

NARRATIVE 13.1 | JOELLEN MAPLES

Joellen Maples is an assistant professor in the Literacy Department at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York, who has 11 years' experience teaching eighth-grade reading in an inclusive middle school:

Back when I was an idealistic, young English teacher, I was bursting with ideas about how I would share Shakespeare with my students. As an English major, I naively believed that they would share my love of reading. However, much to my dismay, they did not. I taught in an inclusive setting and was not prepared for the various reading levels represented in one classroom. I was shocked to learn that some of my eighth graders were nonreaders, while the rest ranged from third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade reading levels. Gone were my dreams of inspiring my students with the classics. Paradoxically, the basal texts, required for use in the classroom, were "on grade level," which meant eighth grade. To compound matters, the stories were not relatable when viewed through the lens of my students' urban background. To achieve success in the reading classroom, reading materials must be interesting, highly relatable, and appropriate for the students' reading levels. I remember looking in disbelief at my students as they would put their heads on their desks in boredom. I could not comprehend simply choosing not to read.

At the perfect moment, I discovered young adult literature, and I immediately recognized its potential as an avenue to promote interest in reading. I was determined to get my students hooked with materials that covered their specific interests. By inundating them with appealing literature, I laid the groundwork needed to support my long-term goals of increasing literacy among my students. My approach was to operate in stealth, honing their reading skills without them realizing it. Initially, I was skeptical. As a literature snob, I wanted them to read the books that I wanted them to read. I had to quickly learn, with some profound and simple advice from my mentor, that the goal was to get them to read. Period. I was desperate, but willing to give young adult literature a try.



I started with *Holes*, a young adult text by Louis Sachar. In *Holes*, Stanley Yelnats is accused of stealing a pair of shoes. As his punishment, he must choose between jail and Camp Green Lake. Stanley chooses camp, where he is forced to dig holes all day. However, in that summer, he learns more about life than he could ever imagine. My students were instantly hooked. I would read aloud to them daily, and eventually, I had some of them reading aloud as well. Every time class would start, they would ask, "Can we read today?" To have them request to read was my sweetest reward.

One day, there was a fight in the hallway that the math teacher and I had to break up. Dealing with the discipline issues prevented me from getting back to class on time, and my students kept popping their heads out saying, "Mrs. Maples, when are you coming to class? We want to finish the book!" In the midst of the excitement, I failed to recognize that my students were begging me to read. As I was headed back to my classroom, I noticed that an eerie silence was emanating from my room and immediately felt a sense of dread thinking, "Oh no! What have they done?" Any teacher knows that, when you are out of the classroom, students can find all kinds of trouble to get themselves into.

Unable to imagine what they could be doing, I raced to my door and I will never forget what I saw. Robert, my best reader, was sitting at my podium reading the ending of *Holes* to his classmates. I surveyed the room and saw that all of my students were on task and following along. They could not wait to find out what happened. It was in that moment that the power of young adult literature availed itself to me. Through this medium, readers, struggling or not, could develop a love for literacy. New teachers interested in learning more about young adult literature in all content areas can check out ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English) at www.Alan-ya.org. ALAN holds an annual conference in November where attendees learn how to integrate young adult literature into their teaching. Young adult authors also provide sessions, giving away copies of their latest books to start classroom libraries. Students deserve rich, high-interest texts to which they can relate and it is our job, as teachers, to provide them.



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