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# Disrupting the dominant narrative: Beginning English teachers' use of young adult literature and culturally responsive pedagogy.

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## Disrupting the Dominant Narrative: Beginning English Teachers' Use of Young Adult Literature and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Elsie Lindy Olan & Kia Jane Richmond

**Abstract:** In this multiple case study that uses narrative research methodology, two beginning English teachers' stories, their use of young adult literature, and their dialogic interactions with university mentors are examined through a lens of culturally responsive pedagogy. This study is focused on how teachers' stories indicate the difficulties they have incorporating culturally relevant young adult literature into their secondary English classes, how they establish connections between the texts, their students' lived experiences, and their own lived experiences, and why they struggle with the application of culturally responsive pedagogy. Findings indicate that beginning teachers' stories (a) express uncertainty regarding the place of young adult literature in their curricula and seek guidance from mentors; (b) demonstrate difficulties meeting students' needs, which include connecting with characters and plots that "resonate" with their life experiences; (c) struggle with the dominant narrative of a standardized curriculum that perpetuates teaching the same texts to everyone; moreover, they do not feel empowered to challenge the dominant narrative; (d) struggle with obtaining culturally relevant resources that meet all students' needs; and (e) recognize, that after exposure to young adult literature in university coursework and secondary teaching, they feel empowered to bring young adult literature into their curricula.

**Keywords:** culturally responsive pedagogy, multiple case study, narrative research,  
young adult literature, teacher education



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**F**requently, beginning English teachers<sup>1</sup> express concerns about entering classrooms and being held hostage by the secondary school curriculum in terms of literature they are being asked to teach. While teacher educators have acknowledged the need for culturally relevant literature (Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995) and young adult literature (Goering & Connors, 2014; Perry, Stallworth & Fink, 2013), teacher candidates hired into full-time English positions report being asked to teach mostly canonical texts, sometimes in prescriptive curricula. In many cases, their classroom resources do not include full texts but only excerpts of classic literature (e.g., abridged versions of novels, condensed or partially excerpted novels, etc.). Recent research on high school curricula demonstrates that canonical texts still represent the majority of literature being taught (Applebee, 1989; Cherry-McDaniel & Young, 2012). Cherry-McDaniel and Young (2012) state that canonical texts “represent what students (and English teachers) ‘already know’ about novels, literature, people, and experiences” (p. 8). They argue that twenty-first century English teachers have learned the viewpoints of the dominant (White, male, heterosexual, Western) culture through the literary canon, and because of this history, “English classrooms have been colonized by these experiences” (p. 8). In order to disrupt this continued colonization, Cherry-McDaniel and Young call for “a multilayered perspective, a chorus

of voices that can help students to fully conceptualize the varied ways to make sense of their worlds” (p. 10).

In this study, we expand upon Cherry-McDaniel and Young’s (2012) metaphor of a chorus of voices while we discuss two teachers’ transitions from methods students to classroom teachers. Both beginning English teachers’ voices highlight the value of young adult literature (YAL) as culturally relevant texts in their pedagogical practices. Their voices represent a change that is new, audible, distinctive, and unexpected in the chorus of the “merry” song of the dominant narrative, one in which teachers’ voices are loudest and students’ silent submission is expected.

The focus of this study is an examination and comparison of the narratives of two beginning teachers, Lindsay and Kathy (pseudonyms). This article, in which their narratives are restoried, analyzed, and interpreted, offers readers additional insight into beginning English teachers’ negotiations with the dominant narrative of the canon and standardized curriculum. Additionally, we examine how they employ culturally responsive pedagogy strategies and bring in YAL to meet their students’ needs. To clarify, culturally responsive pedagogy asks educators to be reflective about their practices and about students’ needs as individuals and members of specific communities in and out of the classroom (Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). Culturally relevant YAL refers to texts written specifically for

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, the term “beginning English teacher” is used to refer to one who has completed

student teaching and is in his/her first five years in the classroom.

young adults that connect to and bring insight into students' diverse cultural and personal realities and identities in and outside the classroom (Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Rybakova, Piotrowski, and Harper, 2013)3.

The guiding research questions for this study include the following:

1. How, if at all, do English teachers' stories indicate difficulties they have with bringing in culturally relevant YAL to their English classes in the secondary schools?
2. How, if at all, do English teachers struggle with the application of culturally responsive pedagogy during their early teaching experiences, even after additional exposure to coursework in YAL?

Our hope is that this study informs teachers, teacher educators and the field of education as to how beginning teachers might disrupt the dominant narrative while making room for their students' voices and finding harmony in their first years of teaching.

### Literature Review

Research in secondary English teacher preparation has demonstrated that including YAL in English Education courses enhances preservice teachers' instructional abilities (Alsup, 2010; Applebaum, 2010; Olan & Richmond, in press). Specifically, Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth (2006) state that YAL provides "a sophisticated reading option for addressing standards, designing relevant curricula, and engaging twenty-first century young adults in rich discussions of literature and life" (p. 53). They also note that YAL should be brought into the secondary classroom because literature helps students improve literacy skills and read more texts, as well as "facilitate[s] teachers' abilities to incorporate more books of interest to adolescents into the curriculum,

thereby avoiding the non-reading curriculum or workbooks and lectures" and "support[s] the development of an inclusive curriculum" (p. 53).

