

An Author's Influence:

Investigating Student Response to a Novel and Motivation for Future Reading

What inspires you to read? I don't mean what motivates you to pick up a book rather than take a walk or watch TV. I mean, when you are ready to read and you are making your selection, what inspires you to choose a particular book? For me, it is often the author. I find an author I like, and I tend to read as much of his or her work as I can find. If I read a book I don't like, rarely will I revisit that author with another title. As I attend professional development conferences at the state level or nationally at NCTE and ALAN, I make it my mission to seek out all of the authors I can, because I know that I am motivated to read when I get to hear an author speak about his or her work and learn how the story came to be. I had never read anything by Matt de la Peña, Sarah Dessen, or Simone Eckles until I heard them speak about their work at a conference.

Unfortunately, students in K-12 schools lack the opportunities we have to go to conferences and hear authors speak. There are small events and festivals in different regions of the country, but this is not a widespread phenomenon. We are fortunate in Northeast Ohio to have the Youngstown State University English Festival. Celebrating its 35th year in 2013, students in grades 7-12 can spend a day on campus listening to authors and engaging in activities that celebrate reading and writing, but these kinds of opportunities are few and not every child can participate.

Pamela K. Coke's article "Developing Academic Kinship, Meeting Rock Stars: What ALAN and NCTE Offer English Educators" (2013) describes her notion

of academic kinship and provides a framework for the project I describe in this article. Teri Lesesne, in her book *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time, Grades 4-12* (2003), recognizes this same phenomenon when she talks about knowing the author as a motivating factor for middle school students. I have certainly come to count many authors as my academic kin, and I wanted to create that experience for students in my area. Without knowing the term, I wanted to help my students experience academic kinship with authors we chose to read. I wanted to give them a chance to meet an author face-to-face—in the classroom, not in an auditorium with hundreds of people—and I wanted them to be able to ask their own questions or discuss their responses to create such a kinship.

As part of the experience, I wanted to answer two primary research questions: *Do students' responses to a novel change after meeting the author, and does meeting the author influence students' motivation to read more by that author or any other author?* I was able to make that happen in the spring of 2012. I have a good working relationship in my local school district, and I was working with a strong group of women who taught seventh grade, so I felt confident they would be willing to take on this project with me. I gave them copies of *The Sledding Hill* (2005) by Chris Crutcher and, after reading it, they agreed to use this book with all of the seventh graders. I also suggested an author visit, feeling sure that Crutcher would be a "good fit" for the students. I proposed the

idea to Crutcher, and he readily agreed to participate. With funding from an ALAN research grant and some on-campus sources, we were off and running.

The Story

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Not only has Eddie lost his best friend, but his father died the same summer. This double tragedy has driven Eddie inward. He does not speak, and he does his best not to interact with anyone, including his mother or the Reverend Tarter of the Red Brick Church who seems to be everywhere—as a teacher at school, at church, and in his home. The Reverend Tarter is a force to be reckoned with, and Eddie is doing his best to steer

clear, but the main conflict brings him squarely into the Reverend's path.

Eddie is taking a course in high school called "Really Modern Literature" taught by the librarian, Ms. Ruth Lloyd, where the class must read books by authors who are still alive. One of those authors just happens to be Chris Crutcher. Crutcher creates a fictional title, *Warren Peece*, which features a main character who is gay. When the Reverend Tarter finds out, he quietly organizes the youth group of the church and other followers in an attempt to ban the book from the curriculum. Eddie becomes a double agent, keeping his silence in the presence of the church members as they plot to remove the book from the curriculum, but secretly keeping his copy, reading it, and eventually crafting a plan to counter the one that is set to take one more thing out of his life.

The Project

We began in January 2012. Students at Carter Middle School (school and student names are all pseud-

onyms) were given copies of *The Sledding Hill*. We began by examining the front and back covers and making predictions about the story. As students started to read the book in class, I pulled aside 30 of the 109 seventh graders for a series of individual interviews. I asked the teachers to help me select a representative cross section of males and females and an equal range among students who are avid readers and those who normally do not choose to read. Also included in that number were all of the students who are pulled out for intervention; they comprised a single focus group. I began by asking the students about their reading habits. In the first round of interviews, I asked students if they liked to read, what they liked to read, if they read when they had free time, and how they went about the task of choosing a book.

