

THE PLEASURE OF READING

The Diary of a Wimpy Kid Series



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A YEAR AGO, AFTER ATTENDING another satisfying literacy conference in the DC metropolitan area, Vivian stopped at her sister's to visit with her twelve-year-old nephew. Being the educator she is, she brought along signed copies of Gareth Hinds' graphic versions of *Beowulf*, and *The Odyssey* and was extremely excited to share these with him, knowing that the strategy of taking home autographed copies of books had worked with her sons when they were that age. Indeed, it worked! He was curious about the books, and started flipping through the exquisite illustrations of *Beowulf*. Of course, Vivian did not convey to him that these autographed books with "cool" illustrations were classic literature, and that it was her feeble attempt to get her nephew to start thinking about the classics often valued in school settings and privileged in standardized tests. As such, she hoped they would be part of his repertoire as he transitioned into middle and higher grades. After skimming through the illustrations, he agreed that they were cool and assured Vivian that he would read them. She was about to leave the room when she noticed him take a seat at one corner of their apartment and grab a book from a stack on the dining table. She stood there for a couple of minutes in silent fascination and watched him begin to read this book

with deep concentration, chuckling at intervals oblivious to the fact that there were other individuals in that room. After briefly observing his engagement with this text, she asked him what he was reading. It was *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days!* She followed that with another question about what he thought of the book. Her nephew giggled, hesitated, gave her a look she inferred as, what a stupid question before saying, "It's funny."

As she headed home that afternoon, she pondered the casual and dismissive way her nephew had expressed his *love* for a book in this popular series by Jeff Kinney. It made her wonder about the kinds of pleasure early adolescents derive from reading literature in general, regardless of the type and if there was some value in gaining pleasure from the reading experience in an age where educators are expected to emphasize only certain kinds of reading: *Reading to learn, to perform tasks, and to compete with the rest of the world* and ways of reading: *close reading*. While we recognize the importance and significance of these kinds and/or ways of reading, we also like to acknowledge other types of reading, some of which include pleasurable and critical reading. In this article, we focus on pleasurable reading: what this means and how

readers may convey this pleasure through their responses.

We begin by briefly describing a class project on series books completed by pre-service middle grade teacher candidates enrolled in a children's literature course at Penn State, followed by a discussion on series books and educators' tenuous relationship with non-literary fiction. Next, we focus on Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series and the kinds of pleasure the fifth graders who participated in our documentary project say they derived from their encounters and interactions with the series as a whole and/or with particular texts in the series. We conclude with statements about pleasurable readings in the age of the Common Core.

The Context

The fifth grade students with whom we worked were students in the classroom of Monica Wagner, a fifth grade teacher at Easterly Parkway Elementary School. Easterly Parkway is one of nine elementary schools located in the college town of State College, PA. This ethnically diverse (at least within State College) K-5 school has a significant ESL population for its rural location due to its proximity to Penn State's campus. Prior to beginning the documentary project (described below) the teacher candidates had already completed approximately 25 hours of apprenticeship teaching in literacy and language arts with Monica's students as part of her ongoing inquiry in literacy and disability studies (Collins & Wagner, in progress; Storm, Collins & Wagner, 2015). The teacher candidates therefore had already established a relationship with the fifth graders at the time we collected our data. In this manuscript, we seek to understand the possibilities that series books, otherwise regarded as non-literary fiction, might offer to learners. After a unit on documentary as text in a literacy program, pre-service teachers, in groups of four were encouraged to interview children on series books of the children's choice. After identifying children for the project, each group had to create an interview protocol on their specific series and the children's experiences with the series (see Table 1 for the protocol for this series). The interview sessions were recorded, discussed, reflected upon within each group and later shared with the class for further discussion as the class compared children's responses to the different series and noted forms of literacies manifested in the documentaries. Three documentaries were shared: *The Divergent Series*, *The Selection Series*, and *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid Series*. We focus on the last documentary because it involved a large number of students.