### The Use of Young Adult Literature in English Teacher Preparation

Scholars in English Education have reported that English teachers of grades 6-12 should have a strong background in both canonical and YAL literature (Pasternak, Caughlan, Renzi, Hallman, & Rush, 2014; Petrone & Sarigianides, 2017; Pope & Kaywell, 2001). Most programs include a heavier focus on YAL because they assume that students are learning about canonical literature in their English subject courses (British literature, American literature, Shakespeare, etc.). Moreover, as Caughlan, Pasternak, Hallman, Renzi, Rush, and Frisby (2017) state, "the three-credit methods course that addresses teaching canonical literature, a narrow range of school-based writing genres, and teaching the forms of a "Standard" dialect is no longer the standard in English education" (p. 290). (For a more complete discussion of curriculum revision, see the authors forthcoming essay in *Wisconsin English Teacher*.) English Educators, therefore, have become intentional about where and how they are including YAL in 21st century teacher education programs.

According to the National Council of Teachers of English/National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCTE/NCATE)—that is now the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)—Standards for Initial Preparation of Teachers of Secondary English Language Arts, Grades 7-12 (2012), teacher candidates should be

knowledgeable about texts—print and non-print texts, media texts, classic texts and contemporary texts, including young adult—that represent a range of world literatures,

historical traditions, genres, and the experiences of different genders, ethnicities, and social classes; they are able to use literary theories to interpret and critique a range of texts. (p. 1)

English Educators need to remember, also, that preservice teachers' understandings of literature tend to be based on canonical pieces "that contain limited inclusion and representation of people of color" (Glenn, 2014, p. 90). Richmond (2014) reports that her<sup>2</sup> preservice teachers are most often required to teach canonical texts: "Popular books my students are required to teach during their sixteen-week final internships in addition to Shakespeare include *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Of Mice and Men*." Moreover, in a 2016 publication, we argue that preservice teachers who research, analyze, and create lessons that incorporate YAL and use culturally relevant literature "become more confident in themselves and competent in their pedagogical choices, which is especially important while working in a system of surveillance such as public education." Using YAL in the secondary classroom can be an important part of a fully developed culturally responsive pedagogy. Moreover, exposing preservice teachers to YAL can help inform English teachers' professional identities.

**"The perpetuation of canonical texts being used in high school English classroom continues despite the prevalence of alternatives."**

### Limited Background in Canonical Literature

The perpetuation of canonical texts being used in high school English classrooms continues despite the prevalence of alternatives. So why does the literature not change? Individual reasons vary; however, Watkins and Ostenson (2015) note that among those reasons are the following: familiarity with the texts, reliability to instructional goals, institutional limits, literary merit, and "potential community reaction to texts" (p. 250). In addition, many teachers' choices of literary texts may be limited because of their access to copies of literature (e.g., how many books are owned by the school and

how many students are in the classroom) and because budgets are limited by administrators (e.g., how much money is set aside for replacing worn physical copies of books or for computer programs used for electronic readers).

Moreover, because teachers are not typically stakeholders in curricular decisions (especially in schools choosing scripted curricula in order to meet new standards, such as the Common Core State Standards), they are often limited in which texts they can choose to teach and when (Liebtag, 2013).

We ground our study in research by Rybakova, Piotrowski, and Harper (2013), who argue that YAL is "an ideal way to engage students with real-life issues and problems and teach social justice and tolerance" (p. 37). Thus, we posit that English teachers should expose secondary students to YAL

<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article we will use "he" to refer to individuals who identify as male, "she" to refer to individuals who identify as

female, and "he or she" to refer to hypothetical or abstract students or teachers. We have selected these pronouns because we believe they are more familiar for a diverse audience of readers.



that provides insight into diverse cultural and personal realities as well as social conditions that shape our world and offers viewpoints that do not solely reflect White, Eurocentric, privileged, heterosexual, able-bodied perspectives that are portrayed in the literary canon. Doing so reflects a commitment to making room for culturally relevant literature and using culturally responsive pedagogy to disrupt the dominant narratives typically brought forth in secondary classrooms.

In particular, preservice teachers are likely to avoid choosing to teach texts that highlight racial or social complications or that go against the status quo in terms of social norms. This is not surprising given that “[p]reservice teachers are often frightened, walking as they are into new roles in which their own authority (as beginners, and usually young beginners) is unestablished” (Whitney, Olan & Fredricksen, 2013). Moreover, beginning teachers are less likely to embrace potentially controversial text choices. Barton and McCully (2007) highlight problems that teachers have with teaching controversial issues, noting “not everyone grows up with the same myths, understandings, or interpretations of the past” (p. 13) and argue that teachers should meet the specific needs of their students by modifying the curriculum. The current study offers support for this viewpoint.

Consequently, we decided to focus this study on how beginning teachers’ stories might indicate the difficulties teacher candidates in our program or alumni have with incorporating culturally relevant YAL in their classes. We do so having identified a need for preservice and beginning English teachers to engage more fully with canonical texts, while also learning about culturally relevant YAL, state standards, best practices, effective lesson planning, and other curricular issues (Olan & Richmond, 2016). Teacher educators should include more culturally relevant YAL in their courses and help

teacher candidates consider critically *why* they choose specific texts, *how* those texts are relevant to students’ lives and cultures, and *how* the literature they teach is connected to Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and/or other required state initiatives (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007; Smith, Applebaum, & Wilhelm, 2014).

Eckert (2013) calls for English teachers and those who prepare them to “take control of their curricula” and to use their expertise to choose appropriate literary texts rather than waiting for “a panel of non-educators to determine what texts will be ‘approved’ for inclusion in CCSS aligned curricula” (p. 40). In our study, we echo Eckert’s argument and offer insight into how beginning teachers are grappling with control of their curricula.