Regardless of whether the students labeled themselves as avid readers, somewhere in the middle, or those who did not like to read and only did so if required to in school, the majority of the students expressed a preference for mystery, fantasy, or science fiction. In their article "Tailoring the Fit: Reading Instruction and Middle School Readers," Ivey and Broadus (2000) found similar reading interests among the students they interviewed. They have conducted multiple studies and found that middle school readers prefer scary stories, sports books, comics, and magazines. Students in this study exhibited the same preferences, but added dystopian novels such as *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). Students, especially boys, cited magazines related to their interests outside of school, like hunting, playing video games, and riding ATVs.

When asked how they chose a book to read, the answers were identical. They look at the cover, read the back or inside flap, and maybe read a little bit of the first couple of pages to decide. After hearing this response repeated verbatim by nearly every student, I asked the teachers why that might be. As it turns out, when these students were in elementary school, their library time became a "class," and the librarian had to "teach" them something, so she taught them how to pick a book. When I tried to delve deeper, the students struggled. They talked a lot about looking at the cover; many who preferred the fantasy/mystery/science fiction vein would say they would look for books with dark covers: blacks, reds, or purples. *The Sledding Hill* cover was yellow and green, the only

red in the lettering of the title itself. Most students said they would never have picked up the book on their own for that reason. Teri Lesesne (2003) also found that the cover of the book influenced student choices. "While length, book flap summaries, and blurbs did not seem to make much difference, students did indicate that they selected books (and rejected them) based on the covers. . . . The best book in the world will not circulate if the cover appears 'dorky' to your kids" (p. 33).

When asked about sources for books, selection was again limited. All of the teachers in this study had a small selection of books in their classrooms and many students started there. The school library was the next potential source. There is a branch of the county district library within the village where the school is located, and that was third in the number of responses, but transportation was often an issue for students who did not live within walking distance. Few students named home libraries or bookstores, brick and mortar or online, as a source for reading material.

Few students expressed a preference for realistic fiction; most did not understand the term when I asked, and then rejected it when I described it as books about teenagers set in current times facing problems that kids their age might face. In fact, only three expressed an interest in reading such books. I began to worry about the success of this project as I faced a group of students who were all telling me that had I not chosen this book and suggested it to their teachers for this project, they would never have picked it up on their own.

The unit of study took about six weeks in each teacher's classroom. All three teachers read the book aloud to their students four or five days a week. The teachers agreed that if they did not read aloud, the majority of students would not read for homework. I was only able to provide one class set of books to each room, thus prohibiting every student from taking a book home. Reading aloud gave time for in-class discussion and clarification during the novel unit. This was helpful because *The Sledding Hill* is a complicated story. The narrator, Billy Bartholomew, is dead, and he is telling us the story of his best friend Eddie Proffit in the third person.

In the beginning, the students had difficulty keeping the boys straight and understanding who was talk-

ing when. Billy is the narrator, but we hear Eddie's voice as he and Billy have conversations when Eddie is dreaming. Crutcher identifies these dreams by using italics, but the students had difficulty recognizing this visual cue. Because Billy was a ghost, he could move in and out of locations and even know what Eddie was thinking at times, making the narration even more complex and at times confusing for the students to follow. Finally, when the censorship plot was developing and community

members began to take sides over the book, the students struggled to sort out which characters were on each side of the debate. As a support for the students, we developed a set of note cards with each character's name and put them on the chalkboard as a kind of word wall so that we could help students

sort and categorize who was dead, who was alive, who was for *Warren Peece*, and who was against it.

The complexity of the narrative and the difficulty in following who was talking was something that came up in most interviews. During the reading, students were expressing some confusion and frustration because they could not follow the story or the narrator, but by the end, they seemed to have sorted it all out, citing the support of the class discussions and teacher explanations as helpful. Sarah described her reading experience like this:

I liked the book at the beginning and then I understood it. Then in the middle, I didn't get it as well . . . but then I got it at the end, and when we went over it in class and then all the questions we asked Chris Crutcher and I understood more. . . . I liked doing this, just reading it and going over it in class.