Students for the documentary were selected from Monica's fifth grade class. Many of the students had already read a part or all of the books in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, which made them an ideal group of participants for the project. The pre-service teachers emailed Monica to see if they could work with her students on the project. They needed to make sure that the students would be able to leave class without missing important content. Next, they collected signed parental consent forms from interested students. Seven students returned the consent forms, two males and five females. The informal chat on the series, took place in the conference room at Easterly Parkway Elementary School. The four pre-service teachers then used the airdrop tool on their computers to co-edit the video, thereby making it easier for us to notice students' likes and/or dislikes about particular books/events/characters/scenes, etc. in the series, a "Tell Me" strategy promoted by Chambers (1996). For these pre-service teachers, the assignment on series books helps them to understand the depth of early adolescents' interests – what they like and how they share these likes and/or dislikes about books in the series and the series as a whole. We argue then that series books have their place in some children's lives and may serve as a forum for a variety of literacy events. The seven students, whose stories with series books we share here, help us to understand a bit more how popular series may provide pleasure to some readers. In the next section we focus on the series, providing background information.

The Diary of a Wimpy Kid

The series contains eleven books and has inspired three movies. It is written in journal form, similar to comics. These journal entries are from the point of view of the main character, Greg Heffley. Research was done on the author, Jeff Kinney as well. The books were inspired by Jeff's life, and were not originally going to be written for children, but rather for adults. The series began as a comic on funbrain.com. Jeff Kinney, who was 44 at the time, attended the University of Maryland. He was a former cartoonist who is a full time writer and video game designer. After writing his first book, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, Jeff Kinney continues his series and now has 10 books out. His 11th book in the series was released in November 2016. The series has also received many different awards. It has won "two Children's Choice Book Awards and five Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards for Favorite Book" (Wimpy Kid, 2012).

Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series has become immensely popular since he first started publishing it on Funbrain.com in 2007 (Wimpy Kid, 2016). The books within the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series are Kinney's only books published. He began with the first, titled, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* after unsuccessful attempts at writing comic strips (Wimpy Kid, 2016). It's interesting to note that even after a failed comic strip attempt, he became so successful with graphic novels. It was only after readers began exhibiting interest and excitement that Harry N. Abrams, Inc. publishing house offered Kinney a multi-book signing contract (Wimpy Kid, 2016). This kick-started the rest of the series that has

galvanized thousands of fans and consequently making it so popular that movies were based on a few titles. His success with these books is proven from the 80 million views of his first book published on the Funbrain website, which pulls in about 70,000 kids per day (Wimpy Kid, 2016). Amazon.com search reveals 4,027 customer reviews for Book 7, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Third Wheel* (2012); 3,074 customer reviews for Book 8, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck* (2013); 2,670 customer reviews for Book 9, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Long Haul* (2014); and 1,335 customer reviews for Book 10, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Old School* (2015). One would conclude that these numbers exist as evidence that readers—both adults and

Table 1
PROTOCOL

Participants		
Seven		
Gender Distribution		
Number of Boys: 2 Number of Girls: 5		
Interview Protocol		
Focus Groups	Individual Follow-up	Sample Responses
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> How did you become interested in this series? How many of the series books have you read? Do you guys have any favorite one? Who is your favorite character? What are some of the funniest scenes or incidents? How do you feel after you finish a book in the series? Who has seen the original movie? How do you think keeping a diary helps Greg? Is this similar to other books you've read about middle schoolers? How does the art in the book help the storytelling? Would you feel the same way about the book if there were no illustrations? Do you like that the series is written in diary format? Who's read the last book in the series? Now who is planning to read the book that just came out? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Why do you like this book? Do you think other people should read this book? What rating out of five stars would you give this book? 	<p>Focus Group, Question #6:</p> <p>Boy 1: "Every time I finish a book I am happy about I go like this (claps hands to gesture accomplishment). . . . "I'm always waiting for another to come out."</p> <p>Boy 2: "But it takes a year!" (Interpreted as impatience that it takes that long)</p> <p>Girl 1: "I feel accomplished" (Others concur nodding and shouting).</p> <p>Girl 5: "I can't wait to read the next book."</p> <p>Individual Follow-Up, Question #2:</p> <p>Girl 2: "Yes, because it is funny . . . It is kind of a twist on the novel."</p> <p>Individual Follow-Up, Question #3:</p> <p>Girl 3: "5. Because it is a really funny book and I like the pictures"</p> <p>Girl 4: "I would give it a 5 out of 5 because it is really humorous and it's really detailed and funny."</p>

young people who post these reviews—might have gained some form of pleasure from specific titles, which in turn allows him to churn out new titles each year. In short, there is a fan base for the series in spite of what educators and scholars of children's and adolescent literature might feel about the literary quality of the books or about the culture of consumerism the successful series seems to support and encourage through other products.

