

# South Carolina English Teacher

South Carolina Council of Teachers of English | 2016



# South Carolina English Teacher

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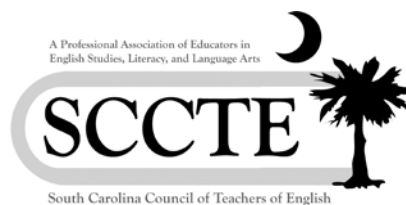
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Co-Editors

**Mary E. Styslinger**  
*University of South Carolina*

**Matthew C. Nelson**  
*Francis Marion University*



# SCCTE Call for Articles

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The South Carolina Council of Teachers of English welcomes contributions to *South Carolina English Teacher (SCET)*, a journal that represents varied perspectives, formats, and voices focusing on the teaching of English in our state. *SCET* publishes teacher research, critical essays, teaching strategies, bibliographies, interviews, personal essays, short stories, poetry, and other creative works including photography and drawings. We invite original artwork for our cover design. Each manuscript should be no more than 12 double spaced, typed pages in current APA style. *SCET* is a blind, peer-reviewed journal. Place the author's personal and institutional identification including an e-mail address on the cover page only. Please attach a copy of your manuscript in Word, subject heading, SCET, to [mstyslin@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:mstyslin@mailbox.sc.edu). Deadline for submission for the next issue of *SCET* is July 30, 2017. All submissions attached by this date will be considered.

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## From the Editors

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It's our honor to share with you the latest volume of *South Carolina English Teacher*, the state's home for teachers of English to share the possibilities of their practice. The pieces in this year's journal provide a range of texts including research, reflection, and creative writing that we hope will challenge and inspire readers.

In the *Teachers as Researchers* section, Sam Griffith and Todd Cherner provide students' perspectives on YA and canonical literature as they suggest strategies teachers can use to get students more fully involved in reading and discussing literature in "Promoting Text Engagement in the High School Classroom: Tips for Teachers from Students." And in "Developing as Teachers: Using Popular Teacher Films and Reflection to Explore Teacher Beliefs," Kari Lee Siko Walters presents findings of her study of how pre-service teachers' experiences watching, writing about, and discussing film depictions of teachers shapes their beliefs and plans for their own teaching.

The *Methods that Matter* section offers descriptions of promising classroom practices. In "Inquiry Based Learning through Socratic Circles," Kathleen Clark describes how structuring classroom discussion around this strategy encourages students to take control of their own learning, provides for broader participation among students, and challenges her to rethink her role as a teacher. Heather Ford

describes how using color-coded annotations can help students engage more deeply with challenging texts in "Secondary Rainbow Reading: Text Comprehension through Color Annotations." And in "Conferring with Young Readers," Ashley Beaumont explains how setting aside time to confer with her students about their reading has had far-reaching implications for her ability to help students grow as readers as well as helping her develop personal relationships with them.

In the *Author Spotlight*, we're pleased to present Tiffany A. Flowers' interview with acclaimed author Beverly Jenkins.

The final section of this issue, *Writing with Purpose*, contains pieces that creatively explore the work we do as teachers, including the poem "dots" by Melissa Summer Wells, Dawn Mitchell's essay on bullying in the farmyard and beyond, "Pecking Order is Real," and Erin Donovan's "Kate: A Short Story in Real Life."

We believe these texts are excellent representations of the important work we do as teachers of reading and writing, capturing the breadth and depth of our lives inside and outside the classroom. They challenge us to innovate and reflect on our teaching practices as we continue to engage with our students not only as readers and writers, but also as human beings. We hope you enjoy them.

# Promoting Text Engagement in the High School Classroom: Tips for Teachers from Students

By Sam Griffith & Todd Cherner

Young adult literature (YA lit) has been and continues to be a thriving genre geared towards the adolescent reader (Herz, 1996; Hill, 2011). YA lit offers its readers opportunities to connect with diverse characters (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2005), something not always available in canonical literature (Rojas, 2013). Plus, it offers readers a vast selection of topics, characters, settings, and plots (Strickland, 2015). Due to the broad topics addressed by YA lit, it is important teachers are aware of high school students' preferences for selecting and reading it. In response, this case study analyzes high-achieving students' tastes for YA lit and canonical literature before concluding with ideas for applying these findings in the high school English classroom.

## Methodology

This study is a qualitative investigation of high-achieving high school students' preferences for reading YA lit. The researchers for this study included a graduate student enrolled in a masters of arts in teaching program who was earning his initial licensure for teaching high school English and his advisor, an assistant professor of English and literacy education.

To collect data, the researchers conducted interviews with their participants, who were all current high school students. The participants were all enrolled in a South Carolina school district, and they were recruited using convenience sampling (Lunsford & Lunsford, 1996), which allowed the researchers to use their personal connections to contact participants. Specifically, the researchers used their connections in the school district and community to first ask the students or the parents of the students if they were willing to participate in this study. After a participant was identified and agreed to the study, both the participants and their parents signed an informed consent form since all participants were younger than 18. In total, this study included six participants who were all high-achieving secondary students, which is operationalized as being in an advanced placement (AP) or honors English course, and Table 1 provides additional information for the participants.

Table 1.  
*Participant Demographic and Academic Data*

Participant	Grade	Gender	Class Level	School Type
Haley	11th	Female	AP	Traditional Public High School
Paul	12th	Male	AP	Traditional Public High School
Lisa	10th	Female	Honors	Magnet School for the Arts & Sciences
Rhonda	10th	Female	Honors	Magnet School for the Arts & Sciences
Jody	11th	Female	Honors	Magnet School for the Arts & Sciences
Max	12th	Male	Honors	Magnet School for the Arts & Sciences

To begin the interviews, the researchers asked the participants to rank the appeal of four book synopses, which were representative of genres commonly found in YA lit and included:

1. *Social Media*. Caitlyn was always considered the good girl in school - good grades, yearbook team leader, captain of the swimming team. But now a misunderstood tweet sends it all crashing down around her. Others in the hall won't look her in the eye, and behind her back her friends are whispering that she might be racist. Even her teachers are treating her differently. Suddenly nobody seems to trust that she is the Caitlyn that they always knew. Can Caitlyn reestablish her name and get her life back on track?
2. *Culture & Religion*. It's hard to be different, but sometimes it's even harder to be friends with somebody who's different. Grace and Samira have been best friends since kindergarten, nearly inseparable, but now as she enters the 9th grade Samira has decided that she wants to follow the traditions of her family and begin covering her hair. She might not see how the eyes of the others have changed when they look at her, but Grace does, and now Grace has to make a decision that will affect their friendship forever.
3. *Dystopian*. "Access is Everything" or at least that's the motto of the newest Internet startup, "Kastle." Unlike their competitors "Kastle," recruits its staff members directly from high school, often before they've even graduated. Jemma just left her eleventh grade peers to join their team. But things don't seem quite right at "Kastle" as she soon stumbles

upon a secret, one that puts not only her job in jeopardy, but her life.

4. *Science Fiction*. In all our years of traveling worlds we never found life. Oh there were the little bacteria things on Europa, and the scientists said that once there was something on Mars. But that was all just in our solar-system, probably just some cross-contamination from asteroids or something. Beyond the sun it was all just rock and elements. But not anymore. On a routine scouting survey Elana has found something, something big, something that will change the universe, if it doesn't destroy it first.

Each participant ranked these synopses from most to least appealing. This ranking, in turn, provided a foundation that the participants often referred to throughout the interview. Following the ranking, the researchers used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) and follow-up questions to guide the interview. For each interview, the researchers took notes and digitally recorded each interview so it could be later transcribed.

To analyze the data, the researchers used an open-coding process to organize the data into meaningful, informational units (Strauss, 1987). To do so, one researcher first transcribed and then printed the transcription. He then notated all the words and phrases he felt constituted an in vivo code, which was any unit of language that contained meaning and was "directly from the participant's discourse" (Kus Saillard, 2011, para. 21). In addition, the researcher added sociologically constructed codes to the data that included any categories, labels, or constructs he identified within the data (Strauss, 1987), and Figure I shows how the data appeared at this point.

<p>T: Did she let you interpret the book at all?</p> <p>B: Kind of? It was kind of very, like, oh, <b>that's my interpretation, open up to the students</b>, and like, most of them would agree with her.</p> <p>G: Yeah</p> <p>B: And then it'd be like <b>mine</b>, and it'd be like, Oh... why do you do that? It's very, <b>it's very weird</b>.</p> <p>T: How did W address 1984?</p> <p>G: Um, we had <b>questions that went along with it</b>, so we were <b>discussing</b> it for a couple of weeks in class, and giving, like, <b>debating our interpretations</b> and stuff. Which was really cool except that you know... <b>when you are a junior you don't exactly want to participate</b>.</p>	<p>Difficulty with teaching style, estrangement</p> <p>Difficulty with teaching style, estrangement</p> <p>Difficulty with teaching style, discussion, debate, estrangement, shy/quiet, lack of power</p>
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Figure 1. An Excerpt of the Coded Interview Transcripts

In this example, the bolded words on the left are the in vivo codes, and the words on the right are the sociologically constructed codes. Next, because validity is a crucial element in determining the credibility of qualitative research (Morrow, 2005), the researcher who coded the data submitted it to the second researcher who acted as a member checker (Harper & Cole, 2012) to ensure the “accuracy, credibility and validity” (p. 1) of the first researcher’s coding. The second researcher read the transcripts without any codes, and he made memos, which were notes that recorded his thoughts, ideas, and responses to the data while reading it (Strauss, 1987). Next, the second researcher then compared his memos to the first researcher’s codes to identify differences and similarities of their reading of the data. Because coding qualitative research is a personal act in which researchers find meaning based on their own experiences and understandings of the phenomenon being studied (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), it was crucial for the researchers to then meet at this point and discuss the data. During that discussion, the researchers talked about their ideas regarding the data and how they analyzed it for meaning. As the researchers explained their interpretations to one another, they engaged in an iterative process to make meaning (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). This process resulted in the two researchers coming

to agree on a common meaning of the data. Once both researchers agreed to the meaning, the researcher who originally coded the data used those codes to create categories, which were then used to establish the themes that are shared in the findings section.

### Findings

In all, three main themes were identified based on the participants’ responses. When coding and categorizing the data into themes, the researchers found that the participants were still building the skills needed—both interpersonal and literary—to express their ideas fully. For example, they frequently referred to previously read YA lit to help them express ideas that were still coalescing in their minds. As such, the researchers chose to list the themes as a “something” to represent the development of these ideas. The following sections, therefore, explain these ideas as *something new*, *something authentic*, and *something that connects*.

### Something New

Across all interviews, the participants showed an interest in reading material that was new or exotic – books that pushed them into unexplored imaginative territory, articles that expanded the horizons of their knowledge, and epic poems that opened new and foreign worlds. They craved a



sense of variety and mystery. Lisa encapsulated this feeling when talking about the *Social Media* book synopses. “It’s cool,” she told the researchers, “because it’s something you don’t see everyday.” Other participants made similar comments. Jody, for example, spoke of her interest in world literature. “I want to know something about...somewhere else,” she said, “where I’m learning something new.” Of course not all of the participants shared the same taste in literature. Some expressed a preference for fantasy, while others liked books dealing with mythology, and even enjoyed non-fiction texts. Yet, all participants used similar language to express what they found appealing in their preferred books and genres.

