Theoretical Foundations of a Study Examining Adolescent Literature and Rape Myth Acceptance

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Abstract: Adolescents are at the greatest risk for victimization and perpetration of sexual assault. This paper examines the current trends in literacy education which marginalize aesthetic reading experiences and using reader response theory, and argues that young adult literature may provide an opportunity to reduce rape myth acceptance in adolescents.

What makes reading a novel different from other types of adolescent reading experiences? The most accepted aspect of a novel that delineates it from other forms of fictional narrative is length: the novel is longer than other types of narrative such as short stories or novellas which may be read in a single sitting. Furthermore, the plots found in novels generally deal with multiple events, issues and ideas, and is generally too long to be focused on only one incident (Probst, 1988). Thus, a major distinction between the experience involved with a novel and other types of narrative is that reading a novel is a longer and more involved process. Because reading a novel may reduce the time that is available for standardized test practice, the amount of experiences many students have with novels in the classroom is diminishing.

Curricula in language arts and English classrooms have been directly influenced by the passage of No Child Left Behind, the signing on to Common Core Standards by many states, and by the implementation of the Race to the Top competition. These events have placed a premium on students' ability to answer questions based on short reading passages as part of high stakes standardized tests. Novels do not generally appear on standardized tests and when excerpts do appear, the majority of questions related to the passages are concerned with reading comprehension and do not generally require the test taker to analyze, interpret, evaluate or make any personal connections to the text (Purves, 1990). Because the appearance of literature is rare or absent in standardized testing, there is a concomitant reduction in the appearance of novels in curricula.

The Problem with Educational Literacy

The culture of testing that has come to dominate the educational landscape has stoked the flames of a wildfire of scripted curricula programs designed to increase student performance on reading tests (Mathews, 2000). Rarely do these programs include novels as novels do not appear on the tests they are preparing students for, and the companies producing scripted curricula do not realize profit from the sales of novels (Atwell, 2010). The absence of novels as part of standardized exams and the exclusion of novels from prefabricated scripted curricula has marginalized and sometimes even eliminated the reading of novels as part of curriculum in many public schools.

The predominant literacy curricula most public school students find themselves in consists of interactions with textbooks, standardized reading materials and pre-packaged literacy programs. These types of literacy events are merely exercises rather than genuine opportunities for communication and promote an input/output ideology (Powell, 2009). Spears-Bunton and Powell (2009) describe this type of literacy instruction as "schooled literacy," which encourages

students to conform to instructional materials and emphasizes accurate responses. Students are not unaware that the primary purpose of their literacy events is to evaluate them and often do not see the relevance of these experiences for their lives (Powell, 2009). Thus, many students robotically move through their education without seeing how it is connected to their own lives, perfunctorily trying to provide the right answers to questions they do not see as worthy of inquiry.

Research has shown that the curriculum students are exposed to at school have a long term effect on students' ability and willingness to read and that the way reading is experienced does not foster a love of reading (Cullinan, 2000). In fact, Irving (1980) found that many students make no connection between reading and pleasure. By presenting reading as a punitive event, it is easy to understand why so many students come to the conclusion that reading is not enjoyable. Although the oppressive and disenfranchising effects of current literacy curricula are clear, we must look at the alternative: providing genuine literacy experiences in the curricula. One of the ways to achieve this is by the use of novels.

Benefits of Novels

Because of the length of novels, interactions with these texts are much longer and more intimate than the interactions most students encounter with excerpts in school. The use of novels as part of the curriculum encourages reading at home as students who commence reading a novel in school are more likely to engage in reading at home than students who do not read novels in school (Anderson, Fielding, & Wilson, 1988). Encouraging students to read at home is critical because reading for extended periods of time is related to growth in vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and general information (Anderson et al., 1988; Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990). Furthermore, independent reading achievement correlates with academic success and increased independent reading (Anderson et al., Fielding, & Wilson, 1988; Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Krashen, 1993). The incorporation of novels into the curriculum has far ranging measurable benefits for students as long as they are novels that students will be interested in reading outside of school.

