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Why Should Students Want to Do a Close Reading?

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Why Should Students *Want* to Do a Close Reading?

Sonya's classroom is abuzz with activity. Students have annotated their texts almost beyond recognition; still, it's their interactions with each other that convey their engagement during this close reading session. A lively classroom discussion unfolds, with students clamoring to respond to and pose questions about the text, demand textual support for opposing opinions, and discuss real-world implications of what they're reading.

Within a broader study of racial segregation—a topic of genuine interest for these eighth graders, almost entirely students of color, including many English learners—Sonya has provided a written text and complementary YouTube video about charter schools that exclusively serve students representing particular racial, ethnic, or gender groups. The relevance of this close reading isn't lost on the students, whose own school, itself a charter, serves a predominantly Latino population and holds particular values and goals, some of which explicitly address language and culture.

This example was encountered during a two-year qualitative study of teachers' work with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). It has stuck with us, mainly because it contrasts so starkly with our recent encounters with "close reading"—the task of determining explicit and inferred meanings of a text through focused and sustained reading and critical thinking. As teacher educators who visit schools regularly, we often see students "going through the motions"

of close reading—dutifully annotating texts over multiple occasions—but seldom showing signs of understanding or caring about what they're reading. The palpable sense of excitement about and interest in reading described above is largely absent.

Importantly, our intention is not to criticize teachers attempting to engage students in close reading as they work to implement the CCSS. Indeed, those teachers are doing exactly what many teacher guidebooks (e.g., Jones, Chang, Heritage, & Tobiason, 2014), and even the authors of the CCSS (i.e., Coleman & Pimentel, 2012), have encouraged them to do—emphasize almost exclusively the structure and process of close reading without substantial discussion of its purpose and relevance to students' lives.

This proclivity to privilege structure and process over relevance and authenticity raises important questions for us and other educators mulling over implications of the CCSS and, especially, the call for the particular notion of close reading associated with them. Specifically, we wonder how close readings in middle schools can be taken up in ways that capture the attention of and deeply engage young adolescents, who interact closely with the authentic texts of their out-of-school lives but may be reluctant to do so with traditional classroom texts (Alvermann, 2002). We find this issue especially pertinent today when so many students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, are underserved by didactic, teacher-centered approaches to literacy instruction and curriculum that fail to engage them (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Thus, we ask, why should students *want*