“Educators’” Tenuous Relationship with Series Books

Perhaps we should elaborate a bit on how some educators perceive series books and why. For educators such as Alycia Zimmerman (2012), series books are a staple in her classroom. She asserts that they “provide excellent support for middle-to-late elementary students who are transitioning into the more independent stages of their reading development” (np). In her article, “Using Series to Support Middle-Grade Reader,” she explains why it is necessary to expose children at this educational level to this genre of literature, sharing ideas on how educators can achieve this. While some educators are in favor of series books as part of the literature/literacy curriculum, several children's literature scholars are slow to warm up to this idea. Many, we have come to conclude, do not consider this genre of books as literature. They dismiss it and insist that children read high quality books. But what educators and/or scholars of children's literature perceive to be “high quality” is often subjective, as many schoolteachers and non-schoolteachers in some of my graduate courses attest. It seems some of these scholars and/or educators tend to shun series books as unworthy of their intellectual attention. Thus, it doesn't surprise us to read that,

There is a curious gap in the scholarship on texts for young people: while series fiction has been an important stream of publishing for children and adolescents at least since the last decades of the nineteenth century, the scholarship of these texts has not been central to the development of theories on and criticism of texts for young people (Reimer, Ali, England, & Unrau 2014, p. 1).

Few win major awards such as the Newbery despite their material success, and society, like many educators, seems to frown on series books. However, like educators such as Monica and her colleagues at Easterly who have always integrated series books in their curriculum, we believe that these books

offer children lots of adventures in addition to learning opportunities that enable them to develop life and other skills that can be transferred to other situations. They are not simply a means to an end, and neither are they meant, from our perspective, to serve only as transitional reading (Zimmerman, 2012). Series books are thus worthy of every educator's attention. Children love them; they construct meaningful literacy events around them and see books in the series as mirrors and windows through which they get to understand their multiple worlds and positions within these spaces—imaginary, real and virtual. Their social worlds as early adolescents often come alive in the pages of the text worlds in these books.

In an article about the importance of student choice in reading materials, Donalyn Miller (2012) mentions the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series as one that teachers may argue is lacking in “literary merit” (p. 92). However, she believes these books and others should be encouraged and that student choice should be validated to show students that all reading is valuable (p. 92). It is clear that the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series is extremely popular among adolescents and that some teachers have capitalized on this interest. The Wimpy Kid website, for example, offers comprehensive teaching guides to help bring the series to the classroom. These guides offer discussion questions, activities, and adaptations for students of various reading abilities, and they are aligned with Common Core and NCTE standards (Gutiérrez). Individual teachers, as leaders in the field, can always build on these, adding activities on critical thinking and those that stretch readers' imagination further to create more possibilities with the series.

In “Nontraditional Texts and the Struggling/Reluctant Reader,” Joan Fingon (2012) advocates for using the series as part of the curriculum to help reluctant or struggling readers. While some teachers may discourage the use of “picture books” in older grades, she believes the graphics in *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series offer important support for meaning making (p. 70). Fingon also highlights the use of the series for English Language Learners (ELL) as the cartoons can be helpful in understanding unique parts of language not present in other traditional texts, such as sarcasm and slang (p. 73). She also noted that during her research, students reading the books engaged in enthusiastic conversation about the texts and made remarks similar to those made by the students in our project (p. 71).

While we do recognize that the educational establishment often prefers that students read literary texts, we do

not believe that it helps the reader to completely avoid series books, often considered non-literary fiction. Non-literary more so than literary fiction may have a “formulaic pattern” but that is its strength, as it enables children to perceive themselves as capable readers who are able to follow their favorite characters’ adventures within the fictional worlds and ponder some of the conflicts while anticipating the resolution. The formulaic pattern thus reinforces one of Chambers’ (1996) “Tell Me” strategies, sharing enthusiasm, which enables children to read with a keen eye for patterns in characterization, language use, plot development and more. We notice similar patterns in Kinney’s series.