Reader Response

Reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995) argues that the interpretation of texts will differ between readers based on their own experiences, world views, biases and even their purpose for reading the text. When reading a text, adolescents participate in a negotiation and collaboration with the author and use their prior knowledge to create meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978). During any transaction, a particular reader and a particular text engage in a dynamic situation where meaning is not fixed in the text, but is created by the interchange between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). The transaction is moderated by the reader's motivations to engage the text, which Rosenblatt labels *stance* (Rosenblatt, 1978). Stance may be either aesthetic or efferent.

Aesthetic reading is a predominantly literary reading event in which the reader's main focus is on what happens during the actual reading and what is activated in a reader's mind by the text is much more important than any specific information which remains after the event. Most of what people would call "reading for enjoyment" would be classified as aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1978).

On the other hand, efferent reading is a predominantly nonliterary reading event in which the reader is focused on getting information from the text. Efferent readers often filter out all information except that which the reader has determined is necessary. Efferent reading requires

attention mostly to public aspects of meaning and often marginalizes, eliminates or precludes activation of personal ideas or feelings (Rosenblatt, 1978).

When students are aware they will be tested on factual aspects of a text that they are engaged in, an aesthetic reading is prevented and the efferent transaction which ensues will focus on retaining information long enough to provide correct answers to questions. The elimination of aesthetic reading from the experience of many public school students precludes them from attaining many of the benefits of independent reading, and Rosenblatt (1995) argues that the elicitation of aesthetic readings from students should be the goal of literacy curricula.

The majority of the benefits of reading novels and independent reading described by Cullinan (2000) are due to students engaging in aesthetic transactions with texts. When a student begins reading a novel at school and continues reading it at home, it is safe to conclude that the student is engaged in an aesthetic transaction with the text. These aesthetic transactions lead to increases in vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and overall academic success (Anderson et al.,1988; Cunningham & Stanovich 1991; Greaney, 1980; Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Krashen, 1993; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990). In addition to the aforementioned academic benefits that aesthetic readings may be related to, there are other benefits for the student who engages in aesthetic readings.

Rosenblatt (1995) argues that literature provides an outlet for antisocial ideas, repressed urges and even anti-authoritarian desires to strike back at those who create social restrictions. Literature provides readers the opportunity to experience events that would normally be impossible or unwise to experience. The ability to sympathize or identify with the experience of characters in literature is the basis of the cathartic benefits of literature and in order to achieve this, a primarily aesthetic reading is required. Although catharsis in and of itself is a worthy benefit, there are numerous other benefits to aesthetic transactions that students can experience.

Besides providing cathartic release for negative emotions, literature may suggest to readers more socially approved channels for the expression of desires (Rosenblatt, 1995). This may be because literature allows readers to engage in a "process of imaginative trial and error" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 190). Because of their aesthetic engagement, readers can vicariously experience what characters go through in a text. This new understanding may give some perspective to the reader when it is related to problems similar to what the reader faces. For many adolescent readers, this may be a chance to realize that their situation may not be unique, and they may find solace in knowing they are not alone or that their cultures definitions of normality are too narrow. Rosenblatt (1995) argues that literary experiences may mitigate feelings of abnormality in adolescents who may not conform to the dominant cultural norms that he/she may be expected to embrace and may encourage adolescents to reexamine their perceptions of others.

Aesthetic transactions with literature can show students how their ideals may have been subconsciously internalized representations of the dominant cultural ideals that surround them (Rosenblatt, 1995). By showing students how their beliefs are influenced by their surroundings, literature may give students a choice in whether to continue embracing ideals that may be socially unacceptable. Rosenblatt (1995) argues that readers can come to understand themselves and the world around them better through examination of their emotional responses to literature. Aesthetic reading of literature may "either reinforce or weaken attitudes and images the young person may encounter through other social influences" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 211). Although parents and educational institutions are often thought to be the major transmitters of culture to adolescents, there is a myriad of propaganda, images and ideals that modern adolescents are

bombarded with which shapes their view of themselves and the world around them. Whether it is through television, print media, movies, music, music videos, commercials or the Internet, adolescents are indoctrinated with many myths, not all of which are beneficial for them to embrace.