To begin, all participants responded positively to books that swept them away from their high school setting into a world of intrigue and mystery. Because each of the interviews began with participants ranking the book synopses, the researchers recorded the participants’ sections. Of the synopses, the *Dystopian* book took place in a world that was particularly mysterious, a world in which a malicious organization was secretly recruiting students away from high school and immediately thrusting them into dire and dangerous circumstances. Five of the six participants selected it the most appealing, and Haley explained her choice: “It’s something different, besides things that I have to deal with. It’s something... that you don’t really see in our world.” Lisa added, “We have too much life. There’s just too much going on around us. We want to escape from it, so we go more towards the fantasy.” A novel that vicariously swept these students away from their commonplace life experiences appealed to them because it let them escape their day-to-day reality. It transported them, along with the characters, from their routines to the excitement of something new. However, that escape did not always necessitate something wildly different.

According to these participants, something new did not necessarily mean something impossible, or even implausible, just something new. Many of them expressed interest in reading about cultural issues or current events. The *Culture and Religion* synopsis dealt with the complexity of religious differences as a young adult, and one participant, Max, even went so far as to tell the researchers this would be his

number one choice among the four. Even Rhonda, although she generally expressed little interest in *Culture and Religion*, still commented that she liked it more than the book synopsis dealing with social media because “It’s not something I’m familiar with.” Although not originally picked as her top choice, the inclusion of a culture in that synopsis did appeal to her.

On the other hand, participants consistently expressed disappointment with books and articles that failed to present them with something new. For instance, the participants expressed a distinct reticence to read a book that had its basis in modern digital technology. The *Social Media* synopsis dealt with the pitfalls of navigating the social media landscape as a high school student, and every participant listed it as the book that they were least likely to read. Indeed, many referred to it with open disdain. “Tacky,” Lisa said. “If that’s the entire book, that’s just sad.” Max, when asked directly about it appearing in novels, said that the use of social media “gives it more of a trying to be hip and cool kind of feel.” That comment expresses a recurring concern that social media was being applied to books in superficial and predictable ways, which ran counter to the participants’ desire for something new. In fact, they were quick to recognize the appearance of social media in a novel as a warning sign. It signaled to them that the book was to be directly about their lives as high school students, a genre for which all of them expressed dislike. Rhonda explained, “It’s too much reality.” Jody said that she, “[doesn’t] like books that take place in high school...They’re cheesy...I see it every day.” Haley was perhaps the most vehement in her disapproval. “I don’t care about high school girls,” she said. “We’re incredibly boring, and horrible.” For these participants, novels set in high school were seen as commonplace; they failed to offer an element of newness.

### Something Authentic

Though these participants were seeking something new, they did not want YA lit to depart wildly or absurdly from certain essential expectations. Specifically, the YA lit had to include an authentic element. For example, the participants did not value the setting being in a modern high school; however, they saw value in relating to the protagonist. Or, if the protagonist

was an older character, the participants still expected the character to behave in ways that they found authentic and familiar. Indeed, the strenuous melding of something new with something relatable appeared to comprise the crucible in which interest was forged.

When asked to provide examples of this phenomenon, Paul identified it in John Green's *Looking for Alaska*. He first mentioned that though he did not ever attend boarding school (establishing the requisite of something new), he could still identify with the novel because, like the protagonist, if he had gone to boarding school, he also "wouldn't have been prepared to go." In this instance, the novel blended Paul's desires for new and exotic material with an essential familiarity via its protagonist.

In another example, Lisa found that blend in *Hamlet*. As compared to the participants' lives in contemporary American culture, medieval Denmark would have been a colder and darker place than a public high school. Certainly, the vision of Denmark that Shakespeare portrayed was fraught with more peril and death, but the participants still were able to identify elements of newness coupled with an authentic feel. To explain, Lisa was enamored by Shakespearean language and viewed it as something new, though it has existed for hundreds of years. Lisa commented, "The people [in her class] who didn't [use translators] were the only people who liked it [*Hamlet*]." She further explained that the language was real, authentic, and distinguished the play as being truly Shakespearean.

Furthermore, even with the story seeming outdated to Lisa, she and her classmates looked into the words themselves to find something new, which to them was the appeal of an antiquated language. Interestingly, for all the challenges due to the Shakespearean language and the play's setting, Lisa found authenticity in the characters. "Anyone could relate to [*Hamlet*]," Lisa said. "It had the characters. You know, there's always someone who gives you bad advice, there's always someone who gives you good advice, and there's always someone who lies to you. So I think a lot of people can relate to that." In this way, the archetype of characters combined with the universal themes found in the play made it authentic to Lisa. However, not all literary works were so favorably viewed by the participants.

Though it enjoyed popularity, the participants disparaged *Twilight* for the actions of the characters. Haley explained, "They made bad decisions...They didn't have common sense." Paul quickly echoed her sentiments, "I just couldn't picture it." Even with the decisions being viewed as poor by the participants, the larger disconnect was that they could not relate. "It's like there are really easy ways to solve things," Haley explained, "but you [the characters in *Twilight*] make it so much harder on yourself [characters in *Twilight*]." For her, *Twilight*'s characters were behaving in ways that were inauthentic, and it made the book unappealing, so much so that even the newness of the werewolves that became wildly popular could not sway these participants.

Beyond the characters' actions, the participants also found social media to be a mark for authenticity. Even with participants not selecting the synopsis that focused on social media, the participants did not preclude social media's appearance entirely from being desirable. In contemporary settings, modern technology was expected. While discussing social media in YA novels, Haley said, "It's [social media] part of our life. There's no way you can't incorporate that, eventually." Rhonda, speaking of the character Annabeth in *Percy Jackson*, told how "she's always...looking stuff up on her computer. And then they use their phones too." Then she adds, crucially, "But they don't write about it every single time." Lisa quickly chimed in to further clarify that point. "They're just using it, and that's fine." For these two readers, the incorporation of digital technology in the novel gave it the mark of authenticity, but the lack of focus on those things allowed the novel to be new and exciting.

### Something that Connects

Lastly, the participants sought to feel connected to YA lit. When they could relate to the decisions of the characters, they began to form bonds with them, bonds that could sometimes rival or even surpass those developed in their real lives. "I didn't have a lot of friends growing up," Haley told the researchers, "so I read books... What I did socially was read books and connect with the characters." Her words reveal that when the characters were viewed as authentic, she could form real relationships with

them that she valued. Haley went on to say that books are “sacred.” She repeated the word several times, revealing how this personal connection with characters extended into a spiritual connection with the texts themselves.

Reading is a unique human experience that can foster a sense of connection with a wider community. In this case, that connection was a rather simple matter to establish. Jody, for example, expressed that she “[liked] reading books that...[her] parents read.” She said she liked the discussion. Max also commented that he liked discussing books he read with his family. “I talk with my brother about *Waiting for Godot* and plays like that, because they were really interesting.” Still talking about his brother, he also expressed a desire to “[plant] that interest in the book.” Jody and Max’s comments illustrate that discussing the texts they read can create a positive loop in which both the interest of the book and their relationship with other readers grow. However, the participants were clear that the opposite of that loop exists as well.

Being forced to read and discuss a novel is a high-stakes moment for the participants. Some of the participants responded well to classroom discussions about a novel, while others did not. The participants who identified themselves as being quiet in the classroom expressed a reluctance to share their thoughts in a classroom environment that they perceived as being hostile. Paul talked about the dismay of “stating your opinions, and then knowing that the majority of the class doesn’t agree.” Far from developing a sense of connection, the class discussions are in this case creating a sense of estrangement. If the connection with a participant’s peer group can form a positive feedback loop that increases interest in a text, than estrangement could cause a negative reaction, turning readers away from a text.

### Implications

These findings reinforce that reading is a personal experience, a unique transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982). No matter if they are reading YA lit or canonical texts, the “somethings” identified by the researchers are each a different way that the participants engaged, interpreted, and read the text. As Rosenblatt (1982) explains, “Reading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving a

reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (p. 34). For the readers, the texts offered them ideas, experiences, characters, and other “somethings” that held meaning for them while completing their high school experience. For the YA lit and other texts referenced, the participants contextualized them to their lives in a new age, which resulted in the texts having renewed meaning. For English teachers, they can ignite this type of transaction by knowing their students and content deeply.

First and foremost, teachers can use anticipation guides, interest surveys, and other pre-reading strategies to research students’ reading preferences (Reading Rockets, 2015). Teachers can then use this information to select short stories, expository texts, novels, and YA lit for their students to read. By guiding their students to texts that will interest them, teachers can promote student engagement, and knowing their students’ preferences is crucial in making those suggestions (Ainley, Corrigan, & Richardson, 2005; Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012).

Second, providing students with a choice in selecting the texts they read might also promote engagement and transaction. Students choice increases their ownership and motivation for reading (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). Plus, choice is an important element for differentiating instruction, which makes the act of reading more personalized to students (Tomlinson, 2001). Even in situations where a curriculum is mandated and specific texts must be taught, teachers can supplement the required texts by offering students a choice of YA lit and short stories that thematically relate to the required texts. In this way, teachers can still meet the requirements while allowing students to choose which texts they wish to read.

Third, teachers can potentially increase student engagement with the text by utilizing technology. In this study, Paul explained why he felt discussing texts was a high-stakes moment for him. Teachers can reduce this type of anxiety and pressure with technology. For example, Cherner (2016) suggests using Google Docs as a tool for students to anonymously and in real time discuss a text with their peers. Or, teachers can simply have students post to a class website using a pseudonym that only the teachers can identify. In both instances, the traditional

classroom conversation has been removed while still providing students with the opportunity to share, discuss, and reflect on the text they read. In this way, students are still sharing the human experience by engaging and discussing literature, a “something” the participants valued.

### Conclusion

Reading is a personal act, and teachers must be cognizant of that. The participants in this study were all high-achieving students; yet, that does not mean that the findings and implications cannot be generalized back to multiple groups of

students. Rather, discovering the characteristics that interest high school students in reading and engaging a text is the teacher’s responsibility. The strategies named in the implications are only a stepping-stone, as teachers will gain more expertise in text engagement via professional development, continuing education, and classroom experience. The first step, however, is for teachers to know their students and provide opportunities that allow students power in selecting their texts and occasions for engaging with their peers.

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### Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Read the following book descriptions as though you were browsing them in the store or online, and these were the synopses on the back covers. Rank them in order of which would most appeal to you (with 1 being most appealing), and discuss your reasons for ranking.
2. Do you feel like you relate to the books that you read for school? If so, what aspects foster that connection?
3. What appeals to you in the books that you read outside of school, for your own pleasure? What do you gain from the novels that you read?
4. Do the books you read outside of school offer you something that the books you are required to read inside of school don't offer you? (Or vice versa)
5. What turns you away from a novel? What will discourage you from choosing it at the store or library? What will cause you to put it down unfinished?
6. Do you think the rise of social media has the power to change the novel? If so, how and why? If not, why not? Think about both content and form. Are there any examples of how social media is part of a recent book you read? (As an alternative, how is social media represented or part of the books you read?)
7. Do you think we live in a significantly different world from that of our parents and grandparents? How so?
8. Do you think your parents and teachers "get" the types of books you like to read? Why or why not?

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**Samuel Griffith** has taught abroad in both Morocco and Malaysia and has recently earned his Masters in Education from Coastal Carolina University. He now teaches English language arts at Columbia High School in Richland School District One.

**Todd Cherner** is an assistant professor in Portland State University's Graduate Teacher Education Program, focusing on secondary education. He received his PhD in 2012 from the University of Tennessee with a concentration in secondary education English, and a cognate in cultural studies in education. Previous to Portland State University, Todd was an assistant professor of English education in Coastal Carolina University's Masters of Arts in Teaching program. His professional focus is on technology and education, and he has expertise and interest in online education and digital literacy.