In her review of Reimer et al. (2014), their book on seriality, Nilson (2015) posits that,

We today tend to view examples such as that of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, which started out as a web page, moved on to becoming books, then transformed to a movie, to a computer game, and to several other products, as very modern, but Mackey clearly shows that there are several similarities to Roy Rogers where children could meet their hero on the big screen, on TV, in commercials, and in comics (np)

In essence, she reminds readers that the idea explored in this series is not new, especially when compared “to the Roy Roger phenomena from the 1940s and 50s (np). But it remains a modern phenomenon for early adolescents such as the ones who participated in our project.

Readers, Pleasure and Non-Literary Fiction

In the introduction of their edited book, *Seriality and Young People: The Compulsion to Repeat*, Reimer et al. (2014) assert that a major “cultural function of series books . . . is one of providing readers with pleasure” (p. 5). In this section, we focus on Kinney’s series, central to the documentary class project between fifth graders in Monica’s class and pre-service teachers in Vivian’s middle grade literature methods course. Following are our observations of the different patterns of pleasure conveyed by the fifth graders.

The students with whom we worked conveyed their pleasures in several ways, reinforcing and/or at times challenging the heavy meaning-construction focus and advocacy ideology that often drive curricular practices in Vivian’s methods class. From their responses, we were able to notice what they thought was important in the texts, how they learned from and with the popular series about life, genres and more while

still having fun. This makes us ponder, if literature “teaches and . . . pleases” (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 22), why should we, educators insist only on the *teaching* part, and particularly for reading achievement? Why can we not also consider “strategies and language for describing and exploring the pleasures texts offer” (p. 22) in our classrooms? We attempt to address these questions in our analysis below with the understanding that, “Good teachers, effective teachers, manage to produce better achievement regardless of which curriculum materials, pedagogical approach, or reading program is selected” (Allington, 2002). As such, pleasurable reading may add to the richness of the reading experience, and for those who consider test scores important, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) acknowledges the role that fun reading also plays in performance. NAEP notes,

Results from previous NAEP assessments show students who read for fun more frequently had higher average scores. Results from the 2012 long-term trend assessment also reflect this pattern. At all three ages [9, 13, 17], students who reported reading for fun almost daily or once or twice a week scored higher than the students who reported reading for fun a few times a year or less (p. 24).

This aligns with our thinking about the role that pleasurable reading may play in a child’s life. And of course, we consider series books as one genre of literature from which children can derive pleasure and which inadvertently would enhance their reading performance.

Like Nodelman and Reimer (2003) we equate thinking with pleasure, with the basic understanding that “pleasure can indeed be thought about” as is evident in these early adolescents’ responses. Referencing Roland Barthes, Nodelman and Reimer (2003) add that “the pleasures of literature . . . are of two sorts” (p. 23): One that “offers the pleasures of the familiar . . . what they expect and like,” and another that “offers the pleasures of the strange . . . expectations that free them from the familiar” (p. 24). We note these contradictory attitudes toward pleasure too in the students’ responses and plan to address these later. The analysis opens with a discussion of the “pleasures of the familiar” or what Chambers refers to as likes of texts, as evidence of finding pleasure in literary and non-literary texts. First, we need to acknowledge that all seven students said they enjoyed the books in the series because of the humor! Based on this attestation, we contemplate the forms that humor take in the books.

Pleasures of the Familiar

The students were quite pleased with their experiences with Kinney's books. Their enjoyment and excitement seem to revolve around the fact that the books are humorous and relatable or more generally appeal to their interests. They found familiar humor in the stories, could relate to what was happening, and could empathize with the characters. When talking about their favorite scenes and characters, they seemed especially animated recalling scenes where the main character's mind plays tricks on him, episodes that seemed all too familiar to their experiences as early adolescents. They continually talked about how the characters seemed like "real middle schoolers" facing "real problems," and found great interest in this simple fact that relates to their lives. Others enjoyed the series because they are "quick read" books, and they actually prefer the books to the movies. The characters, some believe, are awesome! The ability to finish the book and to confidently retell versions of the story plot, as they understand these to be, because of what they observe as the simplistic nature of the style and to laugh at and with the characters add to the pleasure factor. Moreover, being able to connect events in the story with those in real life and to those explored in other texts such as Dork Diaries as some of the students do, demonstrates that their reading is purposeful too.