### Theoretical Framework

As English Educators engaged in narrative research methodology using grounded theory as a coding mechanism for data, we identified culturally responsive pedagogy as the theoretical framework for this study. Culturally responsive pedagogical practices place as much emphasis on teachers’ stances as their classroom practices (Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Moreover, we see culturally responsive pedagogy as tied to dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986). Bakhtin (1981) describes the “languages of heteroglossia” (which coexist as varying languages and dialects that represent our individual and cultural realities as well as shades of meaning within those realities) as demonstrating “specific points of view on the world” that are characterized by their own “object, meanings and values” and that can be “juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically” (pp. 291-292). We rely on Bakhtin’s perspective of language when we engage in dialogue with our participants, when we are interpreting data that resulted from

our interactions, and when we are restorying their narratives in this study.

In a 2015 essay, Aveling, Gillespie, and Cornish offer four principles for “analysing qualitative data informed by the tradition of dialogism” (p. 683).

They argue that analysis of multivoicedness should include

- Contextual knowledge of Self, Other, and the social field;
- Openness to alternative interpretations;
- Interpretive skill and contextual knowledge; and
- Reflexivity on the part of the researcher. (p. 683)

As we engaged in dialogic interactions with the participants, analyzed data, and checked for understanding, we employed these four principles and were cognizant that teachers’ narratives were a product of our and their multivoicedness in college and teaching settings. Our theoretical framework and methodology were consistently aligned with contextual knowledge of Self, Other, and the social contexts within the field of English Education and secondary English Language Arts, which kept the issue of multivoicedness at the forefront of our data analysis and discussion of results as researchers.

Moen (2006) places narrative research in dialogue with Bakhtin’s theories in her discussion of how “narratives can differ depending on to whom the stories are being told,” noting that our experiences are shaped through our differing subject positionalities. Our understanding of dialogue is influenced by Renshaw’s argument that dialogue argue, “looks both ways - towards individual processes of thinking and reflection, as well as towards the constitution of cultural practices and communities at particular historical moments” (Renshaw, 2004, p. 2). Bakhtin’s arguments are key

to “our understanding of the social foundations of learning and thinking, [foregrounding] the socially-situated deployment of language for the development of understanding” (Renshaw, 2004, p. 7).

As English teacher educators, we acknowledge the importance of dialogic interactions present in narratives and conversations. Through dialogic expression, ideas are probed, questioned and reflected upon. According to Bakhtin (1986), “At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of dialogues subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context)” (p. 170). We believe that when teachers are afforded narrative practices and opportunities to share their narratives, they will revisit their assumptions and make more informed decisions regarding their instruction, pedagogical practices, and beliefs.

As researchers, we recognize that these theorists’ arguments about the generative aspects of dialogue, as well as students’ and teachers’ individual cultural backgrounds and experiences, emphasize classroom contexts and interactions between teachers and students in and out of the classroom. Participants and researchers alike tap into broader historical and sociopolitical aspects of their contextual realities.

Culturally responsive educators are more than willing to self-examine and self-reflect upon their own social, educational and political identities and call for teachers to be trained to recognize and analyze social and educational inequity (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Moll, Gonzalez & Amanti, 2005; & Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Moreover, culturally responsive teachers consider the lives of their students outside their classrooms, digging deeper into the political, economic, and

social contexts of their students' lives. They examine their students' beliefs about schooling and prior experiences with schooling, their demographics, and the religious and sociopolitical contexts of the community in which they teach (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

In addition, Stewart (2010) offers a thorough analysis of how Gay's (2010) stance on culturally responsive teaching - which highlights the value of both student-teacher and student-student interactions - and Bakhtin's discussion of dialogism are connected. Stewart states, "Teachers cannot engage in this sort of teaching without creating spaces for dialogue; classrooms must become places where heteroglot voices (Bakhtin, 1981) are represented" (p. 9).

Moreover, Paris (2012) suggests that educators move beyond being merely responsive and move toward supporting and "sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of [young adults'] communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence"; Paris offers the term "culturally sustaining pedagogy" which helps teachers to "perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 95). Paris' work further informs our perspective on culturally responsive teaching; through our research and our dialogues with participants, we hope to sustain these teachers' developing understanding and engagement with culturally responsive practices in their classrooms and beyond.

### Method

In this essay, we use qualitative narrative research employing a multiple, explanatory case study approach. Researchers make use of grounded theory to code data and categorize themes. The participants, context, data collection, and method of analysis are explicated below.

### Context of the Present Study

This study differs from most empirical studies because it employs teachers' stories (data) to show the difficulties that beginning English teachers have with bringing in culturally relevant YAL to their high school classrooms. Participants in this study are two White, females, both 25-35 years old, one teaching in a Midwestern rural setting (Lindsay), and one teaching in a Southern urban setting (Kathy). Both participants are beginning teachers and had attended secondary methods courses in which they crafted stories about their experiences with YAL and canonical texts in- and outside the secondary classroom setting. We acknowledge that our participants are part of the "nearly 85 percent of all secondary teachers" who are "white, monolingual native English speakers, many of whom have had little, if any, training in working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners; many of whom benefit from white privilege; and many of whom hold deficit-oriented beliefs toward young people of color" (Groenke et al, 2015, p. 37).

Both researchers for this study are located at public universities serving undergraduate and graduate populations are the sites for this research. Researcher 1 self-identifies as Latina female and is a Secondary English Language Arts teacher educator at a Southern university, which is located in an urban setting and is the second largest university in the United States with an undergraduate enrollment of sixty-four thousand. Demographics for this school are diverse, with almost thirty-five percent of students identifying as Black/African-American or Hispanic/Latino. Researcher 2 self-identifies as White female and is a Secondary English Language Arts teacher educator at a Midwestern university located in a rural Great Lakes region and which enrolls approximately nine thousand students, only ten percent of whom identify as Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino, or Native American.