# Developing as Teachers: Using Popular Teacher Films and Reflection to Explore Teacher Beliefs

Kari Lee Siko Walters

Teacher identity continually changes and develops throughout the pre-service teacher experience (Cattley, 2007). This is especially true with the development of professional identity and pre-service teachers identifying themselves as teachers (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) discuss the role that teacher education plays in the identity development of pre-service teachers and reference Olsen's frame or analytic lens in reference to how pre-service teachers "integrate a range of influences, the necessary confronting of tensions and contradictions in their careers" (Olsen, 2008 cited in Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Bluestone (2000) points out that film is a useful tool in education to help provide a backdrop for discussion about identity development at the undergraduate level. Specifically, how many preservice teachers perceive a dichotomy of good teachers versus bad teachers.

The study delves into the attitudes of pre-service teachers who watched films and how those films impacted their teacher identity and beliefs of what makes "good" teachers and what makes "bad" teachers. Since teacher attitudes can vary widely based upon their experiences in different schools, it is important for teacher educators to help guide pre-service teachers through their identity development. Films provide a common platform for discussions amongst pre-service teachers about what makes teachers either good or bad; through teacher pedagogy, relationships, and everyday life. In this study, a cohort of pre-service secondary English participants watched four movies during the semester prior to student teaching, while taking an English methods course. During the semester, the cohort spent time reflecting, through both discussion and in writing, on their teacher identity and beliefs and how the films affected them. This article examines a small-scale study in which participants reactions to the films are analyzed along with two surveys and

class discussions to illustrate how the movies impacted the pre-service teachers.

## The Plan: Methodology

### Who and Where: Participants and Context

The study took place in a small, private university in the South. A cohort of pre-service secondary English education majors were the participants. There were five females in the cohort during the semester in which data was collected. Four of the five participants were between the ages 20-23 and one participant was aged 30. The 30 year old participant is a mother and wife, the other four participants are all single and without children. One candidate had transferred to the university from a large, land-grant university after her first year. All five candidates were working on their first undergraduate degree and initial teaching license. It was a deliberate choice of the researcher to have the study take place during the English methods course in order for self-reflection on identity to take place both within the course and in reaction to the films.

### What: Procedures

The semester prior to student teaching is a time when pre-service teachers begin to get serious about their future as a teacher. Pre-service teacher candidates are required to take a methodology course to ensure they have the proper pedagogical knowledge to teach their subject. During this semester, a cohort of pre-service secondary English teachers watched four films including *The Emperor's Club* (2002), *School of Rock* (2003), *Freedom Writers* (2007), and *Detachment* (2011). After each film, the pre-service teachers reflected in writing upon what they saw in the film that they liked, what they disliked, strengths and weaknesses of the teacher in the film, pedagogical approaches they would like to try,

teaching approaches that would never work in their own classrooms, and how watching the film affected their perspectives on becoming teachers. Participants turned each written reflection in to the researcher after each film. Additionally, the students participated in discussions after writing their reflections to share their thoughts with the others in the cohort. The researcher took field notes from the discussions regarding the films. Finally, a brief survey on teacher beliefs was given at both the beginning of the semester and at the end to see if the films impacted the pre-service teachers' beliefs. Participants answered a two-part survey regarding their beliefs about teaching at the beginning of the methods course. The survey questions included: "What do you think are the characteristics of a good teacher? How would you describe a good teacher?" "What do you think are the characteristics of a poor teacher? How would you describe a poor teacher?" The participants then watched the four movies [*The Emperor's Club* (2002), *School of Rock* (2003), *Freedom Writers* (2007), and *Detachment* (2011)] and wrote brief reflections on the movies. The reflections were focused on the following questions:

What did the teacher do that you liked? Why?

What did the teacher do that you did not like? Why?

What did the teacher do effectively?

What did the teacher do that was ineffective?

Would you try any of the instructional strategies in your own class? If so, what and how?

What motivated the teacher?

The participants then discussed their reactions to the movies in a group. After watching all four movies, the participants answered the two-part survey. Participants also wrote a brief reflection on their perceptions of how movies affected their teaching beliefs.

### What: The Films.

A brief synopsis of each of the movies watched and reflected on by the participants follows:

***The Emperor's Club* (2002).** A retired teacher, William Hundert, returns to the private school where he used to teach. Hundert recalls his past in which he tries to help a student. The decision he made years ago, haunts him to the current day. None of the participants had seen this movie before, yet all responded positively to the movie.

***School of Rock* (2003).** After being fired from his band, Dewey Finn takes on the role of a substitute teacher in the fourth grade at a private school in order to pay bills. A job taken simply for money turns into a mission to win a band competition when Finn discovers, through his unconventional methods, his students are not only smart, but also musically talented. Many of the participants had seen this movie before and, when introduced to it as part of this study, were skeptical. They had memories of a fun movie about music, not a movie that future teachers could learn something from.

***Freedom Writers* (2007).** This movie takes place in 1994 in California. A first year English teacher, Erin Gruwell, chose to teach at Woodrow Wilson High School because of a voluntary integration program. Many current teachers at the school feel as if the program has ruined the school and Gruwell is hated by many of the students she is asked to teach. Gruwell faces resistance from not only her students, but also the other teachers causing her to question her decision to become a teacher. The participants were most excited when we watched *Freedom Writers* (2007) since many of them had watched this movie while in middle and/or high school.

***Detachment* (2011).** This is a film that chronicles three weeks in the life of substitute teacher, Henry Barthes, and the teachers, administrators, and students he encounters at one school. Barthes' career as a substitute teacher is the perfect option for him so that he can stay detached from the world around him. During the three weeks, Barthes impacts

the lives of three women, and the film explores these relationships. This movie created the most discussion amongst the participants, as you will see in the Findings section.

### Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The first is the small sample size. The cohort of participants was limited by the small number of candidates enrolled in the English education program at a small, private university at the time of the data collection. Additionally, the movies used in the study are limited in number; therefore, different results and conclusions could be derived from different and/or more movies being used. Future studies could use not only popular films, but also teachers represented in popular television shows.

### What Happened: Findings

An examination of participants' reflections of the movies, in addition to the participants' answers to survey questions provides deeper insights into how preservice teachers develop their teacher identity and what makes teachers good and what makes teachers bad.

### Films

After watching the four movies, *The Emperor's Club* (2002), *School of Rock* (2003), *Freedom Writers* (2007), and *Detachment* (2011), participants wrote informal reflections in response to each movie. Additionally, group discussions about reactions to the movies were held to help participants process their reactions to the movies. An analysis of the participant responses below focuses on what participants identified as characteristics of good teachers or bad teachers.

### Good Teachers

In *The Emperor's Club* (2002), participants stated that while Kevin Line's character, William Hundert, knew his subject area content, he mainly used lower order thinking (mainly recall knowledge) in the classroom. Participants did note that the essays assigned to the student in the movie did require higher level thinking. In their reflections for the film, *School of Rock* (2003), one participant pointed out that Dewey Finn "tapped into each student's personal talent, did not leave anyone out." The

same student also said that Finn "validated the students who did not feel like they have purpose." Another student was impressed with Finn's passion and knowledge about his content (even if was not the content he was assigned to teach).

In the group discussion on the movie *School of Rock*, participants pointed out that Finn was "motivated by extrinsic forces (money), however his love of music is intrinsic (seeing others love what he loves – music)." This statement sparked a conversation about motivation for teachers – specifically why they go into teaching and what they want to get out of teaching. When asked about the teaching that occurred in the movie, one participant stated that "*School of Rock* surprised me because I was expecting no standards-based lessons (he's not a teacher, he can barely fake the curriculum when he's trying), but I saw them...he adjusted his assignments and assessments to individual aptitude and differentiated instruction." This participant and the others agreed that sometimes teachers need to take unique approaches to teaching in order to get students involved and learning. As preservice teachers, they all said they wanted to be a teacher who is able to connect with their students, and Finn is a great example of sometimes going outside of the lines to reach all students.

### Bad Teachers

Participants discussed that Hundert, in *The Emperor's Club* (2002), was not a perfect teacher. He humiliated students in front of the class, had obviously favorite students, and used his authority to intimidate the students. Additionally, participants recalled that Hundert was dishonest in his attempt to bolster one student's self-confidence. In their personal, informal reflections, the participants were more candid in their reflections. One candidate stated that Hundert "needed validation/ recognition for his teaching...was surprised on rejection of becoming headmaster." This candidate reflected that sometimes the need to be affirmed leads teachers to make errors in judgment, as shown through Hundert's treatment of one student, Bell, who cheats and yet is said to have won the Julius Caesar contest.



After watching *Freedom Writers* (2007), several said that this movie helped to motivate them to become teachers. However, when watching the movie through the eyes of a teacher, they found many problems with the protagonist, Erin Gruwell (played by Hillary Swank). One participant reflected, “I would not use many of her methods because I’m not a magical fairy for whom everything works on the first try.” Another participant said, “I loved her passion for her students; also worked against her – made her devalue other teachers’ abilities.” Another participant noted that “she doesn’t follow the chain of command; she would have been fired in real life.” These comments from the reflections, along with the group discussion, illustrate the cohort’s change of opinion with the movie.

After watching *Detachment* (2011), students shared their thoughts:

“What a cynical movie”

“Makes me feel like the world is terrible place”

“People with hope are beaten down throughout until end of the movie – you can’t turn the message around in that last minute”

“Metaphor - sadness and destruction is still there - but he is taking teacher role more at the end”

“Seriously uncomfortable throughout from - everything went to crap and stayed crap - except the narrator”

“Confusing movie - hopeless world view - self salvation and concept of redeemed girl does not make up for this view”

“Makes me rethink this whole thing (teaching) - are we going to change the world? Even help one kid?”

The discussion flowed similarly to the movie—very disjointed and confusing. Each participant would begin a thought, and another would interrupt and go off on another train of thought.

After the initial flow of ideas, participants began to put together thoughts that were a little more developed.

In their reflections, one participant focused on the main character, Henry Barthes’ (played by Adrien Brody, relationships with others. She said, “He did not know how to care for and take care of Erica and Meredith – there was never a relationship established.” Another stated that in his relationship with students, “Barthes tried to be a stereotypical teacher as savior through his interactions with Meredith,” a loner student, but “it cannot happen.” Throughout the movie, one participant stated that Barthes “is angry about society - he is passionate about how boring and lonely society is - but we do not see him attempting to build relationships” because of his position as a substitute teacher. Another participant pointed out that “Not all students were hopeless! One girl was put together - answering questions, put together - happy to be taught.” This was a bright spot in a movie that the participants found overall very depressing. Despite trying to be detached, by staying a substitute teacher who does not get involved, one participant pointed out in her reflection that “when he left - students wanted to be taught - students put up fronts - but they want to be educated.” This statement can be said of many high school students, trying to be “cool” by putting up fronts, and the movie did a good job showing the reality of many high schools. One participant stated that his “biggest flaw was not making the line clear between him and his students. He did not teach, but managed because he was a substitute, not a real teacher.” The preservice teachers were astute in noticing that there is a different between regular classroom teachers’ and substitute teachers’ approaches to both content and students.

Overall, the participants found the movie had a negative view of education with “students getting shut down” and “teachers who lost reason for teaching” and “teachers who are very depressed – lost” and the only positive teacher was the “druggie teacher who was a positive influence on others and he talked to students on their level.” While many participants felt depressed after watching the film, one participant said she is a “hopeless optimist.” She was “struggling to find something positive

about him. I wanted teacher savior, but we did not get it.” Many preservice teachers hope they will be savior-teachers, as stated by this participant, but that is not always an achievable goal. In fact, one participant asked, “How much should you care? How detached can you be and still be a good teacher?” These questions are important for preservice teachers to ask as they enter the classroom to help them develop their teacher identity.