Pleasures of the Strange

The next type of pleasure we gleaned from their conversations on the series is what we loosely describe as "pleasures of the strange," or what Chambers (1996) might refer to as puzzles. We noticed that though the early adolescents found some of the actions of the characters puzzling, these in themselves added to the appeal of the series. Some claim the "alien dude" as one of their favorite character, a character they felt the movie did only "an okay job" in bringing alive on the screen. While puzzled about the rationale behind a character "running in front of old people in his underwear," they still found humor in the act itself. The "ridiculous actions" of the characters watching a movie and engaging in similar activities such as hide and seek, they thought was strange but familiar.

As they shared funny moments, they sparked more ideas among themselves until they were all talking over one another and laughing about their recollections. They also found the nontraditional format of the series that included pictures and unique fonts to represent a handwritten diary intriguing. The pictures, they agreed, deepened their con-

structions of meaning from and with the story and in some instances acted as "punchlines" to jokes. A couple of them asserted that the simplistic style of the art is what made the stories more enjoyable.

Pleasures of Engaging the Verbal and Visual Language

Another pleasure, which the students convey and which puts a smile on our faces, is one of accomplishment in reading books in the series in a timely manner. They hold themselves to a high standard and set their reading goals, which allow them to feel "accomplished" as one student said, and looking forward to the next book. This makes us conclude that they may be highly motivated and also makes us ponder how we, educators could tap on this motivation moving forward to get them to diversify their reading interests with some support from us. Cambria and Guthrie (2010) describe three forms of reading motivation: "(1) interest, (2) dedication, and (3) confidence," noting further that, "An interested student reads because he enjoys it; a dedicated student reads because he believes it is important; and a confident student reads because he can do it" (pp. 16-17). We believe these students are motivated on all three counts: they read books in this series because it gives them pleasure; they believe reading is important and prefer the books to the movie; and thirdly, they believe in their abilities as readers.

In their talk about their experiences focusing on the author's style, they all agree that the unique format of the book is a major draw. As one student puts it, it does not seem like a novel. They all agree that the artwork is just enough, for too much or too little "would be bad." Therefore, the way the author uses language to elicit age appropriate humor, the emotions the style elicits in the reader, and the satisfaction the reader derives from the reading experience in general comprise a form of pleasure. The series' unique stylistic features include cartoon drawings that may endear readers to the characters while also distancing and contextualizing the experiences in the text worlds as "fantasy" that may indeed remind young readers of life in their own social worlds within the home and school settings. The juxtaposition too of font sizes to convey meanings seems unique and different from "traditional" novels that are recommended for the school curriculum. The reader's ability to tell these apart adds to the pleasure of satisfaction and conveys the maturity of readers who understand that there are indeed multiple kinds of texts

that serve their multiple needs.

Students around the age range for the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series are at a time in their lives where things get awkward. Having a book that includes familiar experiences and employs language use that is mixed with some unbelievable wacky activities and characters provides a good read for these early adolescents. We find it extremely rewarding to learn about the possibilities that a series such as Kinney's whose stories adopt a unique but simplistic style can create for some early adolescent readers. Besides the pleasure of engaging with language to construct meanings that has been the focus of this section, we also noted that the series offers opportunities for play.

