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Expanding Middle School Students' Literacy Skills Using the Journey Motif in Three Middle Grade Novels and Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper analyzed three middle grade novels and a short story from two cultures using the journey motif as the vehicle for the analysis. The three novels are *Bud Not Buddy* and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* both by Paul Curtis (1995, 1999) and *Journey to Jo'burg* by Naidoo (1985). The short story is *My Two Dads* by Lee (2000). The three novels and a short story were chosen because these novels are on the reading list for students in many school districts in the USA at the middle grade level. The analysis showed that for the three novels and a short story in the study, each text adhered to some elements/ parts of the journey motif. The paper then suggested 10 literacy strategies that can be used by English Language Arts teachers to engage learners, make the instructional process more interesting and hopefully improve achievement for all learners.

Keywords: education, graphic organizers, journey motif, literature circles, Korea, race relations, reading journals, transactional theory

1. Introduction

Part of an educated citizenry is the ability of the individual to read and write at the level deemed necessary to function in that society. Jackson and Hillaird (2013) indicated that in studies done in Minnesota, "boys were two or three times more likely than girls to be affected by reading disabilities" (p.312). Recent reports have chronicled how many schools are failing and what can be done to turn around failing schools (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Herman, Dawson, Dee, Maynard, Redding & Darwin, 2008). Writing on student performance in the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, the Nations Report Card reported that "Between 2013 and 2015, the percentage of grade 4 students scoring at or above Proficient in reading did not change significantly, but the percentage of grade 8 students scoring at or above Proficient declined by two percentage points. The percentage of grade 8 students scoring below Basic also increased" (p.1). Performance by US students in reading in the 2015 Program in International Student Assessment (PISA) Test was relatively weak. Of the 70 countries with reported scores, US came in number 25 on the list. The OECD Report indicated as a summary that "About 20% of students in OECD countries, on average, do not attain the baseline level of proficiency in reading. This proportion has remained stable since 2009" (PISA, 2015: PISA Results in Focus, p.4). There is always then the need to develop and employ strategies to get students to read more and perform better in reading/literacy test.

One way to do this is to have students read widely and in several genres, including folktales, myths etc. According to Nnolim (1976), many novels are focused on the journey motif-

> From the earliest novels in Western literature, it has been in the nature of the novel genre to record the protagonist as on a journey or a quest, as he goes forth on a search-sometimes for a treasure, often for a father figure. In the search, he often ends up learning quite a few lessons about himself, about human nature in general, or about the nature of the world. Ignorance gives way to experience. Wide-eyed naivete yields to sophistication and wisdom in the ways of the world.

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In agreeing with this view, Howard (nd), indicated that the journey is "a process of discovery in which the heroes learn essential truths about themselves, their society, and the nature of human existence" (page.7). Lawson (2005) using Campbell (1949) pointed out that the

> hero's journey is set in motion by means of a supernatural event that casts the innocent into a strange and unfamiliar arena. At this point, the individual is presented with a choice, and this serves as a call to adventure. .. The choice profoundly affects the character…Those who choose to accept the call begin the journey from the known to the unknown. …Once the journey is underway, the hero faces many tests standing between him/her and the ultimate goal. ..The hero must rely on the assistance of others encountered in the journey in order to overcome the challenges. Those who are able to pass the tests of the journey demonstrate, through the journey itself, that they already possessed brains, courage, and heart (pp. 134-135).

Lawson (2005) also pointed out that another important element in this journey is the ability of the hero to return to his/her community and communicate what has been learned (p.136). The pattern is often the one posited by Campbell (1949)-

i. Call to adventure- hero called to a journey, quest in order to fulfil something,

ii. Meeting a mentor- the hero receives some aid from an adult figure during the early stages of the journey,

iii. The tests- hero goes through tests that enable him/her to prove his/her ability and allow him/her to move forward,

iv. Helpers- hero meets and is helped by others during the journey,

v. Climax- critical point in the hero's journey, and

vi. Flight/ return- the hero returns to his/her homeland. Returns with the power to bestow some blessings to the people.