Overall, the movies prompted the participants to think deeper about not only the movies, but also their overall beliefs about their teacher identity. Some participants focused on the content, instructional strategies, and

classroom management used in the films. Some movies helped the participants to reexamine their ideas of what teaching will be like, while other movies gave them the opportunity to reexamine their own teacher identity.

### Beliefs

Another approach to examining the effects that the films had on the preservice teachers’ identity is through comparison of their beliefs about characteristics of both “good” teachers and “bad” teachers before and after watching the four films. The two charts below contain a snapshot of the characteristics each participant listed initially and at the end of the semester:

**Table 1: Initial Beliefs**

	Characteristics of a Good teacher	Characteristics of a Bad teacher
Participant 1	Professionalism, flexibility, passion, sense of humor, genuine interest	Late, not knowledgeable of content, demeaning, low tolerance, not want to teach
Participant 2	Knows content, listens, tailors plans and instructions based on prior assessments	Focuses on content over student needs, does not listen
Participant 3	Knowledgeable, down to earth, genuine, prepared, creative, optimistic	Terse, judgmental, unoriginal, condescending
Participant 4	Creative, personable, encouraging	Critical, apathetic, incompetent
Participant 5	Care for students, belief in student achievements, desire to learn	Mentally/emotionally absent

**Table 2: End of Semester Beliefs**

	Characteristics of a Good teacher	Characteristics of a Bad teacher
Participant 1	Passion, flexible, knowledgeable, consistent	Too emotional, unrealistic, favoritism, mock students
Participant 2	Personally invested in students, knows content, believes in students	Not interested, thinks she is better than student
Participant 3	Creative, daring, passionate, motivated, innovative	Lazy, uncaring, content-centered, judgmental
Participant 4	Self-sacrificing, intentional, caring, wants students to succeed	Selfish motive, does not leave school stuff at school
Participant 5	Connecting with students, cares about whole student	Disengaged, apathetic, unprepared, does not connect with students

Comparing what participants said in their initial and final descriptions of good and bad teachers, it is clear to see the impact the movies had on the participants. Several comments, including lazy, selfish, disengaged, apathetic, and favoritism, are reminiscent of the discussions and reflections after each of the movies. Whether or not the participants acknowledge the impact the movies had on their beliefs about teachers, the researcher found a definite pattern that emerged from reflections and discussions.

### **Impact of Movies: Conclusions**

Participants were asked to describe the impact that watching the four popular films had on their beliefs about teachers as well as their teacher identity. One candidate stated that she “was able to see what qualities or characteristics I want to emulate in my own classroom.” She also said that she enjoyed “seeing classroom management practices outside of a textbook context” instead of just talking about it in classes. Another participant wrote that “all teachers want to be good – it is just a matter of weathering all (administration, disruptive behaviors, difficult students, unpleasant colleagues).” The participant who is a wife and mother commented that “teachers who put their students before the family are not always the best teachers” and that instead “teachers who help students create a passion for the content are more successful when they connect the content to the students’ lives.” This theme continued with another participant (who got engaged during the semester) who said “a good teacher does not have to neglect their own lives.” Both participants realized that balancing teaching and family is important. Other comments from the participants include that it is “important to know the students and connecting on their levels/interests” and that “students open up when teachers make lessons exciting and applicable to their lives.” One participant summarized it best when she stated that “all teachers want to be good – it how you resist and deal with distractions.”

### **Changes in Approach to Teaching**

When asked specifically about if the study changed their approach to teaching, one candidate stated, “After watching the movies, the teaching style I intended to have changed. I have gone from a more direct instructional

approach to an interactive, student-centered approach.” This candidate benefited from seeing a variety of non-traditional approaches to teaching. Another candidate, when asked if the movies impacted their approach to teaching said “...not much? Movies are fantasies, not reality. They’re formulaic, trope-filled, and unrealistic.” Acknowledging the need for producers to create entertaining movies through exaggeration kept this participant from opening up to possible lessons from the movies. Another participant said that the movies allowed her to “keep an image of the bad teacher before me to avoid it” and that she had “no real change, just reinforcement... I think the best way to reach students is to care for them as people to show that you are there to help them succeed.” While the movies may not have changed her approach to teaching directly, it did affect her when she said that she needs to “make sure I approach each class/lesson with the students’ needs in mind. Constantly checking my motives.” The idea of what motivates a teacher came up in the discussions and reflections for each of the four movies.

In summary, participants felt that the movies helped to reinforce prior beliefs. When teaching, they need to “care for a person to succeed” and they “cannot put career in front of family.” Additionally, they need to be “reflective on teachers’ relationships with students which will cause teachers to change and improve their teaching.” Finally, one candidate said “movies cause us to think critically about the teaching process – because it raises questions and thinking about teaching.” While they may not have taken away specific instructional strategies, approaches, or characteristics they want to emulate, the participants did evolve in their thinking about their teacher beliefs and teacher identity due to viewing and examining the movies. This study provided the opportunity for participants to reflect upon their teacher identities. Through the use of popular films, participants were able to examine both good teachers and bad teachers and consider what makes them so. Then, through written reflection and group discussion of each of the four films [*The Emperor’s Club* (2002), *School of Rock* (2003), *Freedom Writers* (2007), and *Detachment* (2011)], the candidates were able to delve deeper into the characteristics of both good and bad teachers and consider what that means to them as future teachers.

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**Kari Lee Siko Walters** is an Associate Professor of English Education at Charleston Southern University. She is a former middle and high school English teacher who now teaches preservice English teachers. Her research interests include using technology in the classroom and using technology to be more reflective.

# Inquiry Based Learning through Socratic Circles

Kathleen Clark

When I first started teaching middle school English Language Arts, I was constantly telling my students to stop talking. I wanted them to discuss what I was teaching, but only when I wanted them to discuss it. I knew we needed to find an appropriate outlet for them and a less frustrating forum for me. I am a firm believer in the theory that students learn best through discussion, but I was also having trouble with classroom management because all my students wanted to do was talk.

About halfway through my second year of teaching, my school began to encourage Socratic Seminar. I was familiar with this method; I had participated in them during my high school English classes, but I had never thought to try them out with middle school students. We did a series of professional development sessions on this topic, each time digging deeper. We even went so far as to practice, using scholarly articles covering the topics of deeper comprehension for students.

All this time, I was still struggling to find a structured way for my students to talk in the classroom. I had overcome the issue of classroom management problems, but I still didn't think I was giving my students enough quality time to talk. I also was teaching more and more English Language Learners (ELLs) and was told that they really needed to talk as much as possible to build their language knowledge base.

Finally, it all clicked in my head. If students *need* to talk; if students want to talk, why not let them talk and just structure the format in the way that I was comfortable with? Thus began my journey with implementing Socratic Circles, a modified version of Socratic Seminar as identified by Matt Copeland in his book *Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School*, into my classroom on a regular basis.

To say the journey was a challenge would be putting it mildly. There is much research about how to best go about conducting a seminar. It took many hours, multiple trial and error tests, the creation of some expectations on my own before I finally found what works best for me. But now instead of dreading the discussions in my classroom, I love to hear what will be said. My students continue to surprise and impress me with their intellect during these discussions. I honestly cannot imagine what I would do without Socratic Circles now that I have had a taste.

My class time has consistently been cut since my first year teaching due to initiatives and programs implemented by my school district. I have gone from 90 minutes a day to 55 minutes a day, but the one thing that I am holding on to like a life preserver is Socratic Circles. I have seen what it can do for a student's self-confidence, for their research skills, and for their conversation skills. If nothing else, my students can leave my class each year with the knowledge that they have mastered their inquiry and communication standards in an authentic way. Isn't that what the art of teaching is all about?

## Conducting Socratic Circles

Socratic circles can be adapted to different classrooms based on the amount of time a teacher wishes to devote to the activity. In a typical circle setting, the class is broken into two even groups. These groups take turn participating in the discussion. While one group is discussing, the other group is listening, taking notes, and waiting for their turn to discuss the topic at hand. Each round of discussion can last anywhere from 10-20 minutes with a brief break in the middle for the two groups to discuss the process and progress of the conversation.

Students from Group A are given a partner from Group B and this person serves as their coach. While Group A is actively participating in the discussion, Group B is taking notes and observing their partner's participation so that during the break, they can guide them to address ideas they may have missed, encourage them to keep up the hard work, and bring up points of discussion the other person may not have thought of.

There is a space for students from Group B to participate in the discussion if they just cannot manage to hold back their comments any longer and that is the "hot seat". The "hot seat" is a chair that remains empty as each group finds their seat, but once the circle has begun, any student not participating in the current circle's conversation may move into the "hot seat", speak their comment, and then go back to the outer circle and continue observing their partner. This seat is not meant to be a parking place for a student to remain, simply a landing pad in which a student waits for an appropriate time to speak, relates their comment, and then moves on.

I found it works best when I partner students because I know their strengths and weaknesses. It seems to be helpful for both students when a shy student is paired with someone who is more outgoing because they can both encourage each other. The shy student can remind their partner that other students need a chance to speak and encourage them to draw them into the conversation, whereas the student who has no fear of speaking can give their partner speaking points.

I also find it extremely useful to have my students follow along during the seminar with a Socratic Circle Participation Guide. This is simply a form that I created that highlights the following information for students:

- The standard being addressed during the seminar
- Space for a personal goal
- Space for an academic goal
- The expected number of times each student should speak

- The expected number of comments each student should make
- A space to take notes while they participate
- A space to take notes while their partner participates

Students, especially in middle school, need to have some sort of guide to follow in order to ensure they are focused. It is very easy to let your mind wander while someone else is speaking, but if you know there is an expectation, and you can clearly be reminded of the expectation because it is in front of you, focus becomes less of a challenge, and engagement increases.

Students are required to follow Socratic Circle rules and guidelines each time a circle is conducted. I do not serve as the teacher on Socratic Circle days. I am strictly there to be a timekeeper and observer. Students are both facilitators and participants. During each circle a different student is chosen to facilitate the conversation for the day by asking the guiding questions. They are responsible for keeping the conversation going, changing questions if the group has fully discussed one question, and drawing students into the conversation who may be timid or seem to be overlooked when the discussion is going.

Once the first group discusses the text in question for the set amount of time, there is a break for 3 minutes in which each person finds their partner for coaching. I allow students to own this time because I model for them what this break should look like before we ever begin conducting Socratic Circle.

After the partner break, the first group is sent back into the circle for their "last chance" discussion. This is when anyone who hasn't spoken is given their last chance to speak, questions and comments that have not been made yet are made, and connections are made. This round usually lasts a shorter amount of time than the first circle. As soon as the timer goes off, students know that is the indicator to switch: The second circle comes to the inside and begins their discussion. They may discuss topics that the first circle discussed, or they may choose to attack the text from a different angle. The second circle has a schedule that

mirrors the first circle's discussion with a partner break and a "last chance" discussion.

Once both circle's have had a chance to talk about the anchor text, one of the most important elements of our day occurs: reflection. Students are asked to reflect on their personal experience by answering a series of questions about how they feel they participated, if they made enough comments, if they asked any questions, if they involved others, if they had a personal connection to the text, etc. I also try to have students connect the topic for that day's circle to what we are learning in class or maybe even what they are learning in another class.

### **Expectation for Students:**

I believe that one key to the success of the circle is preparation. There can be no academic discussion of a shared text if the students have not prepared using the shared text. This realization led to the following expectations for students:

1. Read the text carefully 2 times
2. Highlight, underline, or circle important information, vocabulary, and notes that would add to the discussion
3. Write two Higher Order Thinking Questions (HOT Qs) that will stimulate conversation
4. Be prepared to speak multiple times

We reviewed these rules every day for two weeks before we ever had a seminar. I wanted to make sure each student knew the rules and was fully equipped to follow them. So, in addition to reviewing the rules each day, I shaped mini-lessons around each of the rules to model how students should go about following these guidelines.