Pleasures of Play

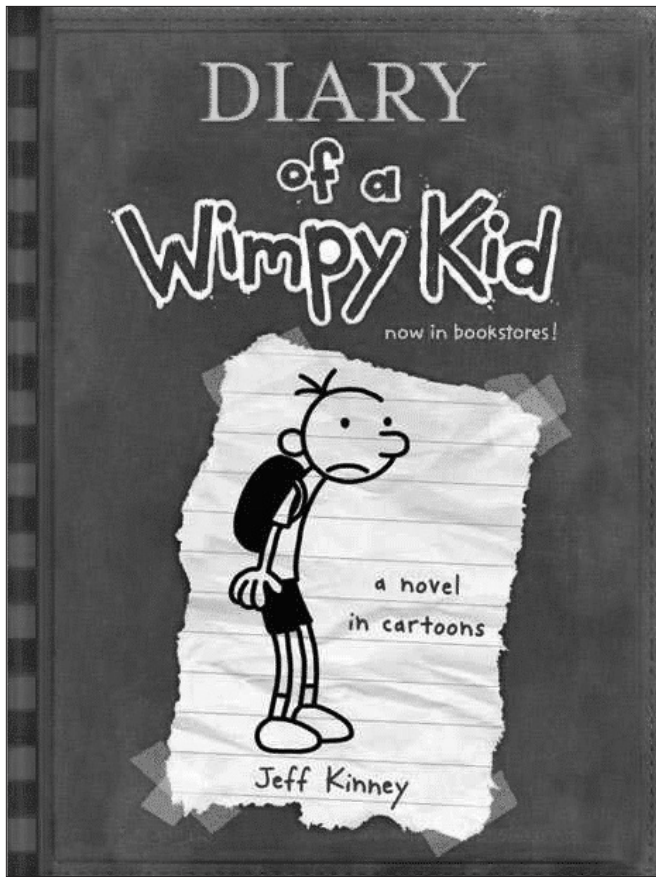
In an interview at Readingrocket.org, Kinney remarks that
 When you read my books, you have to suspend your disbelief a little bit because Greg sometimes has a big adventure during the day and he goes to bed at 3 in the morning and yet he's still writing his journal entry from that day. I think that with this series you have to understand that Greg is sort of an unreliable narrator in a way (np).

For the students, the *Wimpy* series seems like one big adventure too. This pleasure of play recurs in their responses where it takes a variety of forms, some of which include acting in character, mimicking characters' voices and more. Margaret Meek (1991) observes too that, "Being a character in a story is a dominant feature of children's play in our culture. Children fictionalize themselves as they play and they create the world where the fiction allows them to explore both the world they know and the one they make-up" (pp. 108-109). This kind of pleasure thus is not limited only to series books. The fifth graders who participated in the project approached the series as a form of adventure—play! They made faces in character, made snarky remarks about certain events and how the main character handled conflicts, and generally acted "funny" to reflect their engagements with the text worlds. Their responses are lively and fun to watch and to listen to, for beneath the playful gestures are some serious conversations on characterization, plot, setting, language use—remarks that revealed their intellectual engagements with the contents and style of the series. This is in line with the notion of series books as a kind of play or adventure, whereby a reader finishes one book in the series and moves on to the next or anticipates

the plot and style of the next. The fun is also in the prediction, suspense, anticipation, and speculations of how the author might complicate the plot next time around or what he may do with the character—the pleasure in wanting to confirm one's prediction, revise one's speculations, anticipate new journeys with a character who now seems like a close relative. Play deepens their understanding of some basic ideas espoused in the series about being young at home and at school. Sharing their likes and surprises, favorite books in the series and explaining why, often in a playful manner adds to this pleasure of play. This echoes one of Kinney's objectives of reading, "look[ing] like fun and not work" (CNBC, 2016). Perhaps that is why 95% of books in the series continue to appear in print (CNBC, 2016). The premise of a "cartoon character who draws himself in books" (CNBC, 2016) as part of a plot, creates opportunities for pleasurable readings, and thus makes the act of reading the story a form of play, whereby text and social worlds converge. We now focus on the common core and pleasurable reading.

Pleasurable Readings and the Common Core

Fun reading can still align with the Common Core Standards depending on students' interests, as we would like to demonstrate in this section. The group of seven students with whom pre-service teachers worked with conveyed their pleasure for non literary texts in ways that demonstrated their awareness of basic literary elements such as characterization, plot, style, setting, theme, and more, all aspects valued by educational institutions. These students had entered a fifth grade classroom in the fall where the reading of all genres of children's literature was not only expected, but also valued and validated. At a glance around this classroom library, one will see the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series nestled alongside a vast collection of children's poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and other graphic novels. Monica recalls a conversation with a student's parent that occurred during an annual Easterly Parkway ice-cream social prior to the first day of school. Former and present students gather at the school to partake in treats and visit classrooms. Invariably, the children are always drawn to Monica's "Reading Corner." As one student made a bee-line for the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books, his mother stopped Monica to voice her concern that "those books" were in the room. Worried that her son would only choose to read those all year and not be exposed to other literature, the mother asked Monica to remove them from the room. The



Diary of a Wimpy Kid by Jeff Kinney



Reading Corner

mother was reassured that her child would read more, and, in fact, he finished the school year with 42 books recorded on his book log, and they were not all from the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series!