Barrette (nd) also lists the following as the structure of a journey motif-

a. Inception of quest,

b. Quester accepts quest,

c. Quester gathers companion(s) to accompany him/her on the journey,

d. Departure,

e. Quester receives help,

f. Quester's progress is hindered,

g. Quester suspends quest,

h. Quester resumes quest,

i. Quester overcomes hindrance(s),

j. Arrival at destination,

k. Quester encounters the possession and/or the object of quest,

l. Quester completes difficult task(s) and/or condition(s) are met,

M. Quester obtains the object of quest,

n. Quester departs from destination, and

o. Quester returns

This paper analyzes three middle grade novels and a short story from two cultures using the journey motif as the vehicle for the analysis. The three novels are *Bud Not Buddy* and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* both by Paul Curtis and *Journey to Jo'burg* by Naidoo (1986). The short story is My Two Dads by M. Lee (2000). This short story relates to the Korean American culture. The middle school years are years where young preteens often ask many questions- who am I? Why am I here? What is my role in society? Why are things the way they are? Is life fair? Etc. The study will analyze how the novels and short story adhere to the pattern of the journey motif as suggested by Campbell (1949

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and Barrettee (nd). The study will also suggest possible literacy (reading and writing) strategies for teaching any of the three novels and short story.

The three novels and a short story were chosen because these novels are on the reading list for students in many school districts in the USA at the middle grade level. Secondly, the two novels by Paul Curtis have won several literary awards including the Coretta Scott King Award and the Newberry Award. Journey to Jo'Burg has also won the Parents' Choice Honor Book for Paperback Literature (1988) and the Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies (1986). The three novels are also at the 6th grade readability level using Fry's (1968) method and therefore are easily readable for students at this grade level.

2. Analysis

The analysis will begin with a summary of each novel and the short story and then a graphic organizer will be used to show how each story relates to Campbell's pattern for journey motif.

2.1 Bud, Not Buddy

For Bud in *Bud, Not Buddy*, his whole life is a journey aimed at finding a home to belong or to find out who he is/his true identity. At age 6, his mother is dead but leaves him a few wise sayings, newspaper clippings of his "father" and a few fine stones. As the novel opens, we find that he is undertaking a journey to the Amoses, his new foster home. His stay there is short-lived in this new home since he cannot stand Todd, the Amoses young son who is vicious, conniving, a liar, and unwelcoming to anyone who will try to take his parents attention and love from him.. When he travels to the library, he is told that his teacher is now married and given a geography lesson on map reading, finding distances between two cities, and state capitals. He tries to hop on the train for a journey west; but this is not possible. His real journey begins when he decides to go to Grand Rapids in search of his father and his geography lesson from the librarian becomes very useful. This is how he describes the start of his journey to find his father-

> And then I headed out for Grand Rapids. IT'S FUNNY HOW IDEAS ARE, in a lot of ways they're just like seeds. Both of them start real, real small and then ... woop, zoop sloop ... before you can say Jack Robinson they've gone and grown a lot bigger than you ever thought they could. If you look at a great big maple tree it's hard to believe it started out as a little seed. I mean if you pick up one of those maple tree seeds and turn it over a couple of times in your hand there's no way your brain will buy that this little thing can grow up into something so big you have to bend your neck back just to see the top of it. Something so big that you can hang a swing on it, or build a tree house in it, or drive a car into it and kill yourself and any bad-lucked passengers that might be taking a ride with you. Ideas are a lot like that, that's what the idea of Herman E. Calloway being my father started as, something so teeny that if I hadn't paid it no mind it would've blown away with the first good puff of wind. But now here it was so big and important and spread out (p.55).

So, he leaves Flint-

Flint ended all of a sudden and I was in the country. It was like one of those days that it's raining on one side of the street and not on the other. Here you have Flint and a sidewalk, you take one baby step, and here you have country and a dirt path. On the sidewalk side a sign said, YOU ARE NOW LEAVING FLINT, HURRY BACK, and on the dirt path side, YOU ARE NOW ENTERING FLINT -- ENJOY YOUR STAY (Chapter 10, lines 1-6).

Grand Rapids was 120 miles away and he leaves in the night. He does not go too far when he is accosted by Mr. Lefty Lewis who after persistence and love is able to get Bud out of the bush and into his car for their drive to Grand Rapids. Bud describes the point of his entry into Mr. Lewis car this way-"I was glad I was going to be getting a ride but I said, "Sir, I left my suitcase over in the bushes, can we please get it?" (Chapter 10, p.63).

