

*From the Special Interest Group Network on Adolescent Literacy (SIGNAL)*

# The Key to Transforming Student Reading: Honor Stories that Students Value

by Matthew G. Skillen and Shanetia P. Clark



Matthew Skillen

Preservice teachers headed for the upper grades spend a lot of time imagining what will transpire in their future classrooms. Some may retreat to their experiences in middle and high school. Others may recall their field experiences, which may have provided them limited interactions with young people. Fortunately, we have discovered that there is a genuine curiosity and interest among preservice teachers in exploring how adolescent literature will impact their students. Our advice is simple: discover and honor the stories that students value. What follows are three examples of how our preservice teachers used or supported valued texts.



Shanetia Clark

## Encouraging Honest Discovery

Within our teacher education programs, we have flexibility in introducing different adolescent genres to our rising teachers. These opportunities for deep exploration are initially met with resistance or hesitation. However, every-so-often, these explorations yield a moment of discovery for our students.

One such instance involves a preservice teacher named Shanon<sup>1</sup> and *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson (2002). After a rough week at a junior placement, Shanon was at a loss on how to plan for a remedial reading class at a local high school. She found a copy of Mikaelson's book on her instructor's bookshelf and read the entire book in one night. That weekend, Shanon drove to the closest bookstore to buy thirteen copies of the text for her students. During the next six weeks, Shanon was seen rereading the text, marking up her own copy with notes in the margins—chronicling the connections she was making in the text prior to writing her lesson plans. Shanon's enthusiasm was contagious.

The twelve young men in her class were clearly captivated by the Cole Mathews' journey through recovery and reconciliation. When Shanon was facing the greatest challenge in her fledgling career, she integrated a piece of literature that she thought would inspire her students. Through honest discovery, where great literature met opportunity, Shanon facilitated a series of meaningful learning experiences to her students.



In the business of the normal school year, we don't usually take the time to discover and introduce new literature to our students. Perhaps we should.

## The Brutal Truth

Amy's<sup>2</sup> story is another episode that encourages us to keep students imagining new realities. Throughout her education coursework, she explored ways to integrate various texts. Personal histories with these texts were celebrated. She made connections to her own life experiences and wondered what could happen with "real students."

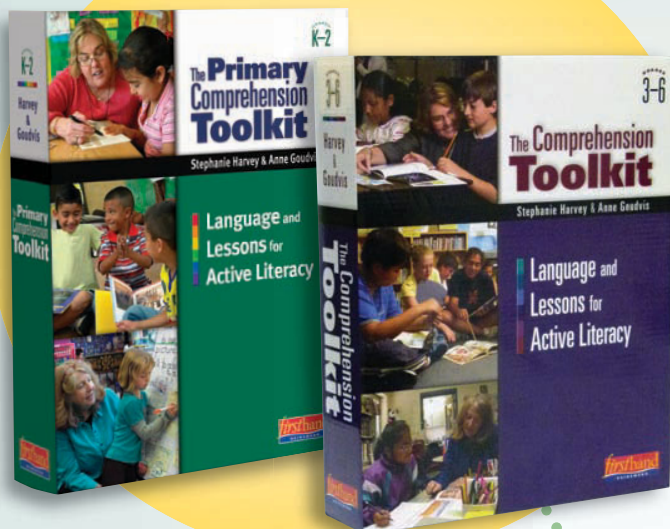
Amy took this reflection to another level. Following the model of "text talks" from her adolescent literature course, she invited her students to select novels and then explore why they should be "valued." These texts would be shared during what she called "Text Talk Tuesday." One of her students, Carlos<sup>3</sup>, was having difficulty choosing a book for his presentation. Recalling a provocative book from her coursework, Amy gave him Alex Sanchez' *Bait* (2009). She felt that the book, which has a compelling Latino male character named Diego, would capture Carlos' attention.

*continued on page 10*

1. A pseudonym has been used to protect this preservice teacher's identity.
2. Again, in order to protect this teacher's identity, a pseudonym is used.
3. "Carlos" is a pseudonym for this student.