So why validate keeping these books in the classroom? As we stated earlier in this article, because they “serve as a forum for a variety of literacy events.” The first literacy event Monica works to establish in her classroom is reading for pleasure. In twenty years of teaching, she sees this as being the single most important aspect of building motivation and stamina in reading. No Common Core Standard can be achieved if a child isn’t an invested reader! Books like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* are non-threatening to kids. Children from all reading levels can participate in this series because it’s accessible—graphics, story-line, humor—all engage the reader. Greg Heffley is not a perfect kid, and neither are they, so kids can see glimpses of themselves in these books and will pick them up to read. As a teacher, Monica finds it her job to observe this and be ready to offer another book immediately that will engage the student. Sometimes, it’s another graphic novel; sometimes it’s a realistic fiction book. She finds that if kids love Kinney’s work, they usually will love James Patterson’s Middle School series. The point is that building stamina in reading comes from loving the books that are being read. Because kids love these books, a teacher can then create genre expansion by introducing other authors and books. Once stamina and interest are built, this series, along with the reading of other children’s literature, leads right into fulfilling Common Core Standards. One such standard in 5th grade asks children to “Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).” As noted earlier in the pre-service teachers’ observation, the students had plenty to say about the illustrations in Kinney’s books. If a whole group of children are exposed to a text that they find pleasurable and can relate to, then conversations revolving around meaning, tone, and text can be entered into by all. This becomes a stepping-stone to the analysis of other texts.

Common Core also asks children to do things such as “Compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics” and “Describe how a narrator’s or speaker’s point of view influences how events are described.” Teachers can start with *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* as common ground to talk about the narration, or voice of the character. Staying within genre they can move to the autobiographical and

award-winning book, *El Deafo* by Cece Bell, to compare and contrast Greg Heffley with Cece, discussing the similarities and differences both characters experience. Because pleasure and engagement is derived from the reading of these texts, students who are learning to cite evidence to support their inferences can do so more readily. Familiarity and connection to the characters allow students to have an easier time drawing details from the text and summarizing events. Teachers can also use these books to work on analyzing character traits, the importance of setting in a story, the sequence of actions that create a plot, and the concept of how the narrator's point of view influences how events are described. Because students are asked to think critically about craft and structure of writing, beginning a dialogue with books that children easily engage with will lead to the understanding of a multitude of concepts and standards that are expected to be taught by teachers today. Using highly motivating reading material to initially engage in the discussion of concepts will create the springboard from which to leap into the reading and analyzing of literary texts.

The way the early adolescents in our project were able to collaborate and discuss the series was a great thing to see; scaffolded by prompts from the pre-service teachers, they shared the meanings they have been constructing and continue to construct around the series. And just like that, there emerged a literacy club (Smith, 1987) of their own making. According to Monica, the students have book clubs of various sorts all year and so are able to discuss with ease and ability because that is how she constructs reading in her classroom. The pre-service teachers were indeed privileged to witness this come alive and as such left the field with renewed vigor and a sense of what is possible.

Pedagogy, Reading and Pleasure

From our experience as educators, we have noticed that often when asking a question about literature that students feel requires one "right answer," teachers encounter a dreadful silence with a bunch of blank faces. What was exciting about this group of students was that they all had something to contribute to the conversation based on their unique experiences with the series or particular books in the series. The pre-service teachers' discussion prompts elicit spontaneous responses that created a low affective filter for everyone, thus building on the tradition of transformative learning practices that is typical at Easterly, a site that has succeeded in trans-

forming an otherwise formal learning environment into book clubs and literature circles typically encouraged by advocates of grand conversation (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). Sharing of experiences with the series then provides opportunities to "gossip" about the characters and events in the text world, connecting these events with those of their social worlds to make better sense of their lives. This community sharing by individuals also enables members to reflect on their purposes for reading only particular types of text and how they interact with texts.