## Multiple Case Study and Narrative Research

Our research design is based on a multiple, explanatory case study approach using narrative research. According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), case study research is defined as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p. 545). A multiple case study allows the researchers to examine and compare data from participants who share characteristics but who work or live in different environments. Yin (2009) reports the goal of multiple case studies is to construct a “general explanation that fits each individual case, even though the cases will vary in their details. The objective is analogous to creating an overall explanation, in science, for the findings from multiple experiments” (p.142).

In constructing the explanation(s), we relied on the analytical technique called “explanation building,” which Yin (2009) describes as “pattern matching” that occurs in “narrative form” (p. 141). Explanations reflect theoretical propositions and “stipulate a presumed set of causal links about how or why something happened” (p. 141). In our cases, English teachers’ narratives were examined to consider the following propositions:

- A. Beginning English teachers’ stories about their experiences with literature in the secondary classroom disrupt the dominant narrative.
- B. Beginning English teachers’ stories demonstrate a desire to enact culturally responsive pedagogy.

Our unit of analysis for this multiple case study is the life history narratives of two beginning English teachers as reported to their mentors.

In this qualitative study, we gather data through the collection of stories, report on individual experiences, and discuss the meaning of those experiences within the context of English teacher education and culturally responsive pedagogy. As we gathered and analyzed our beginning teachers’ stories, we took an active role and “restoried” their narratives into a framework that is primarily time-oriented and theme-based, in order to place events within a chronological order (Creswell, 2013). In this study, we share the ontological and epistemological perspective described by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) who write:

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (p. 2)

It is because data for this study consists of various teacher narratives, their life histories, dialogues with teacher educator mentors, and reflections on teaching and methods and graduate classes that Bakhtin’s theories seem appropriate as they focus on language and interpretations of the perspectives given by participants and researchers alike.

Narratives and “life history approaches are widely used in the study of teachers’ lives” (Beattie, 2003, 2000; Cortazzi, 1993; Day, 2004; Goodson, 1991; Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996) and in teachers’ thinking, as well as personal and professional development (Carter, 1995; Casey, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cole & Knowles, 2000, 2001; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Elbaz, 1990; Goodson, 1992; Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

Narrative research affords participants such as Lindsay and Kathy the opportunity to reflect upon their teaching, tell their stories, and revisit and

reinterpret their experiences through dialogic interactions with researchers and texts they produce. Reflective practice is defined by Schön (1983) as “the practice by which professionals become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from their experience” (p. 49). He notes that we “reflect on action, thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome” (Schön, 1983, p. 26). Narrative research also allows teacher educator researchers to participate in dialogic interactions with participants and amongst fellow researchers while comparing participants’ stories. Narrative researchers revisit participants’ narratives, restory and analyze their narratives, while reflecting upon their own teaching as well as curricular and programmatic decisions.

### Data Collection

Data collection took place during a one-year period; data was collected via email communication (twenty emails where participants wrote individually to their methods teacher, each of whom is a researcher in this study, reflecting upon their experiences with literature and teaching) and storied response assignments for two different English Education courses (autobiographical literacy philosophy; YAL research and lesson plan). Lindsay and Kathy did not communicate with each other during this study. We gathered data by collecting stories, comparing individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences with the individual participants. It is important to note that our relationships with Lindsay and Kathy were developed over a seven-to-ten-year period, during which the professional and personal nature of our relationships were strengthened. Because our research participants were also previously our students in both undergraduate and graduate programs, our roles during the process of data

collection varied (e.g., professor, mentor, expert, counselor, etc.).

### Data Analysis

In analyzing data collected, we first used “grounded theory,” an approach “inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents”; moreover, data is “discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.23). Grounded theory allows for creativity through the researcher’s development of systematic categories (p. 27). Our qualitative data analysis began by compiling Lindsay and Kathy’s written narratives from methods courses, graduate courses, emails, social media exchanges, and transcribed conversations over a year-long period. We then constructed a document including all data and completed line-by-line initial coding, examining data with fresh perspectives not dependent on our first readings of the narratives, generating “a range of ideas and information” on which we could create new categories and discover new meanings (Charmaz, 2006, p. 52). We paid attention to participants’ language during this process, preserving their specific phrasing and meanings using *in vivo* codes whenever possible.

Following that process, we completed focused and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Focused coding is more conceptual in nature and allows researchers to synthesize larger pieces of data, sift through the information, and reorganize it in meaningful ways. During axial coding, which “specifies the properties and dimensions of a category and reassembles the data [we] have fractured during previous codings” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60), we answered the questions who, where, when, why, how, and with what consequences. Charmaz (2006) notes, “Careful coding also helps you refrain from inputting your motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues to your respondents’ collected data” (p. 54). Finally, we

completed thematic coding, creating a chart to establish the possible relationships that existed in the themes, which helped us restory beginning teachers' narratives and organize events both chronologically and thematically (see Table 1). In addition, throughout the research process, we followed the protocol of respondent validation (Charmaz, 2008), sharing our restoried narratives with Lindsay and Kathy, asking them to consider whether the restorying was accurately representative of their words, stories, and ideas.

During the final step in analysis, we also considered dominant narratives and counter-narratives. According to Salinas and Blevins (2014), "There have been multiple calls to examine the school curriculum as one derived by dominant and oppressive ideologies in the name of the nation state and ultimately as a tool for cultural hegemony" (p. 35). In our discussion of the dominant narrative, we adopted the stance described by Salinas and Blevins, specifically as it relates to our participants' experiences as beginning teachers. Likewise, in discussing counter-narratives, we follow Bullough (2008), who defines counter-narratives as stories that recognize and respond to the complexity of teaching while honoring the hopes and dreams and legitimizing the problems and concerns of teachers working in specific contexts and with specific students. We utilize restorying as described by Creswell (2013) as a process of gathering narratives, analyzing them for important themes, and then restorying (retelling) them in a chronological manner (pp. 74-76). By restorying the teacher narratives and comparing the themes in each, we highlight the teachers' perspectives and their pedagogical practices, values, and beliefs.

