

# The Prevalence or Absence of Attention to Adolescent Literature in the Initial Preparation of Secondary Content Teachers

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This study examined uses of adolescent literature included secondary teacher preparation in English, math, science, and social studies education at 12 institutions. Analyses revealed programs emphasized adolescent literature in a variety of ways and most often in courses for English majors. Only two institutions required that prospective math, science, and social studies teachers take literacy courses. References to adolescent literature in syllabi other than English /literacy education courses were almost nonexistent. Adolescent literature was primarily used (a) to ensure knowledge of texts, (b) to address issues of diversity in the classroom, and (c) as a means of effective classroom instruction.

The diversity of today's classrooms combined with the need to develop high school students' reading and writing skills requires literacy be a concern for secondary teachers across content areas (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 2000). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and International Reading Association (IRA) value incorporating adolescent literature in the content area classroom to support continual literacy development of secondary students (Kaywell, 2001; NCTE/IRA, 2009).

Using adolescent literature in content area classrooms has been encouraged because it engages students and provides focus and coherence to content area instruction (Van Middendorp & Lee, 1994). Young adult trade books are excellent resources for content area instruction because the clear and engaging style generates a stronger appeal for the content, and

they often provide detailed and more current information than textbooks (Schallert & Roser, 2004). Also, the variety of available trade books creates opportunities to differentiate instructional material for student needs and tends to generate higher levels of interest and motivation in students (Armbruster, 1991; Schallert & Roser, 2004) Finally, Wolk (2009) argues that adolescent literature can help teach social responsibility by using plot based ethical dilemmas to discuss culture and prejudice. Trade books make viable tools for instruction in the secondary content area.

Preservice teachers of secondary English are often required to have specific training in teaching of adolescent literature (Kaywell, 2001). Often, universities offer entire courses devoted to the instruction of young adult literature. Recently, teacher education programs have begun to develop and require courses which

focus on literacy in the other content areas; however, many preservice teachers outside of English reject the idea of teaching literacy within the content area (Moje, 2008). Research does indicate that adolescent literature can be used for specific purposes in the content areas of history, mathematics and science (Albright, 2002; Daisey, 1995; Fry, 2009). Age appropriate trade books can teach both historical content and multicultural sensitivity (Fry, 2009), can be used to generate lively classroom discussions about historical events (Van Middendorp & Lee, 1994), and can stimulate higher order thinking (Albright, 2002).

Using adolescent literature in teaching mathematics and science can allow students to construct their own learning and to vicariously experience science and math processes (Daisey, 2004). In addition trade books generate positive attitudes towards science and math and can be used effectively to launch mathematical investigations (Daisey, 2004; Martinie, Marcoux, & Stramel, 2005; Wallace, Clark, & Cheery, 2006).

Teacher educators have been encouraged to advocate the use of adolescent literature and to employ approaches such as literature circles and read-alouds in the content areas (Alger, 2007; Daisey, 1995; Kane & Rule, 2004). Course work which promotes the use of literacy strategies in content areas has been successful with preservice teachers (Algers, 2007); however, the degree to which adolescent literature is emphasized across content areas in secondary teacher education preparation programs is under investigated. The purpose of this study was to examine the uses of adolescent literature in secondary teacher preparation programs across one state. Specifically the following question was addressed: How do secondary teacher preparation programs in Georgia address the use of adolescent literature in content area classrooms?

## **Methodology**

This research is based on data collected as part of a larger study addressing the teaching of reading in one state's teacher preparation programs at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels (Many, 2007) using a stratified random sample based on types of institutions (research, state, regional; public, private) and types of program (undergraduate or graduate certification). The final sample for this study included secondary teacher preparation programs at 12 colleges and universities (2 research schools, 7 regional/state schools, 3 private colleges). Five programs were at the graduate level, three institutions had programs that were bachelors of science degrees in education, and four universities' programs were designed as bachelors of arts degrees in content areas with initial certification tracks.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection focused primarily on document analyses of syllabi, followed by requests for elaboration on program content through questionnaires and interviews. First, program contacts were asked to provide any of the following: (a) syllabi of reading/literacy courses; (b) syllabi of methods or practicum courses in any area which included literacy related concepts and processes, or (c) any other documents which might provide pertinent information. Initially, 60 artifacts were collected from the secondary programs with only a few institutions submitting any mathematics, science or social studies education course syllabi. Follow up requests through e-mail and phone calls and searches on the internet focused on obtaining syllabi from methods courses and from practicum experiences. As shown in Table 1, the final number of documents examined included 121 syllabi.

A constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) established thematic categories of interest. After the initial analysis, requests to

**Table 1 Syllabi Collected By Content Area And Course Type**

Course Type	Content Area			
	English	Math	Social Studies	Science
Literacy	16	2	2	2
Methods	20	14	15	14
Practicum	9	6	5	6
Young Adult Literature	6	--	--	--
Total	51	24	22	24

complete a questionnaire elaborating on program content were e-mailed to program contacts. The questions relevant to this investigation focused how each program utilized adolescent literature or prepared preservice teachers to use adolescent literature in instruction. Non-responders were contacted twice to request replies. Eight faculty members responded in writing, including one from a state school, five from research institutions, and two from private institutions. Next, follow up interviews of approximately 25 minutes in length were conducted with ten participants including one respondent from a private institution, four from state programs, and five from research-based institutions. The interview protocol consisted of two general questions focusing on the design of the institution's teacher preparation program(s) and the approach towards literacy and literacy within the content areas within the program(s). Respondents were also asked, "In what ways do your program(s) use adolescent literature or teach preservice teachers how to integrate such literature into their teaching?" Using themes from the document analysis, data from the questionnaires and interviews were coded and served to triangulate the initial findings.

### **Findings**

The analysis of syllabi data revealed secondary preparation program emphasized adolescent literature in a variety of ways and most often in courses designed for English majors.

Six programs required a specific course focusing on teaching adolescent literature. Secondary English methods courses and other courses centered on teaching reading and writing and/or literacy in the content area courses also included assignments preparing preservice teachers to use adolescent literature. Across all institutions, English teachers were required to take a variety of courses which focused on literacy; however these courses were not necessarily required for other content majors. Only two institutions required that prospective math, science, and social studies teachers take such courses. References to adolescent literature in course syllabi other than English methods or literacy education courses were almost nonexistent. Only three math content area methods courses referenced using adolescent literature in the course content. Through interview responses, a single science methods course was also found to include adolescent literature as a means of instruction. In the syllabi references to adolescent literature were used (a) to ensure preservice teacher knowledge of texts, (b) to address issues of diversity in the classroom, and (c) as a means of effective classroom instruction.

#### *Ensuring Preservice Teachers' Knowledge of Texts*

Adolescent literature in preservice teacher courses aimed to develop knowledge of text in two ways: (1) having students become familiar with a variety of adolescent works and (2) enabling preservice teachers to select

and evaluate potential adolescent texts for use in the secondary classroom. Activities such as developing a bibliography of books, reading young adult novels independently and expanding “awareness of the vast resources of children’s literature” are ways in which preservice teachers were asked to familiarize themselves with texts. Specifically, in courses designed for teaching adolescent literature, the syllabi often included an extensive list of list of novels and assignments which included reading a particular number of books. For example, one private institution’s undergraduate program required the reading of 10 pieces of young adult literature for the class and also provided a list of 84 supplemental adolescent literature texts. These texts were used in assignments promoting text awareness by having students “prepare a collection of books for young adult readers.... The YA collection must contain twenty (20) books from the following categories: nonfiction/informational books (5), historical and contemporary fiction (10), and fantasy/science fiction (5).” Interview data from a research institution supported this finding by indicating that preservice teachers were “asked to develop annotated bibliographies related to young adolescent literature, an opportunity to be exposed to a variety of such literature.”

Other assignments, designed to increase the preservice teachers’ knowledge of texts centered on developing the preservice teacher’s ability to select and evaluate literature. One state institution required students to select and review 4 young adult books and include evaluative statements which “address whether and why you would/would not recommend the book for a school classroom, including the appropriate grade level for teaching this book.” Assignments such as these required preservice teachers to not only demonstrate awareness of a variety of adolescent literature, but to also develop a rationale for using particular works with specific students. Another assignment from a research institution’s undergraduate program also assigned students the task of pairing of adolescent literature with

a work that is currently taught in schools and identifying ways to combine these works in a unit of instruction.