One of the mini-lessons was focused on writing a HOT Q. We came up with the following guidelines as a class to help us write HOT Qs:

- Must be open ended
- Cannot be a "yes" or "no" question

- Should encourage healthy debate
- May not be able to be answered or agreed upon

The final component was teaching students how to speak in a Socratic Circle format. It is difficult for students to speak in a format that does not require hands to be raised and a teacher to call on them. It was also critical to teach the students in the outer circle that their role was just as important as those sitting around the inner circle; their observations and comments to partners were key elements to their partner's success. I tried to keep the rules to a minimum because it is a known fact that students, especially middle school students, do best with a smaller number of rules to follow. The following are the rules for each Circle:

1. Only one person speaks at a time
2. All comments are made in a polite manner
3. Allow peers to have speaking time
4. No sleeping, eating, drawing, or outside conversations while Seminar is happening
5. The "hot seat" may only be used 2 times per person, per Seminar

### **The Role of the Teacher**

One of the most difficult aspects of Socratic Circle is abiding by the role of the teacher. The teacher should not be talking during Socratic Circle. The purpose of this is to have students engage themselves as the facilitators and participants. As teachers, we want to immerse ourselves in the conversation, asking questions or guiding attention to that which students may not see. Sometimes during a circle discussion, students will seem to get so off topic or go in a completely different direction than I had intended when I assigned the text, but I have found that is when the most authentic conversations happen.

I often find myself sitting back with my jaw open as I listen to the incredible ideas coming out of the mouths of my students. Students

who are usually the most successful when it comes to Socratic Circles are the ones who tend to stand back in class and do not always seem to be the top performers on tests or quizzes. When you break down the barriers of traditional education, those students who are looking for their niche will shine.

So, the role of the teacher is to sit back, listen, and take in the genuinely astounding conversation that occurs. I have a class roster that I use for each seminar and on that, I keep track of each comment and question a student makes. It is always great for students to see how many times they are speaking during a circle, and this is a form of documentation when it comes to assessing Communication standards.

### **Inquiry Based Learning**

The concept of inquiry based learning is nothing new, but has become quite popular as of late in the field of education. Gone are the days of traditional lecture, note taking, and tests. It is now the expectation that students are learning through asking questions, posing hypotheses, and discovering outcomes. This line of thinking correlates directly with Socratic Circle.

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When a teacher is tasked with the chore of growing inquirers, finding a starting point can seem daunting. Knowing that this method, assigning students a shared text to read and then allowing them to discover the rest of the information, is available to teachers truly helps in the planning process. I, for one, am thrilled to know that I can use this tool to promote multiple facets of English to my students. I am having students read various texts (in some cases multiple texts at a time), I am growing inquirers, and I am encouraging academic discussions facilitated by students.

It is truly phenomenal to experience Socratic Circle as a teacher. If you are looking for a place to start, I would encourage you to find a high interest, engaging text that will motivate students to form an opinion. In a world where technology is becoming more and more prevalent and genuine conversation is going more by the wayside, it is imperative that teachers promote and interweave this method. Technology is fantastic and certainly has its place, but it cannot replace the art of conversation.

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**Kathleen Clark** is a South Carolina native, born and raised in the low country. She has been teaching in the same district she graduated from for six years. She is very involved in her local community and school, sponsoring clubs, sports and activities and volunteering at her church when able. In her free time she enjoys spending time with her husband and beautiful dog, reading young adult literature, and working a second job.



# Secondary Rainbow Reading: Text Comprehension Through Color Annotations

Heather Ford

Nearly all teachers in today's education system have been taught that individual students have individual needs. That is a given. A teacher's job is to discover how to pluralize their lesson plans to incorporate the varying needs of her students. Addressing varying learning styles is a great way to involve students in the classroom dynamic. Felder and Henriques (1995) imply that "students learn in many ways, by seeing and hearing; reflecting and acting; reasoning logically and intuitively; memorizing and visualizing." Whereas many teachers would debate the "memorizing" portion of that statement, the rest is valid. As a ninth grade English teacher, it is a daily challenge to design lessons that educate, enlighten, and entertain. Looking at the individualities of my students, I have found that synchronizing both the visual and kinesthetic learning styles through color and annotation can accommodate all three of my daily challenge goals.

In 1999, a study was done with findings supporting that when color was incorporated in reading techniques, students performed better at comprehension. "Learners who studied in color-coded formats obtained higher test scores on a multiple-choice test than learners who studied conventional formats" (Kalyuga et al., 1999). Yet, color-coding goes beyond using colored highlighters. In fact, students tend to use highlighters in the wrong way. They highlight everything without distinguishing the important parts from the non-essential. This is why I came up with a way to annotate text with purpose. Annotation is a tool teachers can teach students to allow them to engage actively with a text. "Annotating helps readers reach a deeper level of engagement and promotes active reading. It makes the reader's dialogue with the text a visible record of the thoughts

that emerge while making sense of the reading" (Porter-O'Donnell, 2004).

As a ninth grade English teacher, I introduce my students to the joy of annotating in a couple of different ways. First, I choose a short story that has a lot of figurative language and story elements in it, for example, "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut. Before reading the story, we do a lesson on examples of figurative language to frontload the information. I share the text with my students either by hard copy, or have them download the text onto their tablets via Google Classroom onto Microsoft OneNote. Next, we do an initial shared reading of the text in which I read it aloud and model proper fluency and tone. Students enjoy this because they experience a text read with emotion and clarity which is unlike the monotone reading habits many students fall into. Initially, I do not want them to make annotations. After students get into a good habit of and become proficient in the skill, they should be able to annotate while reading a text.

Once the initial shared reading is complete, we, as a class, create a color key. It is democratically decided what colors correspond to which examples of figurative language or story element (i.e. red = simile, green = imagery, orange = setting, blue = characterization). Why do I use colors? Oddly enough, I came up with the idea while trying to help my 9 year old autistic son increase his reading comprehension. He loves colors and they help him with attention deficit. Colors are prevalent in everyday life to draw attention to things, such as road signs or directional signals. Autistic children "are more looking to the color than the shapes...colors such as yellow, blue, and green or color overlay are used in cognitive theory of multimedia which has been proven to be effective in improving

Figure 1

# Harrison Bergeron

Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

exposition

Setting

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April, for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter.<sup>1</sup> Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas.

A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic like bandits from a burglar alarm.

"That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did," said Hazel.

"Huh!" said George.

"That dance—it was nice," said Hazel.

"Yup," said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good—no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights<sup>2</sup> and bags of birdshot,<sup>3</sup> and

Harrison taken to jail

vigilance  
is alert attention, watchfulness

main characters

characterization

My opinion of society so far is that it is very controlled, and no one is able to think for themselves.

#### DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 1–17. Cite specific details that support your answer in 20ff. What is your opinion of the society so far?

personification

simile

#### Analyze Visuals

Examine the image of the television announcer and the picture behind him. What does this painting suggest about television?

1. **transmitter:** an electronic device for broadcasting radio signals.
2. **sashweights:** lead weights used in some kinds of windows to keep them from falling shut when raised.
3. **birdshot:** tiny lead pellets made to be loaded in shotgun shells.

Detail of *TV-Announcer* (1962), Charles Farns-Hall. Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 28", 65cm x 71 cm. © Charles Farns-Hall.

Methods that Matter

reading and attention accuracy” (Omar & Bidin, 2015). In an age when many students struggle with attention and reading comprehension, I deduced that I could use the same strategy with my college prep students.

After a color key is created, now is the time to pick apart the text, label and identify examples of figurative language and story elements, and make inferences about the text in the margins. I model how to do the label and identifications until the halfway point in the story (See Fig. 1). As we discuss the story, I have students answer questions asked by the textbook and by me. They answer the questions or give their interpretations of a paragraph in the margins. By using Microsoft OneNote, students can type or “write” all over the text using the various designated colors. Once completed, students save their annotations to their computer drive and then upload it to an assignment which I generate on Google Classroom. I usually grade based on 1) completion of annotations, 2) color-coded correctly, 3) proper use of margins, and 4) correct inferences made. Readers use the margins to make predictions, inferences, state their opinions, and or reflect on the text.

I found that students really enjoy this activity. Not only does the color-coding keep students’ attentions, the kinesthetic activity allows students to use a tactile activity. I have dubbed the activity “Rainbow Reading” which may sound like an elementary nickname, but students understand its purpose and realize early on that it is not as easy as the name. Doing Rainbow Reading goes way beyond the normal “let’s highlight everything and not understand its purpose” syndrome that many student face when trying to learn reading comprehension strategies. Now do not get me wrong, some students resist the annotation strategy. However, test scores increased between the “Harrison Bergeron” story and the previous short story we read. Why? I believe that Rainbow Reading changes the way students comprehend the text; “because annotating slows the reading down, students discover and uncover ideas that would not have emerged otherwise” (Porter-O’Donnell, 2004). Such discovery is crucial to an increase in reading comprehension and making students actively involved in their learning.

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**Heather Ford** has been teaching English at Beaufort High School for the last three years, and was previously a reading tutor at Beaufort Middle School. She has a B.A. in English, an M.A.T. in Secondary Classroom from Kaplan University, and is completing a M.Ed. in Teaching at the University of South Carolina. Heather strives to become a literacy coach one day, but for now is teaching 9th grade English and Mythology.

# Conferring with Young Readers

Ashley Beaumont

Imagine the feeling it would give your students if you sat and talked with them about their reading progress every week. Telling them how proud you are and how wonderful they are doing at their job of being a reader might be the most joyful part of their day. Just sitting down and talking to a child about life and how it relates to their individual growth in reading might be the only one-on-one positive conversation that child has had with an adult. Imagine the building blocks of learning that would start for each of your students if you just took two to three minutes to confer with them every week and consider how it might change their educational future and relationship with reading.

Unfortunately, conferring does not happen frequently enough during reading blocks in classrooms. Teachers are asked to cram multiple standards, life lessons, behavior management, and plenty more into seven hours a day over the course of 180 school days, and conferring with young students about their reading is often pushed to the side. Children as young as kindergarten are being taught to read at a first grade level, or higher, in order to successfully pass and be ready for the next school year. While students may be able to do this, teachers are feeling the pressure of the multiple tasks at hand.

During my first year of teaching kindergarten, I had a student who was extremely behind, academically and developmentally. He had moved from another state and did not attend preschool. While the majority of my students were already able to read a level A book on the first day, he could not find his name to make his lunch choice or even speak in a complete sentence, let alone distinguish between letters and words. Needless to say, he was in a reading group by himself. Through this experience, I quickly learned the importance of conferring in order to boost his love for reading and teach strategies that worked best for him as a reader. We both learned a lot about each other in those quick two to three minutes every day, and I realized the kind of teacher I wanted to be.

According to research, conferring should happen with a handful of different students each day. The most beneficial time a student has in their years of school is when they work one-on-one with teachers. As Miller (2014) encouraged, “When we confer with students, we’re not standing above them or even learning over, we’re sitting right beside them, shoulder to shoulder. We’re digging deeper now, working hard to individualize our instruction and support children as they apply what we’ve taught them in large and small group settings” (p. 1). You might be asking yourself, “Well, what about the other kids in my class?” While the other twenty something students are not getting to confer with you each day, they will have their time.

Purposeful conferring is a result of trial and error, preparation, practice, and follow-up. Effective teachers should consider goals for each young reader then teach students to learn how to make their own goals based off of your weekly conferences. By doing this, teachers are able to meet each student individually as a reader, teach important goal setting skills, incorporate individual best-practice strategies, and learn students’ interests. If you’re still questioning whether to confer with readers or contemplating whether you have the time, put yourself in their shoes. Would you rather have a rich conversation when you’re made to feel proud of your accomplishments or be part of a group where you clearly realize there’s a learning difference between you and others and nothing is being done about it?