Rape Myths

In a seminal study where the first rape myth inventory was created, the *Rape Myth Acceptance Scale*, Burt (1980) defines rape myths as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" that create an environment hostile to rape victims (p. 217). In a subsequent study, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) define rape myths as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male aggression against women" (p. 134). Rape myths (a) demean victims of rape, "only bad girls get raped"; (b) blame victims for their own assault, "if she didn't want sex she shouldn't have gone to his room"; (c) absolve perpetrators of guilt, "if a man is sexually excited he can get carried away"; and (d) question whether the victim truly did not want to engage in sex with the perpetrator, "any healthy woman can resist a rapist." The acceptance of rape myths influences how a person defines rape and the definition of rape one subscribes to may be broad or narrow.

Rape myth acceptance in men has been hypothesized to be a predictor of proclivity to commit future sexual assault (Abrahms, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Bohner, Jarvis, Eyssel, & Siebler, 2005; Malamuth & Check, 1985; Quackenbush, 1989). These studies are important because if rape myth acceptance can be reduced, there could be a reduction in perpetration of sexual assaults. For adolescents, this is of critical importance because teens are more likely than any other age group to be victims or perpetrators of sexual assault.

Rape Statistics

Rape is pandemic in America. The United States leads the world in number of rapes committed and leads all industrialized nations in rapes per capita ("Rapes by Country," 2010). Studies of college students show that between 24 and 50% of women will be or have been sexually victimized by the time they finish college (Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox, 1988). Burt and Albin (1981) cite Los Angeles police reports that show less than 10% of rapes are reported; of those reported, fewer than 5% are prosecuted. The figures are unchanged for adolescent victims as 60% choose not to report or seek help for dating violence (Ashley & Foshee, 2005). These statistics could show that rape myth acceptance not only is a factor for males in influencing sexual assault but also for female and males who are victimized.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2009), the highest rate of sexual assault and rape victimization occurs to adolescents aged 12-15 years old. Also, 25% of women will experience a rape or an attempted rape before age 14 (Heppner, Humphrey & Hillebrand-Gunn, 1995; Koss, 1997). The greatest proportion of both victims and perpetrators of sexual assaults is accounted for by 14 year olds, who are more than 4 times as likely as an adult to be a victim or a perpetrator of sexual violence (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999; U.S. Department of Justice, 2004).

Although stranger rape may be the best known form of rape, adolescents are in greater danger of acquaintance rape, which is defined as nonconsensual sex between individuals who knew each other before the sex act. Date rape is a subset of acquaintance rape where nonconsensual sex occurs between two people who are in a romantic relationship. Of juvenile sexual assault victims, 93% knew their attacker, 34.2% of perpetrators were family members and 58.7% of perpetrators were acquaintances (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). By the time a female is of college age, 25 to 50% will have experienced at least one act of sexual coercion (submitting to sexual advances against their will) in a dating relationship (Kanin, 1977; Korman

& Leslie, 1982; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Clearly, adolescents are at high risk of suffering sexual assault at the hands of someone they know.

During the adolescent years, most teens begin to date, and for many adolescents, this is a time for sexual experimentation. By the 11th grade, the average teen has had six to eight dating partners, with 12 being the average age for adolescents to begin entering dating relationships (Slep, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf & O'Leary, 2001). The importance and prevalence of dating in secondary school aged adolescents should make school-based date rape prevention programs a priority in education. With adolescents and preteens representing such a disproportionately large percentage of rape victims and sexual assault perpetrators, various educational programs have been created with the intent of reducing the number of rapes and sexual assaults that occur (Post, Maxwell, Smith & Korzeniewski, 2006).