The next day, they travel together in Mr. Lewis' car to Grand Rapids. When he arrives at the home of Mr. Calloway, the initial reception was not very good. In his reflection, he finally understands that Mr. Calloway is not his father but his grandfather. He is well treated by the band and the attitude of his grandfather changes towards him when he learns that his daughter, Bud's mother is dead. He has learned a few things about himself- his grandfather, that the room he is now sleeping in was his mother's room and that his roots is in music, especially jazz.

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2.2 The Watsons Go to Birmingham

In the *Watsons Go to Birmingham*, we have a family consisting of the mother and father and three children-Kenny, Byron, and Joey. Momma, the mother is from Alabama while the father is from Flint and as the story opens, they all live in Flint. Byron, the older of the two boys has a knack for getting himself into trouble. As a result of getting into too much trouble, the father decides to take the family to Birmingham, Alabama where they can spend time with Grandma Sands. The father believes that this journey down south will enable Byron learn how to act right.

As they advance on the journey, they begin to see the geography and the issues in society of the day. The father uses a southern accent to inform them that there is a separation between blacks and whites in the south-

> Dad did an imitation of a hillbilly accent "Cuz, boy, this he-uh is the deep South you-all is gonna be drivin' thoo. Y'all colored folks cain't be jes' pullin' up tuh any ol' way – uh an be 'spectin' to get no room, uh no food, yuh heah, boy? I said yuh heah what I' sayin' boy (p. 87).

In Ohio, the boys find out that the toilets are outside, outhouses. Byron declared-

> Wait, let me dig this, you mean if I gotta go to the bathroom, I got to go outside into a little Nasty thing like that? Ain't they got no sanitation laws down there? (pp. 92-93).

When they arrive in Alabama, Grandma Sands welcomes them heartily-"Grandma Sands squeezed me hard and cried all over me. She wiped a bunch of tears away with a twisted-up hand and blinked a couple of times before she looked at me" (p.103). However, their journey to Alabama will be short-lived for a bomb in the church alerts them to the sinister face of racism. In the bombing, Grandma's church is burned, several people are killed, some are wounded and Kenny is shaken. Byron tries to explain the situation to Kenny and for the safety of the children, the parents decide to return to Michigan.

2.3 Journey to Jo'Burg

Journey to Jo'Burg, set in South Africa is a novel that explores the broad themes of family, self- discovery, sickness and death, the apartheid regime, and friendships. The novels begin as a journey of mercy- Dineo is sick and Naledi and Tiro, her elder sister and brother have to travel to Johannesburg to find their mother and get her to come home and take their sister to the hospital.

> Finally, Naledi could take it no longer. When they had returned with the water, she called Tiro to the back of the house and spoke bluntly. We must get Mmma, or Dineo is going to die. But how? Tiro was bewildered. Their mother worked and lived in Johannesburg, more than 300 kilometers away. We can get to the big road and walk. Naledi replied calmly (p.2).

This is their first travel outside their hometown and the journey is fraught with danger and early missteps. First, they are almost exposed to the guns of the white farmer when they try to steal oranges after the long day of walking. Only the timely intervention of a little boy warning them of the dangers and eventually providing them some accommodation for the night enables them survive the first day on the road. They are fortunate to be able to hitch a ride in a truck to Johannesburg. The next problem is when they try to enter a bus meant specifically for whites only. Only a friendly warning from a stand-by passenger averts the danger and punishment that would have been meted out on them.

> They were just about to jump aboard, when someone shouted to them in English, "What's wrong with you, are you stupid?" Startled, they looked up at the angry face of the bus driver and then at the bus again. White faces stared at them from inside as the bus moved along (pp. 25-26).

When they both get into the right bus, Naledi begins to understand some of the racial issues in South Africa-racial separation and apartheid. Grace, who has just helped them get in the right bus tells them not to be sorry when they apologize for trying to get into the wrong bus. She added "Why shouldn't we use any bus? When our bus is full, their buses are half empty. Don't you be sorry" (p.26).