This student, like many others, responded to the story and the reading process in tandem. She enjoyed the book when she felt she understood what was happening, but when the complexity of the narrative interfered with comprehension, it also interfered with her enjoyment of the book. When we were able to help her sort out the characters and their roles in the central conflict, she was able to enjoy the reading experience.

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Author Visit

One of the variables I hoped to be able to isolate in the students' motivation to read or not was the effect of the author visit. I struggled with whether or not we should tell the students from the beginning that this would be the culmination of the reading, or if we should save that information for the end. I decided to tell them from the start that we would read this book together and meet the author in their classroom at the end. From the outset, students were interested in read-

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We gave some background on Crutcher at the beginning and more in the day or two before he arrived. During the reading, one student in each classroom was designated as the "question keeper." As we read, students would

often ask a question, usually related to the author's motivation—why did he put that in the story?—so we collected those questions for the visit. The day before Crutcher's arrival, we prepared students by reviewing those lists of questions and deciding who would ask which one. Questions were written on note cards and saved for the big day.

I have to admit that I stacked the deck by choosing Chris Crutcher as the author for this project. Ultimately, while my research question centered around *Does meeting an author influence a student's motivation to read?*, what I really wanted to do was try to influence the students' motivation to read. From reports such as *Reading at Risk* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004), we know that literary reading in the United States is declining. Seventh graders are younger than the youngest population included in *Reading at Risk* (2004) data, but other studies and position papers, such as the 2012 revision of *Adolescent Literacy* (International Reading Association, 2012), recommend that "Offering adolescents access to relevant and recent young adult literature can motivate interest in reading and create an opportunity to build a lifelong habit of engaging in reading and writing for pleasure" (International Reading Association, 2012, p. 13). This

position statement also advocates that adolescents be exposed to diverse reading experiences. Given that the majority of students interviewed did not read modern realistic fiction, the choice of *The Sledding Hill* would be a diverse selection.

I also knew that I needed a book that would pique their interests, be at their reading level—not too easy, not too challenging—and I needed an author that the kids could relate to and would enjoy. Chris Crutcher fit the bill. Daniel commented, "I think Chris Crutcher was awesome, so like if he was my grandpa I think he'd be an awesome grandpa. There's like your grandpa and then there's the awesome grandpa, like you have the uncle and then you have the fun uncle." Gloria said, "I thought he was just going to be one of those people who they come in and they sit there and they talk about a lot of boring stuff. Chris Crutcher was amazing. I thought he was so nice and cool." Students connected with the author as a person and were able to relate to what he said. They saw him as approachable and interesting to listen to as a speaker. So the next question becomes, did I accomplish my goal?

Results

This project was guided by two primary research questions: *Do students' responses to a novel change after meeting the author and does meeting the author influence students' motivation to read more by that author or any other author?* Based on this project, the answer to the first question is yes. Qualitative analysis of student responses at the end of this project settled around three different themes. First, students had an increased openness to the genre of modern realistic fiction. Based on positive experiences with *The Sledding Hill*, the class discussions, and the author visit, more students were considering modern realistic fiction for upcoming book report assignments or self-selected reading and asked us for recommendations of titles and authors that were similar to what we had just read. Based on data from the initial interviews, students did not understand what the genre of modern realistic fiction was and had few experiences reading in this genre. This project exposed them to an exemplar text, and through the positive experience with this reading, students expressed motivation to read more in the genre.

Second, the author visit as a single element changed students' responses to the novel by increasing the believability of the story. Throughout the reading, there were occasions where we had to supplement students' background knowledge to help them understand if situations were real or could have been based on real events. None of these students had ever experienced a censorship challenge in our community, and they were skeptical at first that this was even a possibility or that it really happened in other places, so we provided background information and talked about real challenges in other communities. Students prepared questions for Crutcher to ask about his experiences around his books being banned, like: "How does it feel to have your books banned?" "Do you mean or intend for your books to be banned?" "Have you ever been to a school board meeting to defend one of your books?" Through these questions, students were seeking verisimilitude for the events in the story, connecting the author's experiences and his explanation of his writing process to understand how the censorship challenge in the book was described. When they asked, "Why did the Red Brickers win?" Crutcher explained that not every challenge ends with the book being reinstated into the classroom or library, and he wanted to portray a realistic challenge. In the final interview, I asked students if there was anything from the author visit that helped them understand the book better. Eric keyed in on the success of the challenge, saying, "How the Red Brickers win. I didn't understand it until he explained it. It all fits together now because he explained it to us."