Whether you teach kindergarten, upper elementary, or even high school, there should be time set aside to confer with readers. So how can we do this? How can teachers make conferring a part of their day when there is so much incorporated in those precious seven hours? As teachers, we work in one of the remaining fields where we are isolated from other co-workers for the majority of our day so it can be hard to ask for help, learn new ways of teaching, and get out of our comfort zone. Teachers need to consider what’s important and even consider the dreaded but ever present change of instruction.

### What Should Conferring Look Like?

Whether you use the Daily 5 system, Lucy Calkin's Reader's Workshop, or any other best-practice structure for fostering reading, you should try conferring with an open mind and realize it's probably not going to work the first day the way you imagined. If you start this process in kindergarten, you have to remember that most young readers may not have any experience with reading or conversing back and forth with an adult. Too often, young children are not given opportunities to share their experiences, interests, or feelings on subjects. On the first day of conferring, you may not hold a rigorous and philosophical conversation with your reader, but you can begin slowly and teach your students how to converse. Holding a 5-10 minute long conversation is unrealistic but just like their stamina practice, it will increase with time. These conversations may begin teacher directed but will eventually end with you talking less and listening more to your reader. However, you should always compliment, build, and provide readers with developmentally appropriate strategies, by keeping the individual learner in mind, which will help them move from one reading level to the next.

Aside from adequate time and practice, another conferring concept is for certain; most children appreciate their teachers and typically want to be as close to them as possible. When conferring with beginner and advanced readers, teachers and students should sit side by side so they feel like they're a part of the conversation. I remember being very young and sitting on my dad's lap while he read to me. Remembering the conversation I had during these times established the foundation for my love of reading today. Teachers should want to give their students those same experiences because some students may lack positive relationships or sufficient time to read at home. Students need to leave the conference feeling successful, knowledgeable, and encouraged to continue their reading growth with you.

### Making Time and Being Organized

While conferring, it's important to learn and try different tools. Keeping up-to-date running records, anecdotal notes, formal and informal assessments, and past conferring records is encouraged when reflecting on individual student progress, planning for individual needs, and providing evidence of direct instruction. There is an overflow of conferring toolkit

examples on the internet for teachers to use and tweak, but it's best to find something that fits your personal style of teaching. However, keep in mind that useful conferring tools should indicate when you're meeting with each student, the timeframe in which you met, the current reading level of the student, strategies they are currently using, and strategies to teach.

At my school, we use Lucy Calkin's Readers Workshop. I start off with the daily mini-lesson provided by this reading curriculum, then we break into three rotations (read to self, partner reading, work stations). During these three rotations, I work with guided reading groups and confer with other students. It took a lot of practice and trial and error to find a system that works best for me and my class. Teachers may have to consider changing their typical way of doing things in order to incorporate conferring into their daily schedule. It's not going to be easy, but it's going to be worth it in the end.

### Practicing Feedback

During one of my conferring meetings with a student recently, I felt like I was helping her realize the great things she was accomplishing. This particular student struggles with "telling true stories" and staying on topic during conversations, so conferring with her hasn't been easy, but that day I really felt like I was getting somewhere. You know at the end of the Super Bowl when all of the confetti pours out of nowhere and everyone is smiling and cheering? That's how I felt, and it seemed like she felt the same way! She was staring right into my eyes, and I could tell from her body language that she was taking in everything I was saying. I kept telling her, "WOW! You are really doing an amazing job!" and "You used your pointing power and picture power so well today!" Needless to say, my "Super Bowl" feeling came to a screeching halt when she randomly started talking about her baby brother who doesn't exist and her favorite TV show, *Peppa Pig*. As I stated before, conferring may not be the easiest for every student, and honestly, we never know what children are going to say. This is when I start to think, "Why am I even bothering because I don't have time for this?" But it does matter, and I do have time for this, and so do you.

Providing feedback to students should be individualized because there's clearly no cookie cutter reader response. Feedback is conversing with students about their performance and

should be about talking *with* them and not *at* them. Your conversation should be genuine and authentic, not scripted. Most importantly, feedback should drive instruction and move it forward. Suggesting the next steps, providing support, setting goals, and asking what the reader thinks about your comments and strategies are essential elements in ensuring your feedback is beneficial and not redundant. Furthermore, the student should mirror your feedback. Checking to see whether the reader is following through and applying your suggestions is an educational opportunity for you as the teacher to see whether or not your conferences are constructive. The foundation of teaching reading is to help students develop a love for it and not fight with it. Remembering this has also helped me during difficult conferring times.

### **Explain, Model, and Practice the Strategies**

At the beginning of the school year, we practice the procedures of our reading block and our jobs during this time. I grit my teeth and smile during the entire month of September when I pull up the “stamina chart” on the SMART Board day after day and walk around with timer in hand, observing students. “Let’s try and make it to 2 minutes of read to self today!” I announce with enthusiasm, but the practice is worth it in the end. It’s important to teach your students that they have a job and just like all jobs; they need to work at it every day.

During this time, the reading strategies provided should be explained, modeled, and practiced. Students cannot successfully learn if instruction is not explained, modeled appropriately, and then practiced excessively by your students. Kids can’t read our mind and shouldn’t be disciplined for not knowing how to do something if the time isn’t provided to effectively teach a skill. Whole group instruction needs to be connected to individual teaching strategies, and conferences should build upon those whole group lessons and be

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modified for each learner. It’s also important to consider how much your student is talking during the conferences. There should be a balance between teacher explanation of the skill being taught and student explanation of the understanding they have for the particular skill. Once the conversation ends on a positive note, you can begin to create goals together.

### **Love Conferring**

Students should want to come to school every day because they enjoy it, feel important, and feel safe. Conferring is one way to accomplish all of this and more by creating a positive relationship with your students. Conferring can also be fun and satisfying for the teacher as well. I have found that one of my favorite parts of this job is having conversations with students so I can see my instruction in action. I love watching them read to self, sitting on the floor or in a corner, working hard at figuring out a challenging word, overhearing their conversations with partners, and hearing the positive feedback from parents about their reading at home. Conferring is challenging, yes, and so is the change you will have to make to incorporate this in your classroom. But to me, the benefits of conferring outweigh the challenges a hundred times over. I would rather change everything I know about my day than give up conferring.

Conferring keeps this job interesting, and when I see student growth, it reassures my career choice. With all of the hardships we face on a daily and yearly basis, finding the good and holding on to it gets me through the tough times. So, consider your purpose and plan your conferences throughout your day. Ideally, all teachers share the same common goals, and that’s to educate and inspire their students. We work hard every day to ensure that our students learn to love learning as much as we do. Make conferring a part of your day, and your students will thank you for it by choosing to read more, and you will thank yourself for it in the end as well.

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**Ashley Beaumont** is a kindergarten teacher. She graduated from Francis Marion University in 2011 and is currently attending graduate school at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. She loves her job and has a huge passion for reading. Kindergarten is such an exciting grade level to teach because children grow so quickly and truly build a love for school. She loves learning and hopes to grow more as a teacher to better her students.

# Best-Selling Author, Beverly Jenkins, Writes for Teens

Tiffany A. Flowers



Beverly Jenkins, author of *Belle* and *Josephine*, is touted as the premiere writer of African American historical romance fiction. Some of her accolades include various national and international awards in literary fiction. She has been featured in publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *People*. Mrs. Jenkins has been a speaker at many prestigious universities, colleges, and literary festivals. Her books offer fresh alternatives for those who work with teens and young adults and want to provide them with diverse and well-developed characters. Mrs. Jenkins' work is a great choice for read alouds, book clubs, novel study, and independent reading. Author Beverly Jenkins loves to visit schools and talk with students about writing.

## What do you enjoy most about being a writer?

What I enjoy most about being a writer is hearing from the readers. Getting to be home in my pjs is nice as well.

## Why did you begin writing for teens?

I wrote my two teen books at the request of my publisher, HarperCollins.

## What do you want teachers to know about your writing?

Teachers should know that my teen books are age appropriate and may offer their students and some teachers a look at 19th century African American life that is rarely showcased.

## How would you like to see your books used in schools?

My books have been used as all school reads for middle school students and have been used in both English and History classes from middle school through graduate school.

## Do your fans write to you about your young adult novels? If so, what is the reaction?

I did get a tremendous amount of mail following the publication of the teen books. Most of them were letters thanking me for writing a story they could relate to and that opened their eyes to how great history can be when viewed through the eyes of a novel.

## What are some of your titles for teens?

There are only two teen titles – both are historical fiction. *Belle* and *Josephine*

## Where can teachers find your work?

My work is widely distributed and can be ordered online or in bookstores.

**Tiffany A. Flowers** is an Assistant Professor of Education at Georgia State University Perimeter College. She is an Indiana Minority Faculty Fellow, Frederick Douglass Teaching Fellow, and an NCTE Early Career Award Leadership Award Recipient. Her research interests include Literature, Traditional Literacy, Diversity Issues in Education, African American Literacy Development, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.





# Pecking Order Is Real

*Dawn Mitchell*

Back in early spring when the ground cover of pasture grass and clover greened up and bloomed and the air warmed up to a beautiful sixty five degrees, we tilled our garden and took a good look at our ladies' parlour. We cleaned out the nesting boxes and added new straw like we do every week, and I decided it needed a fresh coat of barn red paint and maybe some flowers for the girls to enjoy. Greg added a load of pine mulch, and we let our four hens out to free range in the yard. They had a spring in their step like they knew the season had changed and pecked happily here, there, and everywhere...well, everywhere except the garden. We had the girls guard the edges of our freshly planted rows to keep the seed-snatchers out of our flower and vegetable beds. Our son, Eli, followed Dolly, Henrietta, Gertie-Mae, and little Pearl around clucking and acting like a five year old boy behind them.

When we took a look at our ladies we realized that they were getting older. We bought six mature Golden Comet hens two years ago, and we had lost two to old age. We realized in addition to sprucing up the place, we also needed to add some new life to the hen house. We researched which breeds would be best and were excited to add two fluffy feathered, full bodied grey and white Barred Rocks, Naomi and Tammy Faye, two small, silky feathered Rhode Island Reds, Ruby and Jolene, and two beautiful, black oil slick colored Australorps, Merlelina and Loretta.

We brought them home one Saturday morning in the bed of Greg's truck in a clucking crate. We just knew that our girls would be excited to meet their new feathered friends. We read that our new hens would need some time to adjust to their surroundings and to acclimate to the ladies' parlour, claiming a nesting box before we let them loose to free range. While we had hoped for a warm welcome, we certainly weren't prepared for the vicious attack that we witnessed.

Within minutes after opening the crate and letting our new ladies out they made their way straight to the feeder, full of fresh grain Eli had filled up for them. Of course, they were hungry, and I know myself after a long trip to a new place a little Scooby snack as our family likes to call it, goes a long way to help settle your stomach and help you feel better about things. Well, they never even got a taste. Henrietta rushed the feeder and began poufing out her feathers, puffing up her chest, and chicken screaming... Yes, chickens scream. Henrietta had never screamed like that. Mainly she clucks, cute little contented clucks when she is happily pecking grain or even an excited little screech of a cluck when the gate is opened for free range. This, though, was an other-worldly sound that came out of this sweet chicken's throat. It scared us to death. It was a wonder that poor Loretta didn't keel over dead right then and there.

We didn't know what to do. We were in shock. The poor chickens came out of the crate and whenever they tried to go into the hen house or anywhere near the food or water, they were viciously pecked, chased, and screamed at in a fuss of feathers. Who are these hens? Greg immediately said, "Girls, now that's no way to treat our guests. There's plenty of food to go around." He hollered for Eli to go get a cup of feed and he guided him to spreading more out on the ground where the new chickens were. Well, that didn't go over so well.