When they meet their mother, they are surprised at the tone of the Madam towards their mother- -

> "The children couldn't follow everything the Madam was saying in English, but her voice sounded annoyed, while Mma spoke so softly. Why does the white lady seem cross with Mma? It is not Mma's fault that Dineo

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> is sick, Naledi thought" (p.32). Apartheid also made it impossible for the children to spend the night with their mother in Parktown (the white suburb) since the police would be after them. They had to be taken to Soweto. However, this journey allows the children to see police brutality against blacks and at the house of Grace who allowed them to spend the night, they are told of the events of the Soweto uprisings in the 1970's "You see", Grace began, "our brother Dunn got picked up by the police in 76. That was the time when the students here and all over were marching, and the place was on fire" (p.44). The story that Grace tells the children informs Naledi of the miseducation of black students, police brutality, and some students fleeing South Africa for their lives.

On the journey back home on the train with her mother, Naledi, first is conflicted between the words of Grace (that blacks are taught rubbish in schools and only what the white man wants) and her mother who insists that children ought to be in school (pp. 51-52). She also understands the true nature of her mother's work and life since her mother tells her all-

> You know, every day I must struggle… struggle... to make everything just how the Madam wants it. The cooking, the cleaning, the washing, the ironing. From seven every morning, sometimes till ten, even eleven at night, when they have parties. The only time I sit is when I eat. But I keep quiet and do everything.,. because if I lose my job, I won't get another one..'It's very bad, Mma," Naledi said in a low voice. Yes, it's bad. But those children who marched in the streets don't want to be like us…learning in school just how to be servants. They want to change what is wrong… even if they must die (p.54).

Herein is represented for Naledi the plight of black women as seen by the author- the loss of power and dignity, the pain and suffering to make ends meet in the absence of a husband and the hope that their children will have a better education to make their lives better. Naledi sees the importance of a different type of education when towards the end of the novel she declares-

> All of a sudden, lying there in the dark, it became so clear to Naledi. It wasn't just their school they were talking about. It was her school too. All those lessons on writing letters… for jobs as servants…always writing how good they were at cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening… always ending with "Yours obediently" (p.72).

This realization causes her to want to be someone different- not a servant but a doctor. "Yes, that's what she'd like to be. Imagine how useful it would be if she became a doctor especially in her own village. She could even look after her own family" (p.72).

The journey had also helped her at self- discovery. She is able to see a cross section of her country and in the process understands firsthand the geography of her country, the city, and the problems surrounding travel in the country. She is able to understand the working conditions of her mother and other black women her mother's age, why they have to work and how she must get a more useful education in order to get out of the situation her mother finds herself in. Her thoughts in two different parts of the novels illustrate the importance of this self-discovery.

> Vast stretches of land flashed by; grassland, mountains, grassland again. Naledi felt suddenly very small. Before their journey to fetch Mma, she had never imagined all this land existed. Nor had she any idea what the city was like… and she had never known her own mother in the way she was beginning to know her now. (p. 55) and Naledi turned over and stroked Dineo's cheeks, making her sister smile a little in her sleep. How strange, thought Naledi. If Dineo hadn't been so terribly ill, she and Tiro would never have made the journey to get Mma. It had saved Dineo, she was sure. But also, through this journey, she had begun to find out so much (p.73).

2.4 My Two Dads

This short story by Marie Lee is a first person narrative of a journey undertaken by a little girl with her family to Korea. The story documents some of the difficulties encountered by a girl who has travelled to a country/culture that she is not so familiar with. Her travel exposes the complex nature of human behavior- that some people hold on to the adage- when you are in Rome, do like the Romans. The narrator returns to USA with respect for the Korean people and admiring "the people who place high such high value on hard work and scholarship" (p.22).

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3. How Does Each Hold to the Journey Motif?

Table 1 below showed some of the concepts of the journey motif and how parts of each novel/ short story related to the concepts.