There were other instances of students seeking out what was real in this story. Students looked for books written by other authors in Ruth Lloyd's curriculum and discovered that these authors were real and some of their books were in the school library. We began to see students carrying around copies of works mentioned by Crutcher like *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 1983) and *Slaughterhouse Five* (Vonnegut, 1969).

Other cultural references added to the believability once students understood them. At one point, Billy tries to explain Eddie's reaction to the banning of *Warren Peece* by describing how Eddie is now motivated to read and listen to anything that censors have deemed inappropriate as an act of rebellion. He says, "If Coach were smart he'd give Eddie a really hard

math problem right before every race and offer him a Dixie Chicks CD if he could solve it by the end of the race" (Crutcher, 2005, p. 146). These students were too young to remember the controversial comments made by Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines in 2003 when she criticized President George W. Bush in front of a British audience. So we played "Not Ready to Make Nice" (Maguire, Maines, Robinson, & Wilson, 2006) and showed students the lyrics. When the reference made sense, they were better able to understand censorship as a real issue in society.

The ultimate example of an increase in believability came from Crutcher's school visit. From the beginning, many students were skeptical about the ways both Eddie's father and Billy died. They found the manner of death in each case far-fetched and convoluted until Crutcher sat before them in their classroom and told them that his grandfather nearly died in the same manner he used for Eddie's dad and that when he was a boy, a childhood friend died in the same way he killed the character of Billy Bartholomew. This was a pivotal moment for many of these students and the facial expressions and open jaws in the room reflected the contradictions they were feeling. Their previous perceptions that these events were exaggerated were shattered by the power of the author sitting in front of them and answering their questions like, "Why such unusual deaths?" or "Is this book based on facts?" Benjamin summed it up by saying, "Well, I wouldn't imagine that something like the deaths that happened would've really happened in somebody's life." As Crutcher told the stories of his grandfather's accident and of people he has known in his life that influenced characters such as the Reverend Tartar or Ruth Lloyd, students began to see that even though the story was fiction, there was motivation or background in events or people that were important to the author. Lisa explained her ideas about these events by saying, "I guess you could say

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[he] spoke the truth because it had to do with his life and it actually happened to him.” Kelly described it this way:

After you see his kind of view of the book and how he wants you or the reader to see it kind of like changes how you look at it. You see it in a different light. Like you may picture a person one way, like after he said he is much like Eddie himself, it kind of made me think about what he would look like as a kid, like as Eddie. Didn't really change my opinion of Eddie, just understand him more.

Does meeting the author influence students' motivation to read more by that author or any other author? This is hard to tell as an isolated variable.

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Overall, the experience of reading and meeting the author increased students' motivation to read. Based on the final interviews when students were asked if this experience was likely to encourage or discourage them to read more, and the evidence of students carrying around other books by Crutcher or authors we were recommending as modern realistic fiction (e.g., Laurie

Halse Anderson, Jordan Sonnenblick, or Christopher Paul Curtis), students were more interested in reading modern realistic fiction than they had expressed in the initial interviews. At one point, the school librarian had to go into storage to bring out additional copies of Crutcher's books she had packed away because more students were asking for books than she had copies available.

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Shannon: I am reading *Stotan!* Like I see other people walking around with other Chris Crutcher books. [This experience] encourages me 'cause I didn't like reading at the beginning when we first did interviews, but now I like it because I want to see like what he is writing about and like how other books just like are boring and everything but he put interesting things in there now, personal things

for everybody to learn [about] their life.

Gary: I like how he modeled the Reverend after someone he knew and most of the characters are people he knew, like his friend dying and his grandpa dying the same way as Billy and John died. That was cool. I never read these kind of realistic fiction books . . . so maybe I'll read more of those. I'll read different kinds of things because I usually only read two or three genres. I'll read more of his books because I like how he writes them.