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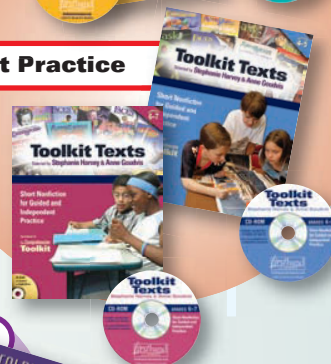
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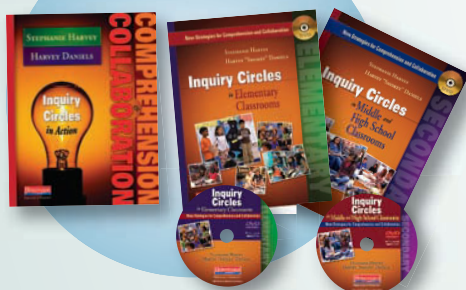
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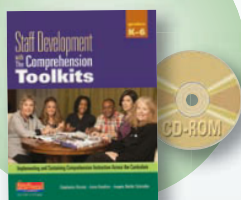
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## About SIGNAL

The Special Interest Group Network on Adolescent Literacy (SIGNAL) is an organization dedicated to bringing young adults and books together. For information on membership and subscription to *Signal Journal*, go to <http://signal.kennesaw.edu>.

We encourage preservice teachers to explore the NCTE Anti-Censorship Center, which includes resources, such as guidelines to consider when choosing materials for English classes. Additionally, we direct them to read about the experiences of others published in professional journals like *The SIGNAL Journal*, which often prints manuscripts that provide advice on how to incorporate challenged texts in a classroom.

## Works Cited

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Scroggins, W. (2010, September 17). Filthy books demeaning to republic education. *News-Leader*. Retrieved from <http://www.news-leader.com/article/20100918/OPINIONS02/112020001/Filthy-books-demeaning-Republic-education>

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Amy had heard Carlos (like Diego) was a cutter. The signs revealed themselves to her: he wore long sleeves on hot days, was withdrawn, and expressed being depressed in a variety of ways. Carlos had emotional and physical scars that mirrored Diego's wounds. Carlos devoured *Bait*. For the first time, Carlos made his reading public! He read during breaks in class; he read during lunch; he read during homeroom. Carlos read wherever and whenever he could. Amy revealed that prior to getting *Bait* he had been a reluctant reader, never wanting to read...ever.

In class, Carlos explained that *Bait* should be valued because opening up makes you feel better and that talking is one way to make you feel better (Cleveland, personal communication, May 9, 2011). Carlos bravely explained why Diego would cut himself; he shared that the character was sexually abused as a young boy and even started to question his own sexuality. At this point, different boys in the class started to mutter the words "fag" and "gay," but Carlos remained steadfast. Diego had no outlet to deal with what happened to him; thus, he resorted to anger and cutting. The conviction with which Carlos spoke, defending this fictitious character, indicated that he could empathize and even identify with him (Cleveland, personal communication, May 9, 2011). Here power of "giving the right book to the right person at the right time" is revealed.

The beautifully brutal truth is that literature changes lives. Amy, who now teaches eighth grade English in an urban district, will never be the same. She witnessed the juxtaposition of her role as teacher and the awesome power of adolescent texts. Carlos has been transformed. He is unashamed to

make his reading public and became a stronger person. The classmates who had muttered the derogatory words changed their thinking and behavior after Carlos' impassioned advocacy. In fact, they raced to borrow *Bait*, and it remained the most passed around book of that year.

## Challenging Resources

One area that we were not adequately prepared for when we entered the field was how to address challenges to reading material in our classrooms. If we encourage future language arts teachers to include literature that illustrates raw emotions and real-life conflict, we should also prepare them for what could happen if others do not see value in these texts.

Nearly a year ago, an op-ed piece in Missouri's *News-Leader* was written to warn parents and students of several titles that the writer considered "soft-core porn" (Scroggins, 2010). The editorial was written as the local school board was reviewing the books. One title named in the editorial, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999), received a ground swell of national support from the adolescent literature community. Within a matter of a few days, primarily through social media, thousands of supporters directed their voices to that local school district and presented a compelling case to allow the book to remain available to teachers and students.

The writer of the editorial was uninformed about Anderson's work, which is a story about rape and clearly not a pornographic novel. Nevertheless, this case serves as a great lesson. If these young teachers are so bold to include titles like *Speak* in their lesson plans, they should be ready to defend their choice if they encounter a challenge from a member of the community.