We also used an explanation-building, analytic technique to establish pattern-matching logic and construct explanations from the life histories of the participants in narrative form. Such narratives

embrace the lives beneath the much-desired generalizations promised by education, science, and the systems that encourage "fabrications" (p. 5). We include the dominant and counter-narratives as part of our restorying of Lindsay and Kathy's narratives, which allows us to consider causality and "a more detailed discussion of the meaning of the story" (Creswell, 2013, p. 75). Below, we provide a brief introduction to our first encounters with the participants and describe when our collaborative journey began.

The following themes were identified during data analysis and will be discussed in detail in the section below where data is restoried:

- a. Beginning teachers express uncertainty regarding the place of YAL in their curricula and seek guidance from mentors
- b. Beginning teachers' stories demonstrate difficulties they have meeting students' needs which include connecting with characters and plots that "resonate" with their life experiences
- c. Beginning teachers struggle with the dominant narrative of a standardized curriculum that perpetuates teaching the same texts regardless of who is in the room; moreover, they do not feel empowered to challenge the dominant narrative
- d. Beginning teachers struggle with obtaining culturally relevant resources that meet all students' needs
- e. Beginning teachers recognize that after exposure to YAL (in their graduate courses and in their teaching), they feel more empowered to bring YAL into their curricula. They also begin valuing the multivocal voices in their classroom and move toward enacting culturally responsive pedagogy.

## Findings and Discussion

Based on narrative research completed in this study, we argue that YAL is a conduit for English preservice teachers and beginning teachers to tap into while implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies. These strategies should afford access to all, and lead to equitable education while enhancing teacher agency. In this section, we explicate how researchers developed relationships with beginning English teachers in this study while discussing teachers' narratives and findings.

### The Story Begins: Contextualizing our Relationships and Discussing Teachers' Narratives

**Researcher 1.** As a faculty member who was co-teaching with a tenured professor in my new department at the Southern University, I met Kathy when she asked a question during class. After I shared my opinion, she stopped me at the end of the class and asked me about culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010) and the qualitative research I had discussed with students. She asked, "Do you think my [English Speakers of Other Languages] ESOL students and other students in the class would benefit from graphic novels and project-based learning?" She continued, "I have these crazy ideas, but I'm not sure I can make this happen because I don't have my own classroom yet." It was at this point that our relationship as teacher and student began. After Kathy's graduation from our undergraduate program, she did not find a full-time position immediately; thus, she decided to apply for graduate school. Our relationship reignited at this point and changed to a mentoring relationship. In an excited email a year later while still enrolled in graduate studies, Kathy shared her good news: "Finally, I am a teacher working in [an urban high school], teaching English Language Arts 9th/10th regular and advanced."

**Researcher 2.** Lindsay and I first met when she was enrolled in my English methods class ten years ago. I followed her from methods into student teaching, supervising her for sixteen weeks in placement in a rural school. During that time, we developed a close relationship in which phone calls and emails about teaching, finding a full-time position, and life outside of school were a regular part of our conversations. Even though she did not obtain a teaching position right away, Lindsay and I maintained contact. Moreover, as a newlywed whose husband's job required him to travel, Lindsay had to take a job in the financial industry to make ends meet. We would have casual encounters on a regular basis while she kept an eye out for teaching positions. Eventually, a few years later, she secured her first part-time teaching position at a community college nearby, then at a middle/high school in a rural, border town in a neighboring state. Excited to have the opportunity to teach after waiting for many years, Lindsay wrote, "I FINALLY got a full-time teaching job! I get to teach a college credit course to seniors (through a nearby technical college). I'm pretty pumped!" When she returned to the university to seek her Master's degree a year later, our talks became even more frequent. During our journeys with Lindsay and Kathy, we engaged in rich and varied interactions. Through the process of problematizing and comparing our students' stories, we made the decision to engage in more formal research and requested participants' consent after receiving approval from institutional review boards (IRB) of both our universities. Next, we identified recurrent themes throughout their storied responses, writings, and references to both dominant and counter-narratives. We examined, revisited, and exchanged ideas about their teaching stances and positionalities as beginning teachers. As researchers, we rely on a definition of positionality from Gregory et al. (2011):

The fact that a researcher’s social, cultural and subject positions (and other psychological processes) affect: the questions they ask; how they frame them...their relations with those they research in the field or through interviews; interpretations they place on empirical evidence; access to data, institutions and outlets for research dissemination; and the likelihood that they will be listened to and heard. (p. 556)

Additionally, we analyzed and interpreted Lindsay and Kathy’s relationships with YAL and their own students and distinct communities.

### Forming a Relationship with Young Adult Literature

To begin our study, we first read through Lindsay and Kathy’s reflections on their literacy experiences before becoming teachers. In Lindsay’s narrative, she recalled enjoying reading YAL at home as a teenager, and even as an adult, she noted

As a reader and a learner, I often find myself roaming the YA lit shelves of local bookstores mainly because I genuinely enjoy reading YA lit for myself. I find the plots of this genre to be extremely engaging and often they remind me of why I love to read. They are fun to read, but more importantly also challenge me to look at the world around me in a new way or even remind me of how important it is to be engaged and aware of the world around me.

In this passage, Lindsay positioned herself in a positive stance toward YAL. Likewise, Kathy noted a similar stance as a young adult herself, stating

Growing up I had a very positive relationship with YAL, although I did not have an adult who was able to “walk” me through the tough parts. I grew up in a home where racism and abuse was alive and well, and I retreated to YAL in order to help me through things that were going on in my home - almost my own therapy. This has shaped me in many ways as an educator, one being that I understand the importance of putting the right book in the right student’s hand, at the right time in their life.