Not only was Henrietta still large and in charge of the stationary feeder but now Gertie-Mae and Pearl got in on the bullying, beating little Ruby and Jolene to the pile of food and squawking so hard the feathers on their neck stood out. Our Hannah Faith said, "Mama it looks like they are saying bad words at them." Well, I don't speak chicken but it definitely didn't seem like words of welcome to me either. I scolded the girls and told them right quick that we would not have any of this. This was a LADIES PARLOUR and we needed to act like

ladies. We will be kind and caring and we will get along. Lily Grace chimed in and cold stared Henrietta down telling her, "Sharing is caring, Henrietta!"

It didn't do a bit of good. For the next two days we were on high alert hen watch. The first night the new hens had to roost outside on the door hinge because they weren't let in. The next day they were mercilessly pecked when they went in the hen house to lay. All throughout Saturday our activities were punctuated by the sound of Henrietta's screaming. Mercy! We begged them to show grace to each other. We let the new chickens out and held them, stroking their feathers and speaking soothing words to them. I smiled to myself as I heard Lily Grace whisper to little Jolene the words of Aibileen from *The Help*... "You are smart, You are kind, You are important." Bless it.

My mother rode over on the golf cart and witnessed an especially brutal air attack of Henrietta on Tammy Faye, running her away from her sneak sideways attempt at a mid-morning snack. Mama said, "Well, by God I won't have this. She then proceeded to re-name our four original hens Chicken Dinner, Chicken Nugget, Chicken Pot Pie, and Chicken Liver. She said, "Well, how do you like that girls?! You can be nice or you can be dinner!"

I decided to do a little research to figure out what to do. When in doubt, read it out. I consulted some online resources and a book we had on keeping chickens and learned about pecking order. It is real and it is instinctual. According to the Modern Farmer blog that I frequently visit for backyard farmer tips, "The pecking order is, literally, determined by pecking. Bigger, stronger, and more aggressive chickens bully their way to the top of the flock by pecking the others into submission with their pointy beaks. First they strut about, fluff their feathers, and squawk, but if that doesn't get the point across, they peck. It can get violent. Sometimes blood is drawn; occasionally, the opponent is killed." Good Lord!

We learned from further reading that once the pecking order is established and understood by all in the parlour, then the chickens settle down and acclimate to the hierarchy of their social organization. We watched this unfold before our own eyes. Once Henrietta let everyone know that yes, she is large and in charge, then

she backed off and the other hens were able to eat, drink, and finally they were let in the hen house to lay eggs and to roost at night. Greg breathed a sigh of relief when we checked on them and saw all ten cozied up together roosting, feather touching feather, clucking lightly to each other as they settled into sleep.

Something still didn't set right with me though. I didn't like what I saw. It bothered me and as I kept reflecting on it, I realized why. While it may be instinctual for chickens to pull rank and establish their pecking order, it shouldn't be in humans. The mean hen behavior reminded me of some mean girl behavior I'd seen in my classrooms. When I was pondering this I realized pecking order is real, and it isn't just in the ladies' parlour... It's in our classrooms. It's in our families. It's in our churches. It's in our groups and organizations. It's everywhere.

*Webster's Dictionary* defines pecking order as, "The way in which people or things in a group or organization are placed in a series of levels with different importance or status." I've seen painful pecking of first year teachers when they stretched their necks out to ask for help from their colleagues in their grade level. Hurtful words hurled at them such as "Well, you will figure it out." "I didn't have anyone to help me." "Good luck with that." I've heard of newcomers at church given the skeptical once-over when they didn't worship in the same way or heaven-forbid sat in the wrong pew. In my own class I saw new kids purposefully chosen last on the playground. I've seen mothers together at Target engaging in group mentality as they criticized another mother's buggy full of shoeless, snotty nosed offspring. They could've been mine or yours on any given day when we needed cold medicine or diapers, but when we are together, we tend to be meaner, more self-righteous.

In a conversation with a friend about this, she shared with me that the psychological term for this behavior is "othering." It's when we intentionally or unintentionally classify those outside of the group as deserving of scorn or criticism at worst and as "less than" at best. I realized that pecking order wasn't just behavior I had witnessed as a teacher, as a church member, as a friend. To get at the hard truth the Holy Spirit was hitting my heart with, I had to

be honest and recognize that I have also been Henrietta. I may have not stretched my neck and crowed a chicken screech but I have been guilty of judging others that I did not know, have been guilty of assuming what another mouth told but I'd never seen or heard myself. I have guarded territory that I realized later was never mind to guard.

It's easy to see this behavior in others. In our own family of three children the old adage, "Two's company and three's a crowd," has proven true many times when Lily would push her way in front of Hannah and Eli to be first in line for lunch, the swing set, or the sprinkler. I've seen it when Hannah and Lily would lock Eli out when they were trying to play without their

little brother and he would stand at the door, face flushed from crying, hot tears coursing down his cheeks saying, "Let me in." We have all felt that when we've been pecked, or left out, or "othered", or whatever word you want to use to name the feeling of being ostracized...not because of what you've done, but because of who you aren't.

The lesson learned for me is we need to be kinder hens. When the instinct is to protect and to guard, to build walls and to keep out, we have to submit ourselves, not to fear and power, but to service and to love. We need to open our arms, lower our chins, soften our faces with a sincere smile and with actions that say, "Welcome, you belong here too."



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**Dawn Johnson Mitchell** *Through her family Dawn Johnson Mitchell has developed a keen love for reading, writing, and storytelling. She has spent more than fifteen years working with public school students, parents, and teachers in literacy instruction through her work at the Spartanburg Writing Project, Furman University's Teacher to Teacher Program, and in Spartanburg School District Six. When she is not teaching you can find her most days outside with her husband and three children in the garden or on a hiking trail, or in a good book.*

# Kate: A Short Story About Real Life

Erin Donovan

The two stood by the fire. They were too close and it burned their faces. They looked at each other and nodded. They threw the crumpled piece of paper into its blazing grave.

They called her Lessie at school. No one wanted to be seen with her. She ate alone, read alone, and walked home alone. No one dared beat her up because she had shown more than once she could take on anyone who dared to challenge her physically. No, the bullying took place through hushed whispers, snickers, silly notes written by a circle of girls who seemed to take great delight in writing on Kate's locker with lipstick.

But Kate didn't care. She didn't understand why the world made her look and dress a certain way. She never understood why everyone wanted her to be something she wasn't. After all, she really liked herself and she liked herself just the ways she was, as she spent her days running around the woods outside her Colorado home. She would scale to the top of the tallest rock she could find and felt the sun warm her ruddy face. But the best times in her life were when her brother allowed her to scramble after him as he smiled, ruffling her hair, watching the world slowly turn in front of his eyes.

Kate and Kevin were inseparable. Even though Kevin was ten years older, he treated his little sister like the little brother he had always wanted, and she loved it. After school he would come home and find her knee deep in some sort of mud experiment. Still covered in her work, he would drag her into whatever adventure he had dreamed up for the day.

Kevin was the exact opposite of what Kate would turn out to be. He was popular, an athlete, and the love of every 10th grade girl.

But like his little sister, he just wasn't into that sort of thing. He drank in life and it streamed out of his very being. He was a showoff and everyone loved him for it. Even when his odd little sister would tag along, Kevin's friends would tolerate her just for the opportunity to be with Kevin. He was the apple of his parents' eyes and it seemed it was easier for them to deal with their odd daughter as long as they could show off their perfect son.

It was on Kevin's 17th birthday that things changed. The boys took him out for a joy ride to celebrate his "manhood." It was never called murder but when his limp body passed through the halls of the hospital, it had a blood alcohol content that could only be described as lethal. Sure there were lots of questions and the inquiry took on a very serious tone, especially when Kevin's parents got their lawyer involved, but at the end of the day convicting the four most promising athletes of anything other than bad judgment just wasn't going to happen. Of the four who were in the car that night, three went to college together. One dropped out after his first semester, both out of school and society. The other two went on to live pretty normal lives although they never returned to their hometown and reportedly never talked about what actually happened that night. The other boy, the only one who stayed at home and didn't go to college, committed suicide the night before graduation. Only Kate knew what really happened. Before pulling the trigger and ending his life, the fourth boy wrote Kate a letter. It came in the mail with no return address, in a simple white envelope. It was addressed to: Kevin's Sister

*To Kevin's Sister,*

*I know you don't know me or anything but I was with your brother the night he died. I figured that if you were ever going to know the truth you'd hear it from me. Kevin was my best friend but to be honest there was a lot of jealousy around school. You know how it was with him, everyone like him and man, he was good at everything. I think that jealousy got the best of them, and I was dumb enough to believe that they were telling the truth when they told me they were planning a birthday prank. I never tried to stop them. I was just as guilty as the rest. I went along with everything.*

*We picked Kevin up that night and I knew we were going to get him really drunk. See he didn't drink or nothing and I think that made the other boys mad, cause it made it seem like he was better than them. So we took him out and one of the boys brought a bunch of booze. We told him we was going out in the woods and we was going get right drunk. Kevin kinda laughed and said, "You guys can have my share cause I'm all about watching you make fools out of yourselves." Well, I think that was kinda the wrong thing to say. One of the guys, the guy in charge of all this, got real mad. Anyway, we got to the clearing and we all started drinking. Kevin just had soda only he didn't know that Adam was stuffing those sodas with ruffies and before you know it Kevin was passed out cold. Well one of the other guys started pouring alcohol down his throat saying stuff like that'll serve you right. Kevin started vomiting but he was pretty much doing it while he was unconscious. Adam started yelling at him. Then he started punching him. At that point, the rest of us knew this was all going too far and we tried to pull Adam off Kevin. Adam looked at him and spit straight in his face. Then he kicked him real hard in the ribs and jumped in the car and we had to chase after him to even get in. He had this look in his eyes. I was afraid to do anything to cross him. I think we all were. He drove for a while and one of the other boys said, "O.k., joke's over. Let's go back and get him." Adam just kept driving. It's that look he had in his eyes that keeps me up at night. It's that look I see in my nightmares. He made us all promise to never say anything. If we did, he would kill us and we all knew he meant it.*

*Listen I wish I could tell you your brother had a different death than he did. But I just thought you deserved the truth. I'm so sorry. Use this letter as evidence, do whatever you want. I held my end of the bargain. I'm going to face the justice I deserve. I hope someday you can pray for me but I understand if you can't.*

*Samuel*

Kevin was her world and he was the only one who ever made it ok to just be Kate. Adam took that away from her. She wasn't planning to take the letter to the police. The letter was hers. She alone knew the secret of that night and she would keep it with her until she got her own revenge. She vowed no matter how long it took to hurt Adam just the way he had hurt her. Whatever it took. Adam Johnston.

So Kate went along being Kate. But she went to school each day, slouching down to hide from life. Her spiky brown hair and round black glasses probably didn't help her image issues at school, but Kate couldn't have cared less. She had no time for the stupid girls and their stupid games that seemed to define the school day. The more she ignored them, the angrier they got.

She bought a new pair of boots that she loved. They were black, big, and bulky. She loved stomping around her house, turning up her music and just letting her soul shine. That morning with her shined boots on, she took a

deep breath and headed off to school. The day passed and soon she found herself eating her usual lunch, slumped in her usual corner. Kate barely tolerated the crap that passed for food at this school and let out a little smile when she remembered the jokes that Kevin used to make about having string hair for lunch or turd on a bun. Kevin always said that he loved her smile. One day when she and Kevin were running around their woods, fighting the invisible enemy with sticks and rocks, she stopped to breathe in the world around her. She couldn't help but smile. He turned around and said, "You know, you have the greatest smile in the world. Don't ever let anyone take that away." That day at the lunch table, she secretly smiled her little smile and promised to bottle up that moment.

