “What if the book reminds me of a TV show or something I saw in a movie?” Another yes, and the room lit with his smile. Joshua became a reader that summer.

In this Review of Research in the Classroom column, we will examine the research on what Joshua discovered that summer—reading makes more sense and

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is most engaging when we can see connections to other texts--both print and non-print--like the computer games and television shows Joshua knew so well. In addition, I have included resources to help you create text sets—a collection of multi-genre and multi-disciplinary texts that share similar authors, content or themes. As teachers, we know Joshua needs access not only to favorite games and shows but also a wide range of quality texts, including the complex texts required of Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

Text-Sets: The Basic Tools

Mary Ann Cappiello and Erika Thulin Dawes have a new book called *Teaching with Text Sets* (2013), which will provide you with a framework for developing a standards-based curriculum with informational texts and other quality texts. By texts, we mean books, news articles, websites, works of art, film, websites and more. The first step is to determine what you want students to know or to be able to do, as in Backwards Design. Then, decide if you want your text set to involve an author study (Malcolm Gladwell), a theme (immigration), an essential question (Who am I?), or topic (sustainability). Next, partner with a librarian and begin to locate texts at various reading levels and formats—online and offline; narrative, poetry, and informational. Cappiello (2013) cautions, “a text set is a classroom tool for a teacher to use strategically...it is not everything but the kitchen sink (though in the gathering and sifting phase it is) but rather an expert culling to structure a specific learning experience.” Mathis (2002) suggests a text set is five to fifteen texts and

“that the most powerful aspect of text set preparation is not just identifying books but planning engagements that nurture critical thinking, intertextual comparisons and multiple means of response” (p. 127). Cappiello and Dawes’ book (2013) comes not only with great ideas, sample text sets and models for grades K-8, but also a digital resource CD.

Young Readers and Text-Sets

Neuman and Roskos (2012) use text sets to scaffold young children’s ability to read and comprehend information text. In the early grades, they start with a read-aloud of a predictable book, such as Eric Carle’s (1996) *The Grouchy Ladybug*, to teach not only literary language but also academic language (i.e. larva, pupa, thorax and abdomen). In addition to predictable books, the authors suggest rhyming books, storybooks and information books to engage young readers in opportunities to learning vocabulary, concepts and information in a variety of contexts.

Informational Text Sets

Recently revised publishers’ criteria for CCSS in grades K-5 call for 50% literary and 50% informational text in science, social studies, and the arts; by grades 6-12 adolescents are expected to reading even more informational texts (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). Next, we’ll examine articles that address use of text sets in the science and social studies classroom.

Ebbers (2002) shares specific nonfiction genres and practical suggestions to promote science practice in your classroom by including reference books, explanation texts, field-guides, how-to books, narrative expository texts, biographies, and journals in text sets. The author then demonstrates how she has uses a text set to encourage both literacy and inquiry practices in science. There are three main steps: 1) question generating; 2) investigating through inquiry; and 3) investigating through research. Ebbers (2002) concludes that carefully selected text sets “provide children with windows into a welcoming scientific community” (p. 49).

Bersh (2013) found that using a picture book thematic text set in the elementary and middle school classroom provided a rich curriculum resource in the social studies classroom, which encouraged students to experience multiple perspectives on topics. Specifically, she created and implemented a text set on immigration to address some of the ramifications: 1) causes and effects; 2) historical, contemporary, and geographical migratory patterns in the U.S.; 3) impact on diversifying culture and ethnic demographics; 4) difficulties new immigrants experience; and 5) lessons on empathy, tolerance and respect.

English Language Learners and Text Sets

Ogle and Correa-Kovtun (2010) utilize both text sets and a research-based instructional routine to scaffold English language learners’ developing reading and leaning with informational texts. Using the one-minute fluency snapshot (Blachowicz, Sullivan & Cieply, 2001), classroom teachers created text sets of 8 to 10 different titles on one theme, which matched the range of reading levels in the

classroom. Ideally, there are two or three copies of each title. Next, teachers model and helped student practice an instructional routine called Partner Reading and Content, Too (PRC2). The routine lasts between 20 and 30 minutes and consists of the following steps:

1. Partners preview the entire book.
2. For every two pages, each partner silently reads to get a sense of the text.
3. Partners decide which pages they will read-aloud and then re-read and practice. The reader also selects a prepared question or writes a question to discuss during the read-aloud.
4. Each partner then reads a page or section aloud and then asks a question of the partner who has been listening to the read-aloud. Next, both talk about the text, vocabulary and concepts.
5. Partners then switch roles.
6. Last, each individual reader adds words to his or her personal vocabulary notebook.

As you can see, the PRC2 routine utilizes several research-based practices, such as question generating, practice reading aloud (versus only being read to by a teacher), peer learning, and vocabulary development. Ogle and Correa-Kovtun (2010) article also includes a helpful chart with discussion stems in both English and Spanish.

Linked Text Sets in the High School Classroom

No matter how much the CCSS emphasizes informational texts, the English language arts teacher is still going to be required to teach the English canon. Tatum, Wold and Elish-Piper (2009) have provided guidelines to interest and engage adolescent readers through the use of Linked Text Sets (LTS). LTS include “print (written texts) and nonprint (visual representations, music, Internet sites, movies) media” to help adolescents consider the important ideas or essential questions addressed in a literary work from the English canon (i.e. What influences one’s identity development) (p. 88). The authors suggest three criteria to guide the selection of quality texts:

- Students will identify with and know more about those who live within and beyond their own borders.
- Students who read at different levels will be allowed to engage with a variety of texts.
- Students will be given choice in what they read to empower them to become more independent and motivated readers.

After the references section of this column, I will share examples of text sets shared in several publications included in this column to help get you started using text sets with your students. Hope you get to experience the teaching joy we did that summer Joshua made connections between texts and became a reader.

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Sample Text Sets

Bersh (2002)—Annotated bibliography with twenty-three recommended picture books about **immigration**

Cappiello & Dawes (2013)—Includes text sets for studying **immigration, solar system, The Great Depression, Honeybees and Trees**.

Ebbers (2002)—Text set unit on **sound**

Gross, S. & Schulten (2013)--New York Times offers an excellent resource for lesson ideas and a starter to build linked text sets. I found a lesson plan for ***The Book Thief*** (Zusak, 2007), a popular literary work read in today’s middle and high school classrooms (also recently released as a film), which is paired with an informational text entitled “Auschwitz shifts from memorializing to teaching,” a New York Times 2011 article by Michael Kimmelman.

Kurkjian, Livingston, & Siu-Runyan (2003/2004)—Creating text sets using the Notable Books for a Global Society Award lists. Samples include **humanities** text sets for two themes: Resilient Spirit and Bordering Cultures and Languages.

Mathis (2002)--Text sets on themes emerging from *The Outsiders*, such as prejudice, friendship, search for self, conflict and loyalty

Ogle and Correa-Kovtun (2010) –Text set for ELLs learning about **simple machines**