In this passage from Kathy’s narrative, she self-identified as coming from a troubled home life where books were her respite. She noted, “Growing

**“The dominant narrative in the field of English places YAL at one end of a spectrum, with canonical texts at the opposite end.”**

up my favorite book series was *Harry Potter*... [which] made me feel as though I was able to escape my normal life and travel to a better place.” She continued, “I believe that YA lit can help do the same for my students, to allow them a break from what is expected of them and whatever their home life is, and help them figuratively travel to places that otherwise might not be realistic.” In this reflective passage, Kathy acknowledged the importance of YAL while examining herself as a reader and beginning teacher.

Lindsay and Kathy’s relationships with YAL as entertainment or therapy are supported by contemporary research in the field (Alsup, 2010; Gallo, 2010; Rybakova, Piotrowski, & Harper, 2014). Alsup (2010) notes that reading YAL can help adolescents “change through vicarious experience; they can grow, develop, ask new questions, think new thoughts, and even feel new emotions” (p. 5). Both Kathy and Lindsay pointed to constructing favorable relationships with YAL in their teenage years.



The dominant narrative in the field of English places YAL at one end of a spectrum, with canonical texts at the opposite end. Gallo (2010) describes a tendency in educators in the mid-twentieth century to position YAL as external to the canon and as “inferior reading material suitable for only remedial readers” (p. 9). Lindsay and Kathy’s narratives pointed to finding solace and renewal in YAL, and doing so outside of the English classroom, and in Kathy’s case, outside of the home environment as well. As readers of YAL themselves, Lindsay and Kathy experienced “self-actualization” through their interactions with the adolescent characters on the page (Alsop, 2010, p. 9). Despite the fact that both beginning teachers could be viewed as members of the dominant culture, they identified with YAL and its value in the curriculum; thus, they self-identified as part of the counter-narrative.

**Beginning teachers: Expressing uncertainty about young adult literature while grappling with teacher power.** As Lindsay and Kathy eventually found full-time teaching positions, they began to make decisions as teachers of literature. However, in their stories they expressed uncertainty regarding the place of YAL in their curricula. Therefore, they sought guidance from their English teacher educator mentors, who were still working with them in their graduate programs. Lindsay said,

I know *The Book Thief* isn't considered part of the canon; however, I do teach it with my 10th graders and thought of including *Maus* with it next year before we read the novel. I like that both deal with abandonment issues concerning parental figures and one is told from a German's perspective while *Maus* is told from a Jewish perspective. Is that something I could do? I am also teaching *Frankenstein* next year with my seniors and thought that maybe, just MAYBE, a book like

*My Friend Dahmer* could be used with it? I might be waaay out in left field on this, but was wondering if this was a start?

Here, Lindsay sought permission from her mentor to bring in young adult texts even though as a reader herself, she had already identified the genre as beneficial. Moreover, having already taught part-time at a community college, Lindsay was familiar with the policy of having to ask before bringing in anything new to the curriculum. In her new position as a high school English teacher, she didn't believe she had the power to make curricular decisions; rather, she wanted to support her decisions with expert opinion. As a beginning teacher who did not feel empowered, Lindsay's fortitude relied on the knowledge of a seasoned professional educator who had more experience and academic credentials.

On the other hand, Kathy seemed to have more resources and support from her principal, yet her novice teaching status made her doubt her ability to enact upon the freedom she is granted. When she wanted to bring graphic novels into her high school classroom, Kathy noted,

I struggle as a new teacher with having resources for all my students and beyond that selecting YA Literature/graphic novels that are culturally relevant for all my students, especially my ESOL kids that need all the help they can get. I can do what I want. My principal said, “Go ahead Kathy try that.” I just wanted him to tell me what to do.

Even though her administrator was being supportive by telling her to incorporate the graphic novels, she did not interpret his response that way. Like Lindsay, Kathy needed reassurance because what she wanted from her administrator was a directive.

Newer teachers often struggle with balancing their professional identities with their positions as novice teachers in an environment of mandates, standards and regulations. When they enter their own classrooms, they share with us the dominant narratives - told by teachers and principals, among others - and those dominant narratives are not generally supportive of change. Beginning teachers are often in confined, restrained positions and frequently fear taking risks, which limits what they know they can do to help students (Alsup, 2010). In many ways, they are repositioned into a subordinate stance, one that they had experienced prior to having their teaching credentials. It is not surprising, then, that beginning teachers sought out confirmation for their curricular decisions from mentors and others.

In a recent article, Whitney, Olan, and Fredricksen (2013) recount how preservice teachers such as Lindsay and Kathy position themselves as wanting direction. In a discussion of preservice teachers' statements, she shares one such teacher's remarks: "Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it." Whitney, Olan, and Fredricksen (2013) explain how preservice teachers' perspectives are most likely inherited from a wider prejudice against "over-theoretical" education programs spread via mass media reporting on education issues and at times by teachers themselves, and as students begin to engage their coursework in earnest these attitudes do soften. Yet as they approach their first field experiences, preservice teachers do seem hungry to know exactly how to teach—and if we know how, they seem to plead, why won't we just tell them?

In Lindsay and Kathy's search for guidance regarding their decisions about incorporating YAL into their curricula, they struggled with their positionality. They were in full-time teaching jobs, but were still feeling like students. Their agency was limited in part because of the prevailing norms

associated with the dominant narratives that put caveats on what teachers can and cannot do with literature in their own classrooms.