While the style of series books may be formulaic, there are still patterns of language use, of character development, of conflict resolution and more, which early adolescent readers can attend to. The strategies they use to navigate these aspects of their simple and yet enjoyable texts can be transferred to literary texts that not only demand that the reader uses his/her background knowledge to negotiate meanings but also expects that they engage with such texts in different ways.

Reimer et al. (2014) open their book noting that, "Seriality has long been suspected by taste-making critics of exploiting children's untutored desires" (p. 3). As we exit this article, we wonder now who is really exploiting whom. We ponder this because from working with the early adolescent volunteers on this project, documenting their reactions to Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series for further classroom use, it does not seem so simple. First, we believe that the children, like all readers, have legitimate desires to read books that appeal to them or that resonate with their current experiences and/or interests. We observed that the participants had a clear sense of what they believed should appear in the next book. They had agency and thus were fully invested in this series. They didn't seem to be consuming blindly, in as much as they loved the books in the series. Perhaps there are more like these children out there; however, we would not know this until we conduct a formal study. For now we are delighted that there are early adolescents who love reading, love talking about their readings, and take responsibility for their reading selections, with guidance from their classroom teacher who has continued to mentor them, serving as a facilitator and them as apprentices within their well-established literacy community that is rich in literary practices, including the physical environment.

To elicit similar responses from students while reading other books, perhaps educators should consider encouraging shared reading experiences like these as well as providing stu-

dents with the opportunity to self-select books of interest. Many of the students who participated in the project said they had read books in the series upon recommendation from a friend or family member and then decided to read more. As attested by Monica who has worked with these students through out the academic year, offering books on a regular basis to students, which they would want to share with others, fosters a reading community that may also lead to more book selections that could transform the community in ways that accommodate non-literary fiction and other works of literature deemed highbrow. Meek (1991) notes,

Those who are exclusive about literature, whose concern for special kinds of writing seems to downgrade the reading that ordinary people do, are not helpful to those needing to know that literature is not reserved for specially trained readers belonging to a club that keeps the secrets of texts. . . The little girl or boy who says 'Again!' at the end of a story and a scholar writing about the art of the novel are both part of the same enterprise (p. 181).

We agree with this assertion and hope other educators would see some merit in children reading different kinds of texts in and out of the classroom. And like Meek we also share the mindset that

[i]f we want young readers to engage with interpretive reading of books which offer different kinds of reading experience we have to remove certain misconceptions about literature which have blocked their way in the past. Literature is not old books, not a list of specially chosen great books which represent an unchanging heritage, conferring on the reader the distinction of showing taste and discrimination. There is no way of saying the text is literature by inspecting its sentences or its formal arrangement. We should dissuade the young from believing that literature is a privileged form of reading reserved for those who stay at school long enough to claim literature as a possession or to qualify for access to antique poetry. What counts as literature will always change as the technologies for its production change (Meek, 1991, p. 181).

So, why not give series books a chance while helping early adolescent readers understand that there are different types of literature, each serving a different kind of purpose in readers' lives?

Returning to Vivian's nephew's reading experience with

Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days*, we would say, let him enjoy this piece of literature. As he grows as a reader with interests that evolve and/or expand to include other types of texts, with the guidance of his teachers, parents, and peers, he may find a balance between his love for popular series books and literary fiction highly valued within the school system. Like his peers who participated in our class project, pleasure, we hope would continue to be part of his motivation to engage texts (series books, literary fiction and nonfiction, poetry, drama, digital, oral etc.). The idea is for us educators to support these early adolescents as they seek ways to find personal meanings in their interactions with texts, albeit from popular texts such as series books often downgraded as not literarily enough. Let the "pleasure" of reading (whatever text chosen that creates personal pleasure) be the children's stepping stone into the multitude of literary reading that awaits them. This way, we would not have to worry anymore why teenagers no longer read (Ludden, 2014), for they actually are reading, only they read what they self-select and for their own purposes. •

¹This is one way we interpret Chambers' "puzzles" in this article.

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