

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

4-2023

Found Families: An Idea for Blending Whole-Class Novels and Student Choice in Middle School and High School English Classrooms

Abby De Groot
Dordt University, abby.degroot@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work



Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

De Groot, A. (2023). Found Families: An Idea for Blending Whole-Class Novels and Student Choice in Middle School and High School English Classrooms. *Christian Educators Journal*, 62 (4), 19. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1482

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Found Families: An Idea for Blending Whole-Class Novels and Student Choice in Middle School and High School English Classrooms

Abstract

The ideas in this article spring from three important identities I carry in my heart: reader, teacher, and child in the family of God. I have spent my career as a teacher, both in K–12 schools and higher education, thinking about how to best teach literature in a way that produces not only literate and knowledgeable students but also students who see and value God’s truth in stories. I have not always succeeded at reaching these worthwhile goals, but I am grateful to still be discovering and articulating ways to do so.

Keywords

novels, middle school students, high school students, classrooms

Disciplines

Language and Literacy Education

Comments

Copyright © *Christian Educators Journal* 2023.

Found Families: An Idea for Blending Whole-Class Novels and Student Choice in Middle School and High School English Classrooms

The ideas in this article spring from three important identities I carry in my heart: reader, teacher, and child in the family of God. I have spent my career as a teacher, both in K–12 schools and higher education, thinking about how to best teach literature in a way that produces not only literate and knowledgeable students but also students who see and value God’s truth in stories. I have not always succeeded at reaching these worthwhile goals, but I am grateful to still be discovering and articulating ways to do so.

Throughout the eleven years that I taught high school English, I mostly approached texts with my students in the same way I had been taught: as whole-class reads with a schedule, homework checks, discussions, and some sort of summative assessment (mostly papers or projects). I also included a variety of attempts at independent reading and book-club style group reading, inspired by reading workshop enthusiasts such as Nancie Atwell (*In the Middle*) and Donalyn Miller (*The Book Whisperer*). While students in my classroom learned and achieved a measure of success in reading with each of those instructional approaches, I never felt as if I was able to help students make authentic connections between their whole-class and independent reading.

Those connections, as well as an instructional approach that would enable them, were on my mind as I designed an English Methods course for future middle school and high school English teachers a few years later. I have taught the college course twice, in the fall semesters of 2020 and 2022, and a significant part of the course includes exploring with future teachers how to structure literature units, how to effectively teach literacy skills, and how to choose and approach a variety of texts.

One of the resources that has been essential to this part of our work together has been the book *A Novel Approach: Whole-Class Novels, Student-Centered Teaching, and Choice* by Kate Roberts. Roberts begins the book by outlining the “debate” between reading experts who advocate for whole-class texts and those who advocate for independent reading or reading workshops (4). Drawing on educational research, literacy experts, and her own experiences in the classroom, she clearly describes both approaches, including their advantages and shortcomings:

A whole-class text approach revolves around tough, widely read, complex texts chosen by teachers or schools. This approach, advocated for by literacy experts such as Tim Shanahan and Doug Lemov, ensures that students read a wide range of texts that they would not otherwise pick up on their own. Teachers can guide students in rigorous shared-learning experiences with difficult texts that can help prepare them for college. However, this approach is complicated by varying skill levels of students, a lack of diverse representation in the canon, and the time-consuming nature of the approach.

An independent reading or workshop approach revolves around reading strategies and skills taught by teachers that students then use to read books of their own choosing. Advocates of this approach, including the two authors mentioned above—Nancie Atwell and Donalyn Miller—as well as Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle, argue that students need to read a large volume of books in order to become fluent readers, and that choice motivates students to read in ways that teacher-chosen novels do not. However, this approach is less effective when students fail to choose increasingly difficult texts, and it limits students’ exposure to seminal texts. It is also difficult to manage and requires a significant investment in classroom libraries.

Instead of choosing one of these approaches over the other, Roberts endorses them both and argues that teachers can strategically blend them together for students’ benefit: “I am suggesting that by thoughtfully, intentionally taking some of the best of different teaching methodologies, while always holding onto some research-based, core beliefs, we can help our students flourish in ways that teaching only one way may not” (6). She spends the rest of the book outlining this approach in detail, describing how to organize a course around both whole-class and independent reading, united by the teaching of literacy skills as required in the Common Core Standards.

Our English Methods class spends the first part of our semester reading Roberts’s book, responding to it, and trying out her curriculum design. I model read-alouds and mini-lessons, and then the class of future teachers designs their own and teaches them to each other. We look deeply at standards and discuss how and when they should be addressed. We think about relevant book choices, read together, and make recommendations. As a final assessment, future teachers design a literature unit that includes both a whole-class novel and an independent choice book. In their units, they scaffold the literacy skills they want students to learn by introducing the skills in the whole-class novel before asking students to practice those skills independently in a choice book. The two experiences—the whole-class read and the independent book—are united through studies of the author’s craft, theme, characterization, symbolism, or plot structure. The book choices are connected as well, as future teachers think about how to match choice books with whole-class novels using themes, authors, genres, time periods, or other touchpoints.

Most importantly, we wrestle with what it means to teach literature as Christians: how can we invite students into stories that help them better understand God and his world while also teaching them the literacy skills they will need to be flourishing students, citizens, workers, family members, and disciples? How can we honor students as image-bearers who deserve autonomy and choice while also designing formative community reading experiences in which we learn from and with each other? How can we help students appreciate the beauty of a revealing symbol, a finely crafted sentence, or a universal theme, seeing them as God’s good gifts?

One of the ways that we answered those questions together during the fall 2022 semester of English Methods included gathering book recommendations. We wanted a

list of books for both whole-class and student choice novels that are beautiful and ripe with literary elements to study. We also wanted those books to unveil part of God's creation, fall, redemption, and restoration narrative in a new way for students. One of the members of our class came up with the idea of uniting our list with a "found family" trope.

Common in literature, TV, and movies, the idea of a found family—a group of unrelated characters who form tightly knit, familial bonds—is also a beautiful metaphor for the kingdom of God. Indeed, the apostle Paul eloquently lays out our place in God's found family in Romans 8:14–17:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Using "found families" as our uniting element, we read and reviewed a variety of books to share with each other and a wider audience of teachers. While many books commonly taught in classrooms employ this trope, our list offers lesser known but valuable titles that cross genre, difficulty, and grade level. Because we also wanted teachers to get a feel for the book and be able to envision how it might be used in their classrooms, our list includes a summary, review, and suggestion for classroom use with each entry. Our hope is that our reviews of these titles are useful for teachers as they design literacy instruction that helps students find their unique place in God's family and equips them with the skills they need to flourish in it.