**Finding the teaching self: Seeking harmony through positionality and a desire to enact social justice.** Lindsay and Kathy both positioned themselves as not having the authority to make decisions about curriculum; they identified as needing support for their decisions with research from the field. They also identified a social justice stance as part of their teaching identity. Kathy was teaching in a large, affluent urban high school that is 56% White and 44% minority population (Hispanic 23%, Black 13%, Asian 6%, and Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander 1%). Of the over 3000 students, 33% were eligible for reduced or free lunch. She noted that her second language learners struggled with reading comprehension because of language/vocabulary issues and because they did not see themselves reflected in the literature included within the scripted English curriculum.

The same was true of Lindsay, who had taught in both college and high school classrooms but did not feel empowered to bring in YAL although she knew it would help her students. Lindsay's school was a small, rural high school with 98% White and 2% Black population; of the approximately 130 students enrolled at the high school, 42% were eligible for reduced or free lunch. Lindsay reported that her students, especially the male students in grades nine and ten, did not identify easily with the characters in the literature they had been asked to read, even though those characters were often of the same ethnic background. She noted that her students responded more fully to books whose characters and plots "resonate[d]" with students and their life experiences. As Gay (2010) notes, "Accepting the validity of these students' cultural socialization and prior experiences will help to reverse achievement trends" (p. 27). Even though Lindsay's student

population seemed homogenous, their experiences and socialization were culturally diverse in other ways.

Though the two contextual realities of Lindsay and Kathy's school might seem disparate, in fact, they shared the dominant narrative of a standardized curriculum that perpetuates the teaching of the same texts regardless of who is in the room. Moreover, that curriculum stripped away the rich contexts that teachers like Lindsay and Kathy could use when they employed other resources. In spite of having resources, these beginning teachers did not feel empowered to challenge the dominant narrative that kept them tied to the same traditional texts.

Lindsay knew and had already experienced the limitations put on English teachers. At her school, administrators told her, "these are the books we have;" these are the books we use. Because of this decree, and because she was a beginning teacher, Lindsay first created lesson plans based on the texts in the room and not necessarily on the needs of her students. Moreover, she did not verbalize her concerns because of her familiarity with the dominant culture and ongoing administrative resistance to pushing boundaries and valuing of the status quo. Even though she was a novice, she recognized that authority should not be questioned if she wanted to remain employed and accepted by the school community. In Lindsay's reflections about her place within the school and larger community, as well as in considering why she incorporates YAL, she said, "I've expressed to my students the importance of spreading their wings and exploring the bigger world that is around them, yet in recent years I have found great importance in being at home and establishing myself while giving back to my own small, sleepy community that has bestowed so much on me." Lindsay wanted to be positioned as an insider because she understood the power of being part of the educational team.

On the other hand, despite the fact that Kathy had an abundance of field experiences, and a degree in English Language Arts, and that her supervisor and principal told her to do what she thought was best for the students, she did not feel comfortable making independent curricular decisions. Kathy felt that she needed to support her decisions with research from experts. She said, "I have started to find useful and relevant research in order to better inform my practice." Kathy's statement was indicative of how she relied on research to inform her supervisors about her teaching and sought permission to meet her students' academic needs through nontraditional means. She used the research to better inform her classroom practice based on a curriculum that was functional, relevant, and meaningful to her students. Kathy stated, "In the modern-day classroom it is not just important, but also necessary, to include young adult literature (YAL) in the curriculum."

Kathy's knowledge of her students' needs and understanding of their specific struggles (especially those for whom English is a second language) motivated her to identify resources better attuned to their learning interests, cultural identities, and language experiences. Research, for Kathy, allowed her to have a safety net; she verified that her choice to bring in resources from outside the scripted curriculum was supported by academics with the authority and experience she lacked. Kathy still viewed herself as an outsider. However, she had found a way to establish harmony by bringing in the research to support her rationale for teaching YAL and to help her engage in conversations about curriculum within the educational community. Kathy felt that by having the research to support her pedagogical and textual choices, her own voice did not stand out but began to blend in with (or harmonize with) those of other educators and administrators in her district with more experience.

As beginning English teachers, Lindsay and Kathy were not ignorant of the power of culturally responsive teaching, which is defined as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Both beginning teachers were engaged in the process of belonging to the profession of teaching and specific educational communities. Secondary teachers make decisions about curriculum within a narrow scope; the authority of the school board and the curriculum is sacrosanct: beginning teachers should not question the curriculum. However, what Lindsay and Kathy started to realize is that they can enhance and strengthen their teaching by bringing in texts that are culturally relevant.

**Culturally responsive teaching: Questioning the dominant narrative as a beginning teacher.**

During their first years of teaching, Lindsay and Kathy both enrolled in graduate programs, which revealed new information, networking opportunities, and resources about YAL and its relevance to adolescent lives. Lindsay began to meet the needs of her students more fully, while simultaneously taking a graduate course on graphic novels. She voiced her frustration with the dominant narrative while also looking for advice from her English Education professor. She said, young adult literature “also challenge[s] me to look at the world around me in a new way or even remind[s] me of how important it is to be engaged and aware of the world around me.” In noticing that world, she recognized its complexity. Lindsay continued, “Sometimes it’s hard to bring up taboo topics in a classroom, yet YA lit has allowed me to have honest, open discussions about what characters are up against mainly because students themselves have faced similar obstacles and may not have had an avenue to discuss their feelings or own experiences and concerns.” While problematizing her classroom,

Lindsay reflected on the value of YAL as a means to address students’ emotions and varied needs. She knew that the traditional texts offered by the school did not provide all the answers.