### *Addressing Issues of Diversity*

Adolescent literature was addressed in some teacher preparation programs to enable preservice teachers (1) to expose secondary students to issues of diversity and to generate conversations regarding these issues and (2) to be able to select texts which would appeal to a diverse group of learners in the classroom. In these data, diversity was broadly defined to refer to learners with differing ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic, and family backgrounds, abilities, skills, age, and/or gender, etc. Some syllabi included assignments encouraging preservice teachers to discuss issues of diversity with students. For example, in one private, religious institution, one course stated “Picture story books and other literature are a means by which children (and teachers) can expand their knowledge about and develop empathy for people who are different from themselves.” This assignment required that the preservice teachers use the literature with students to generate discussion regarding themes of diversity and to reflect on skills needed in facilitating these discussions.

Other assignments were designed to assist preservice teachers in recognizing diversity in the classroom and selecting texts and activities were appropriate for varying academic abilities. In an assignment from a state school, the preservice teachers must design a resource notebook targeting the diverse learners found in classrooms. In this assignment, preservice teachers select a specific group of learners and respond to questions such as: “Who are the students you are targeting? Why? What makes you drawn to this group of students? How can you support their reading? How can you push their reading to a new level?” Along with these responses, the students include 10 texts and reviews which both summarize text and establish connections

to the targeted group of students. These types of assignments are designed to help preservice teachers deal with issues of diversity by using adolescent literature.

### *Means for Effective Instruction*

The use of adolescent literature as a tool for effective instruction in the secondary classroom was also evident in the syllabi as preservice teachers (1) generated lesson plans which incorporated adolescent literature and (2) engaged in activities which modeled uses for adolescent literature in the classroom. In this category, there were several assignments in which preservice teachers designed lessons using adolescent literature in content areas other than English. For example, one state school syllabi asked preservice teachers to “design a 1 reading and 1 writing lesson that incorporates children’s literature in the language arts or to one of the content areas.” The literacy course which offered this assignment was required for preservice English teachers and optional for those in other content areas. In a private institution, which required all content area preservice teachers to take a literacy course, the assignment was “...create a 10 day literature unit plan based on a literary theme, genre, author, or specific work appropriate for the grade/subject she or he plans to teach. Write 3 of those lesson plans in detail. Lessons must incorporate Georgia Performance Standards for grades 7-12 in both English Language Arts and the subject area of certification.” In both of these assignments, preservice teacher develop lessons using adolescent literature for content area instruction. Two mathematics methods course syllabi referenced assignments using adolescent literature. One state institution course assigned a day of class discussion to the topic of literature in mathematics, but did not offer any further explanation of this topic. The other example was one research institution’s mathematics methods course which required students to “prepare a 20-minute presentation which summarizes a piece of adolescent literature, assigns an appropriate

grade level, explains how it will be used to increase student learning and provides a lesson plan for using the text in a mathematics lesson.” Through interviews, one research institution indicated that science preservice teachers were asked to design a lesson which incorporated adolescent literature and use it “while they are doing their student teaching in the summer.” This lesson was not present in the course syllabi.

There were also several examples of syllabi which involved the preservice teachers in activities which model instructional methods using adolescent literature. For example, a young adult literature course at a private university requires that the preservice teachers use a response journal. The assignment specified that the preservice teacher “keep a typewritten journal in which you respond to the required young adult reading. Date each entry and give the title and author of the work to which you are responding. Be ready to share your responses with the class.” Another course at a state institution had the preservice teachers participate in literature circles. This assignment indicated “Candidates will participate in a literature circle. Evaluation will be based upon at least 5 interactions according to roles of illustrator, connector, investigator, and timeline and 1 individual reflective narrative about the use of literature circles and your personal reactions to the experience.” Assigned book talks and oral presentations also engaged preservice teachers in activities used to teach adolescent literature in the content area classroom.