"What are you doing freak?" The voice of the ignorant brought her back to reality.

"Look at this loser. Why are you sitting here all by yourself smiling?"

"Oh I know why she's smiling," said another ignorant. "Look at her fancy boots. Her

girlfriend must have bought those for her.”

Kate could feel the tears push against the backs of her eyes. She bit her lip hard and swore to herself that she wouldn’t cry.

“What’s wrong sweetie? Did we hit a sore spot? Did you and your girlfriend break up?”

Kate’s nails dug into her palms.

“I heard she’s just as big of a wimp as her brother. I mean he couldn’t even take his alcohol. What a loser!”

Time stopped. When Kate thought back to what happened. Every second seemed to go by in her head like she was walking in Jell-O. She picked up her tray and threw the leftover food right in the girl’s face. All the chatter in the lunch room stopped and people stared. The girl wiped the spaghetti out of her face as her friends were egging her on to fight. But she was saying nothing; her eyes were painted with fear.

Kate grabbed the girl and pushed her to the ground. She started to hit her face again and again and again. The girl was fighting back but only in self-defense. She clawed at Kate’s face. Kate stood her ground and felt no pain. She punched her one final time, with every bit of rage she had ever felt and as she punched her, she heard the satisfying crack of bone.

The two girls sat in the principal’s office. They were separated on each side of the office. Sonya had an icepack on her broken nose and an ambulance was on its way. There was blood all over her perfect outfit. Kate sat in her corner, glasses broken, with a huge scratch on the side of her face, still bleeding. She hoped it would make a cool scar and refused every bit of medical attention they tried to give her. She sat like a stone, her eyes fixed to the red wooden apple Principal McMillan had on her desk. Principal McMillan strolled into her office, outfitted in her usual navy blue shirt and jacket. Her face betrayed nothing. She looked at both of the girls in a sort of I’m not here to judge you, I just want to talk to you sort of way. She took a deep breath, “Ok Sonya, can you give us a minute. Just step outside and then I’ll listen to your side.” Sonya looked at her with this what are you kidding, I’m the one whose bleeding look. Kate kept her gaze fixed on the apple, letting nothing detract her from her target. Sonya got up in a huff and left. After a moment, the principal opened her mouth. “So little Kate,

how are we doing?”

Kate did not reply.

Her silence did nothing to shake Principal McMillan. “So you’ve had quite a time lately.” When Kate didn’t respond, the principal continued. “I don’t think any of us could ever imagine how it’s been for you. It’s like you lost part of yourself. It’s like half of you is gone.”

Kate shifted her steel glance from the apple to the woman’s eyes. How could she know? How could this person in a suit know how she felt?

“I never lost anyone like that. I’ll tell you a secret though. I’m not sure that I ever really had someone like that to begin with. You were lucky to have him if only for a very small moment in your life.

The two stared at each other as if they were seeing their image in a mirror, just discovering at this moment that the image was looking back.

“But you know Kate,” the principal continued, “even though I am very sad about your brother, what I am more concerned about is you. You know I’ve watched you. I’ve watched you slink around the halls, sit by yourself at lunch, and just generally try to make yourself invisible.”

Kate looked at her wide eye now. How did she know? A slow tear left her eye. She was ashamed.

Principal McMillan sucked her cheeks in and took a deep breath.

“Oh Kate! I feel we’re failing you. You know, I really don’t know you but I guess I just see so much of myself in you. I know how it feels to be invisible, to hope no one notices you. I promised myself I would never overlook someone like you and here we are...you and I and a broken nose.” She said, nodding her head toward the direction of the door. “So what am I to do? You know what, here is your punishment. Kate you need to find your voice.”

Kate’s brows knitted together. She still had not said a word. She looked down at her fingers, knuckles turning white after being clenched in fists for so long.

“I didn’t mean to hurt her. It was just...” Kate said. Her first words. Her first words in so long.

“I know. You were pushed too hard. When you are so used to not fighting back and someone pushes you in a corner like that, well sometimes you just don’t have a choice. You

did what you had to do. I can't punish you for that. I can't even blame you for that. What I can do is give you space to find your voice, just like I said. Kate, you need to find a way to express yourself, tell the world your story without ending up with blood on your knuckles." Ashamed, Kate stuck her hands under her legs.

"Here." Principal McMillan handed her a small black notebook. "Your punishment is to write in this journal every night. You don't have to turn it in or anything. It's not like a school assignment." She stopped to think as she looked up to the ceiling covered in water-stained tiles. "It's like a soul assignment. I want you to give yourself a place to feel something, a place to scream at the world. That's what this book should be to you." The principal held out the little book to her and Kate just looked at her.

"Well it's not going to fly over there by itself. Take it."

Kate almost let a smile go but stopped herself by scrunching her face up and sticking her hand out. She grabbed the book and held it close against her.

The principal seemed to be waiting for something, a thank you, a refusal, anything. When she didn't get it she just said. "Ok then, go on with you, and no more fighting Kate. I mean it, next time I might, oh I don't know, make you do a painting project."

This time Kate couldn't help it; a giggle escaped her lips and she smiled her little smile.

"Be careful with that smile now, someone might think you're not taking your punishment seriously." The principal smiled back. She stood up and walked around her desk.

"Oh yeah, one more thing, I'm always here. You know they don't let me leave." This time Kate gave her a full tooth grin and the principal smiled back although Kate noticed she looked a little sad in her eyes.

She opened the door escorting Kate out and pointing to Sonya, motioning for her to come inside. "Ok Miss Johnston, let's hear your side."

That name made Kate stop in her tracks. "What's your name?"

"Sonya, you idiot. Don't you know that? Everyone knows that." The principal seemingly ignored this comment and looked at her watch.

"No, you're last name."

Principal McMillan answered "Johnston. In fact I think your brothers were friends."

The two girls locked eyes and Kate replied, "No. My brother would never be friends with a person like him." Sonya rolled her eyes and trounced into the principal's office. The door closed and Kate clutched the book tighter and tighter. No smile, no joy—only a glazed look and a clear idea of what the book would be used for. It was time to plan revenge.

It started simply enough. Kate immersed herself in Sonya's schedule so she would know where she would be at each moment of the school day. It wasn't hard. Kate was still invisible. She watched and wrote and waited. Sonya was easy to follow because she was one of those girls who seem to act as if being seen, even being seen with a broken nose and two black eyes, was her main purpose in life. She announced her presence with a flip of her hair, a smack of her lips. Kate would roll her eyes with a disbelieving smirk. How stupid was this girl? Taking her down wouldn't take much. She strutted from boy to boy, friendship to friendship, never caring who she stepped on or who she hurt in the process. Kate found herself writing about her every night. And the more she wrote, the more she perfected her plan.

Kate started by dropping anonymous notes to the popular girls. They ranged from fake love letters from Sonya to their boyfriends to notes spreading rumors about the girls that received them. Secrets that only an invisible girl could hear swelled around the school. Soon Sonya's herd began to turn. Kate watched Sonya take her tray to the popular table only to have her friends ignore her. She pretended it didn't bother her. She just rolled her eyes and smacked her lips and tried to engage a less popular girl in conversation.

Before long, Sonya, just like Kate, sat alone in the cafeteria every day at lunch. The strain of losing everything was beginning to show in Sonya's appearance. She was no longer quite as pretty, quite as put together, quite as confident. As her face healed, what was left the place of a broken nose and black eyes, was the mark of shame. Sonya didn't know what was going on. At first she thought it would go away. When that didn't happen, it wasn't long before she just kind of gave up. She was absent a lot, stopped dressing up, and started to disappear. Just like Kate.

Kate on the other hand, rushed home each day laughing as she wrote about Sonya's

newest humiliation. She was starting to feel vindication, and even power. That was until Principal McMillan called her in one day, just to check up. She sat down across from her and was hit by that mirror image. The principal's sad eyes met hers and Kate felt ashamed.

"So how is the punishment going?"

Kate was a little confused. She had forgotten that the book was given to her as a punishment. In fact, she had forgotten altogether what the book was really for.

The principal was quick to remind her. "Oh I am so disappointed! I'd thought you would have so much to say that you would be begging me for another one by now."

Kate looked down at her lap.

"Are things any better?" McMillan asked, truly caring about the response.

"Well. I guess things aren't so bad."

"You know. I realize you two aren't exactly friends, but it seems Ms. Johnston's situation is not quite so rosy. Do you know anything about that?"

"Well. Like you said, we're not really friends."

"Maybe you should work on changing that. It really seems like she might need a good friend right now."

Kate went home that night and reread the letter. How could she ever be friends with the sister of the boy who killed her brother? Tears burned her eyes. She thought back to McMillan's kindness and thought about how Sonya had looked that day in the cafeteria, alone in a corner, staring at her empty tray. Just like Kate.

As Kate had basically memorized Sonya's life, it was easy to follow her home. About a block from her house, Kate crossed the street and cleared her throat as she got close to Sonya. She spun around and was face to face with Kate.

"What do you want? Are you going to hit me again? Listen, just leave me alone."

Kate started. "I'm sorry I broke your nose."

Sonya just stared at her. Tears broke loose and she replied, wiping her running nose on the back of her sleeve. "I know this may sound crazy but that was like the nicest thing anyone has said to me in a long time."

"Well, maybe if you weren't so mean all the time, you would have more friends."

The old Sonya popped back and said, "Well aren't you the expert!"

Kate promised herself that no matter what, she was going to go through with her plan. No matter what Sonya said or did.

"I'm not here to fight or insult you. I just need you to read something ok?"

"Umm, I don't know what you've heard but I don't swing that way."

"Sonya, please don't make this harder on me. Please just listen. It's my fault your friends don't like you. I started the rumors."

Sonya's cheeks went red and she started to reach for Kate's neck as if she was going to strangle her. Kate caught her hands and squeezed her wrists until Sonya pulled them away, trying to rub the soreness away.

Kate continued. "I did it for revenge. I didn't know how else to hurt your brother."

"My brother? What's going on? What's this all about?"

"I need you to read something. It's the only way to make you understand why I did what I did."

Sonya cocked her head to one side as if measuring Kate, figuring out if she could be trusted.

"Please."

Sonya dropped her glance to the floor and nodded her head yes.

The two girls sat on top of the rock as Sonya finished reading Samuel's letter. Her eyes were red from crying. She started to say something but Kate stopped her.

"When I go this letter I was just so mad. You can't understand what my brother meant to me. He was the only one in the world who loved me. When he was taken from me and then I found out who did it....well, I had to do something about it."

"We have to tell the police. I can find my brother. I'll turn him in."

"But it won't bring my brother back. Listen, I'm not looking for a solution here. I guess I just wanted someone else to know."

Sonya looked at Kate in a way she had never looked at anyone else before. She felt a mixture of shame and pity and deep sadness. She threw her arms around Kate and squeezed. Kate's small tears wet her shoulder as her sobs melted her soul.

No one ever read the letter. The girls made



sure of that. For some reason, they felt better returning Samuel's confession to him through the smoke rings that rose to the sky greeting his tired soul. The two went on to live their lives although they never really spoke again, the sadness of reality was just too much for the both of them. But their lives changed because of a moment they spent together; a moment

they both felt the humanity of the other.

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**Erin Donovan** is an educator who has been writing for her students for the past decade. She is inspired by those kids who have stories which have not been told and may be at times, difficult to tell. She researches topics which directly impact the k-12 student and pre-service teachers, hoping to add her voice and unique approach to the field of education