Concept	Bud Not Buddy	Watsons Go to Birmingham	Journey to Jo'burg	My Two Dads
Call to adventure- hero called to a journey, quest in order to fulfil something (Inception of quest/ Departure)	Journey is to find out who he is- his identity	Journey is to help the brothers to find out their roots and to get out of trouble	Dineo is sick and Naledi and Tiro, her elder sister and brother have to travel to Johannesburg to find their mother	She has to travel with his father to Korea on a family visit and "to atone for my past indifference" to the Korean culture (p. 20).
Meeting a mentor- the hero receives some aid from an adult figure during the early stages of the journey	Mr. Lewis provides such help	Both the mother and father give help to their children	The little boy that helps them to secure some food and the adult who puts them on the right bus	She travels with her father who helps her to navigate some of the customs in Korea
The tests- hero goes through tests that enable him/her to prove his/her ability and allows him/her to move forward			First, there is the test of hunger- where will they find something to eat? Then the test of making sure they navigate properly since they are black or else they will be killed	How could she fit properly into Korean society as her father who seemed to fit and behave appropriately, as the situation warranted.
Helpers- hero is helped by several people during the journey			The little buy and their mother's friends	Her father, mother, and cousins that lived in Korea seemed to make things easier for her
Climax- critical point in the hero's journey	He meets his grandfather and finds out who he is and what he does	The church bombing	They meet their mother, find out what she does for a living and are confronted with the problems of inequality and poor education for the blacks	"I discerned the noble, sometimes harsh, Korean character… I began to admire a people who place such high value on hard work and scholarship" (pp. 21-22).
Flight/ Returns home with the power to bestow		The family returns home to wrestle with	They return home with a renewed vigor to fight to	She returns home with her family bit without the father

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some blessings to the people (Quester returns)	the problem of racism in society	change the educational system	who will return later on. From the eye of the protagonist, we see that human behavior is complex and we may need to understand others to be able to judge why they behave the way they do. Also we see the importance of hard work and scholarship, a message she intends to impart to all.

The above table showed that not all concepts were found in each novel/short story. However, the novels and short story adhered to many of the concepts that make up the journey motif.

4. 10 Possible Literacy Strategies

These novels and short story are often part of the reading list for middle school students. Below, are some literacy strategies that teachers can implement to help students understand journeys-

1. Students with teacher guidance engage in literature circles (Hill, Noe, & Johnson, 2001).

   a. The Travel Tracer will track where the action takes place during the daily readings. The Tracer will describe each setting in detail in words or through a diagram or a map.

   b. The Discussion Leader leads in the important issues in the novel, short story- what motivates characters in each novel to behave the way they do? What is the historical context for the novel, short story? What issues about human behavior does each text raise?

   c. Since all three are historical fiction, students research on the following- apartheid in South Africa, the Great Depression, the Birmingham riots of 1963 present as a research paper. The Researcher in the literature circles will act as a lead for this project.
2. Students complete a story map about each novel or short story.
3. Students complete a reader response journal where they record their response to daily readings. The reflect on a journey they have undertaken and relate any events to the events in the story they are reading
4. Students and teacher engage in Direct Reading and Thinking Activity (McKenna & Robinson, 2002; Stahl, 2008). Teacher pre-selects interesting portions especially those relevant to journeying. Students get to make predictions and read to find out if each of their prediction was correct.
5. Students prepare a word wall with words related to journeys and travel.
6. Students write essays related to journeys (My Last Journey – narrative essay; Describe in some detail the landscape from your last journey or a monument you saw during the journey; Argue for or against the topic- Life itself is a journey).
7. Rewriting some of the sections that are not in Standard English. This will allow teachers to assess students' knowledge of grammar and writing ability.
8. Students use graphic organizers to capture some of the events showing cause and effect relationships. Here, they use fishbone diagram to show how events during the journey result in some effect in the life of the major characters.

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9. Students use a Discussion Web (Alvermann, 1991) to write their thoughts and then engage in debate on such topics as "Inequality will never end in our society", "Race relations are not improving in our society", "Our current educational system is irrelevant to our needs."
10. Using Rosenblatt's Transactional theory, students make text to self, text to text, and text to world connections.

5. Conclusion

An educated citizenry ensures the continuation of some of the ideals of a democratic society. Literacy is important to national, social, and personal development. An inclusion of multicultural texts exposes learners to cultures different from their own. According to Colby and Lyon (2004), "When teachers gain awareness that multicultural literature may be used as a stimulus for creating classrooms where all students are valued, then children can celebrate their own cultures and explore the uniqueness of others" (p.28). The analysis showed that for the three novels and a short story in the study, each text adhered to some elements/parts of the journey motif. Howard (nd) pointed out that the journey is "a process of discovery in which the heroes learn essential truths about themselves, their society, and the nature of human existence" (p.7). These three novels have allowed readers in middle school to experience journeys from the main characters perspective and during this process, readers have been challenged to re-examine some of the issues facing our existence- inequality, racism, hunger, and defining our identity, etc. The paper has suggested several strategies that can be used by English Language Arts teachers to engage learners, make the instructional process more interesting, and hopefully improve achievement for all learners.

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