In addition, syllabi included assignments which required both the development of lesson plans using a work of adolescent literature and also the teaching of a portion of the lesson to the class. One of these assignments, from a research institution methods course, stated, “Planning: You will develop a lesson plan following the lesson plan format found in the syllabus attachments. ...A final copy of this lesson plan is to be given to all classmates and the instructor on the day

of the presentation. Teaching: Your teaching presentation must use PowerPoint and must demonstrate English content in literature. You will present this as though you were teaching a class at the middle/high school level.”

### **Discussion**

In summary, across one southern state’s secondary teacher preparation programs, there were three themes evident in assignments preparing preservice teachers to use adolescent literature in content area instruction. The majority of the assignments were found in the content area of English, and more specifically in young adult literature courses. Other content area methods and practicum courses may have included assignments involving preservice teachers using adolescent literature for instruction, but such assignments were not specified on syllabi.

The findings of this study are, however, limited by the data collected. Document analysis can only offer a limited perspective of programs and, although we contacted faculty, our efforts to triangulate findings were limited by the number of contacts who provided follow up information. Another limitation comes from the syllabi submitted. Some programs only submitted reading courses, even though the request for syllabi stressed an interest in any education course across content areas which might address literacy. Without access to an expansive set of syllabi used across programs, findings are limited to the data set provided.

Acknowledging these limitations, this research offers information regarding the use of adolescent literature in the secondary teacher preparation programs in one state and provides a description of the methods being used in programs to prepare pre-service teachers to use adolescent literature as an instructional tool in the content area classroom. Findings indicated that secondary preservice teacher education programs are engaging educators, across all content areas,

in activities which require them to use adolescent literature a tool for effective instruction. Outside of English programs, however, assignments which help preservice teachers value adolescent literature as an important instructional tool in the content area classroom are not prevalent. Upon closer investigation, there were also only four programs which specifically indicated assignments in which math, science and social studies preservice teachers used adolescent literature. When contrasted with entire courses on adolescent literature in the preparation of English teachers and required literacy in the content area courses for English majors, the absence of using adolescent literature in other content areas is profound. This indicates that though research demonstrates the value of incorporating adolescent literature into content area instruction, (Albright, 2002; Daisey, 1995; Fry, 2009; Martinie et al., 2005; Moje, 2008; Wallace et. al., 2006) teacher preparation programs are not consistently preparing preservice teachers to do this outside the field of English.

In addition to the limited number of math, science and social studies programs using adolescent literature, the nature of the course assignments for preservice teachers integrating such literature should also be expanded. The most common type of activity, across discipline, institution, and content area involved the preservice teacher generating lessons which incorporated adolescent literature. Generating lesson plans takes an understanding of available materials and familiarity with possible instructional practices; however, in no content area other than English, was it required for preservice teachers to engage in instructional strategies modeling uses for adolescent literature in the secondary classroom or to participate in activities which would increase their knowledge of content appropriate adolescent literature.

Finally, preservice teacher programs are not preparing preservice teachers to use adolescent literature as a way to address issues of diversity

and as a specific resource for teaching a diverse group of students. Classrooms offer a mixture of students who have demographic diversity and diverse learning styles and abilities (Fry, 2009). To meet state standards which require students to engage in multicultural learning through exposure and discussion about lifestyles different from their own, teachers need instructional tools which incorporate these issues of diversity within the content classroom. Research has demonstrated that adolescent literature is a means of dealing with these issues (Fry, 2009); however, examining the preservice education course syllabi in this southern state indicates that a majority of the programs are not emphasizing the use of adolescent literature in this way.

In conclusion, equipping secondary teachers with the tools to use adolescent literature in all content areas should not only be part of teacher preparation, but should also be emphasized as a major component of the curriculum they will use with their future students. Designing coursework in a teacher preparation program that unifies content and literacy instruction in a meaningful way can create a commitment from secondary teachers to provide such activities to the students in their classrooms (Algers, 2007). It is our belief that future educators, in all content areas, should leave secondary teacher preparation programs with (1) a knowledge of adolescent literature which allows them to select appropriate texts, (2) an understanding of how to use this literature to address issues of diversity and (3) the ability to implement lessons which effectively incorporate adolescent literature using a variety of instructional strategies.

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All three authors are currently on faculty at Georgia State University.