Rape Myths and Rape Prevention

Educators have created numerous programs that attempt to change the attitudes of both males and females toward rape myth acceptance with the belief that reducing rape myth acceptance will reduce attempted rapes. There have been many studies on the effects of educational programs on changing attitudes toward dating violence in college students (Heppner et al., 1995; Johansson-Love & Geer, 2003; Hanson, & Gidycz, 1993; Foubert & Perry, 2007). Some researchers believe that educational programs dealing with sexual violence should be conducted before children develop their dating behaviors and preferences (Mandelblatt, 1999; Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001). Because adolescents of secondary school age are at the highest risk for victimization and perpetration of sexual assaults, secondary schools are a logical place for date rape prevention education. Furthermore, because the majority of secondary school students do not progress on to college, secondary school based date rape education is more appropriate since it would reach a greater portion of the population at risk. Finally, because 14-year olds may be the highest at risk age for both perpetration and victimization of sexual assaults, middle school would be the ideal setting for date rape prevention education.

Date Rape Education

Educators have created numerous programs that attempt to change the attitudes of both males and females toward acquaintance rape. The majority of programs have been instituted on college campuses. The majority of studies have focused on the effects of didactic based programs on college students' rape myth acceptance (Feltey, Ainslie, & Geib, 1991; Foubert & Perry, 2007; Hanson & Gidycz, 1993; Heppner et al., 1995; Johansson-Love & Geer, 2003). Fewer studies focus on secondary school students (Ting, 2009). Those that do are similar in didactic elements to the programs used in colleges (Hickman, Jaycox & Aronoff, 2004; Jaffe, Suderman, Reitzel & Kellip, 1992). The majority of both college and secondary school interventions seem to rely on didactic methods to change participants' acceptance of rape myths in order to reduce future sexual assaults. Interventions have shown various levels of effectiveness in reducing rape myth acceptance and even in reducing future sexual assaults.

Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of some programs has been a backlash in male participants where rape myth acceptance actually increased for some post intervention (Jaffe et al., 1992). This backlash could be caused by a variety of factors, but the didactic nature of most treatment plans and the short term duration of many interventions may not provide the opportunity for all participants to develop empathy for victims of sexual assault. A prolonged aesthetic transaction with adolescent literature may provide the solution to this problem.

Speak

Speak, by Laurie Halse Anderson, is a young adult novel that deals with the aftermath of a date rape. The main character, Melinda Sordino, is raped by a male high school student whom she meets at a party during the summer before her freshman year of high school. She is under the influence of alcohol at the party and during the rape. Although she consents to kissing her assailant while taking a walk in the woods, she does not agree to engage in intercourse. She does not report the rape to authorities nor to anyone else, and throughout the novel questions whether or not her experience was a rape. The novel chronicles her efforts to remain in denial about the rape. The novel was a *New York Times* bestseller and a Printz Honor book in 1999. Because of the popularity with both teachers and students in dealing with the subject of date rape, *Speak* would be an excellent choice to use with adolescents to determine whether reading literature can aid in reducing rape myth acceptance.

Statement of the Problem

Considering the lack of research into the relationship between reader response based classroom instruction of fictional literature and adolescents' rape myth acceptance, this paper argues the necessity for research which will seek to examine the relationship between reading a novel, *Speak*, and adolescents' acceptance of rape myths.

Research Question

Do students who read the novel *Speak* have lower levels of rape myth acceptance than those who do not?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the use of young adult novels, specifically *Speak*, has a relationship with adolescents' rape myth acceptance. This study will attempt to determine the benefits from reading novels that can be measured outside of the realm of standardized reading proficiency exams. It is hoped that this study will support the argument that novels should be maintained as part of the curriculum in language arts and English classes.

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