These responses illustrate the success of this project in motivating students to read and to try a genre that was relatively new to them. Through the experience of reading *The Sledding Hill* and meeting Chris Crutcher, they found that they could enjoy modern realistic fiction and were motivated by the notion that stories they might once have rejected as “fake” could actually have roots in an author's life. That added interest and integrity to their reading.

What Did I Learn?

Students in this project were craving recommendations for books they might enjoy. This is a relatively small community. School and classroom libraries are limited, and most students do not have access to a large selection of books. They look to others for recommendations: teachers, parents, librarians, and friends. They need access to a range of choices, and they want adult mentors to provide guidance. They trust friends for recommendations to a point, but acknowledge that either friends have as limited access as they do, or their friends' choices are limited to personal preferences they don't share.

Maria: It depends on what friend it is. If Tess would recommend a book to me, then I would probably want to read it because she is one of those people that likes exciting books and stuff like that. But if Karen would recommend a book to me, then I'd be like, ah, I'll try it because she reads all books, but I'm like, not really.

Many kids would have given up on this story without adult mentoring. When they were struggling to keep the characters straight, understand who

was talking to them or telling the story, or trying to sort out the people and the issues, they needed class discussion and adult guidance to make sense of it. Without that support, they might have given up on the reading.

Jimmy: [I]f I would have read the first chapter or two, it probably wouldn't have clicked at first or may not have seemed too interesting, and halfway through the book, I started getting really confused about like what Eddie was doing and about the dreams and stuff that he kept going in and out, and about who each character was, and it was a little confusing.

Beth: I liked it because I like reading books with other people, and we got to meet the author so it was even better. Because sometimes I read a book by myself and I miss something that I won't understand the whole entire book, so it was really fun. We got to discuss the book with other people so we got to discuss what our favorite parts were or if we like the book or not.

No one would have picked up this title on his or her own. Whether that was due to the cover design or the genre, the interviews made clear that not one student would have selected this book if we had not presented it as a whole-class novel, but most found they had enjoyed the reading once we were finished. This tells me that teachers need to do two things. First, we need to expose students to a wide range of texts; second, we need to understand that in order to do that, we must be readers of a wide range of texts so that we have a deep well of books from which to draw. The Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association published a position statement on adolescent literacy in 1999 that begins with the first principle for supporting adolescents' literacy growth: "Adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read" (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 4). *Reading Next* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), a report by the Carnegie Corporation, emphasizes the importance of diverse texts. In this case, diversity includes a range of reading levels, topics, and diverse characters and situations where students may find reflections of themselves as well as representations of those who are

different. The Common Core State Standards, College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading 6–12 encourage diversity of texts:

To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students' own thinking and writing (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 35).

Sometimes we need to encourage readers to try something new, but that requires that we have something new to offer them. How can we do that? I asked students to give me advice for teachers and parents that could help them choose books. They suggested book talks, without knowing there was a word for "tell us about more books we might be interested in." We can do book talks live in the classroom once or twice a week or show book trailers from YouTube as students are entering our classrooms each day. We

can read aloud to our students a few times a week for no other reason than to let them listen to a story, and then add recommendations along the way for other books like the one they are listening to. We need to have well-stocked classroom libraries. If we can't have all the physical books on hand that we would like, we could dedicate a section of wall space to posting pictures of book covers as a source of recommendation and inspiration. In the end, if we tell them about a book that we enjoyed, chances are they will be open to the suggestion.

When making our recommendations, we need to include authors. In other words, we need to tell students about the author as well as about the book. We need to connect kids and authors as often as possible. Lack of funding may prohibit school visits such as the one described in this project, but there may be untapped resources available, such as local civic organizations willing to donate and support an author visit, grants, or other donor sources. Many authors are willing to do visits via Skype, which is significantly

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cheaper than a face-to-face visit. If nothing else, most authors have a webpage, and on those webpages are biographies, pictures, and often videos so that your students can connect a name and a face and a voice to the story that they are reading.

Those of us who read and study young adult literature are lucky; we get to experience the theme of Ruth Lloyd's "Really Modern Literature" class because most of the authors we read are still alive and accessible to us and to our students through websites, blogs, Skype, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. We need to access those resources and use these connections to authors as one more way to motivate kids to read.

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