In an earlier quote, we heard Lindsay talk about wanting to use *The Book Thief* and *Maus* in her high school English classes. There, Lindsay revisited her rationale for incorporating YAL into her secondary curriculum. In an email, she wrote, “I ordered MAUS for next year, but have yet to read it. I’m not sure if I would use it at the middle or high school level, but thought it could be a good introductory novel for something that is read concerning WWII. Is it okay?” We recognized how Lindsay began to question her choices, took a risk, and incorporated young adult texts. While teaching *The Book Thief*, she wanted to enact a culturally responsive stance and expose her student to *Maus* to provide students with different perspectives on motifs such as the horrors of the Holocaust, coming-of-age stories, and other themes. Lindsay looked for a way to help students to connect their lived experiences to the literature they were reading by selecting a young adult novel that she felt would be accessible and that would allow them to look at a familiar story (World War II) through a different lens (*Maus*). Even in doing so, she sought approval from her English teacher educator mentor, who herself had demonstrated resistance to the dominant narrative.

Likewise, in Kathy’s graduate class, she spoke about her desire to integrate YAL into her secondary classroom. She shared with classmates that after speaking to her administrator and sharing relevant scholarly research, as well as her newly discovered faith in graphic novels, she determined these as helpful in increasing reading comprehension and learning. She felt “blessed with an administration that trusts [her] judgment.” She also brought *Maus* into her English classroom and noticed that all students could relate to the graphic novel, especially

her ESOL students. Kathy discovered that the images allowed students to access the ideas when the words did not. Moreover, her students related to the notion of being outsiders/immigrants. For instance, Kathy said,

I now question texts that are considered a “must-teach” in the classroom, and want to explore more the justification of those texts and how I can push the bounds of YAL in my classroom in order to benefit my students. Although the context and nature of some YAL books might be controversial, I do not believe that means that teachers should be shying away from the content. Things like suicide, rape, racism, and drug use - all controversial in nature - are actual problems that young adults are facing, or will face, in their lives.

In the quote above, Kathy seemed to be moving toward a stance of questioning the status quo and the appropriateness of the resources and curriculum she was being asked to teach, which is a culturally responsive stance.

Britzman (quoted in *Foreword* to Alsup 2006) notes, “Educating others while being educated is where the student teacher must begin. It can take a good long while to understand that the work of learning to teach and then the work of trying to teach also encompass belonging to a profession that can and should question its own authority” (p. ix). Kathy may have been a beginning teacher, but that didn’t mean she had limited experiences with the dominant narrative. In fact, her understanding of the dominant narrative started with her own schooling (which consisted of exclusively canonical texts) and in her undergraduate coursework (in which Shakespeare, Chaucer, and other canonical authors were the norm). As she recognized cultural differences and acknowledged her own questions

regarding curricula and worldviews, she identified the dangers of generalizing and viewing all students through one lens. It was here that we saw Kathy, and Lindsay as well, begin to develop a stronger, more independent, teacher positioning while participating within the conversation of counter-narratives such as those mentioned by Bullough (2008), Miller (2005), and Riessman (2008).

In both cases, these beginning teachers brought in YAL from outside the curriculum to better address their students’ cultural and individual needs. Both Lindsay and Kathy examined the curriculum, identifying disharmony, and questioning what they were permitted to do within the structure of the power dynamic in the public school setting. They did so cautiously, however, which is well warranted since, as Bullough (2008) notes, the education system may become damaged and teaching can become “joyless” when educators “consistently find themselves needing to engage in actions contrary to their most fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning in order to satisfy one or another set of externally imposed mandates” (p. 5). Although these beginning teachers supplemented the curriculum with YAL, creating their own counter-narratives, they were still doing so with a tentative positioning and some feelings of melancholy. They continued to seek acceptance and permission from those in power both in public schools and in their graduate courses. It is important to remember, however, “culturally responsive teaching is a developmental process that involves learning over time” (Gay, 2013, p. 57). Listening to one another and creating harmony takes practice.

### **Recognizing the Benefits of Young Adult Literature and Valuing Student Voices**

Previously, Lindsay and Kathy identified the dominant narrative and began bringing in YAL because they were supplementing the curriculum



and beginning to question the status quo. In the quotes below, we saw them valuing students' voices, by listening and identifying the cultural differences and individual needs of their students. These beginning teachers recognized that after exposure to YAL (in their graduate courses and in their teaching), they felt more empowered to bring YAL into their curricula. They also began valuing the multivocal voices in their classroom and moved toward enacting culturally responsive pedagogy.

Lindsay reflected in her graduate course about a graphic novel, *My Friend Dahmer*, which tells the story of the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer as a Midwestern teenager in high school. Despite having qualms about the serial killer part, Lindsay saw a connection with historical and world events and her students' cultural identities as members of a predominantly White, Midwestern community much like that of Dahmer and his teenaged friends. She wrote,

The name Dahmer incites a reaction in us all, and as an educator I easily shrank away and was hesitant about the content based on the title. Instead by craftily placing the main characters in a high school setting, suddenly readers are able to not only relate to such main characters like Backderf, but they are also scrutinizing and evaluating age-old social roadblocks such as substance abuse, friendships, responsibility whether it be peer or parent, and perhaps empathy for our fellow classmates that are ostracized, insignificant, and yet ironically memorable. Effortlessly Backderf motivates readers and raises alarms that students encounter on a daily basis.

**“If students aren’t able to tell educators what they understand and how they connect to texts, those teachers are not addressing pedagogy in a culturally responsive manner.”**

Lindsay then pointed to research from Rybakova, Piotrowski, and Harper (2014), who show that YAL like *My Friend Dahmer* allows “students to learn how to voice their opinions as well as listen and consider others’ points of view on important issues,” continuing, “the goal for raising hard topics in the classroom via YAL is for students to recognize injustice, question the status quo, develop their own opinions about others, and learn to overcome the angst and pains of adolescence” (p. 39). Here Lindsay considered the power of students’ voices and referencing culturally relevant literature, even literature that was controversial in nature.

Kathy, likewise, showed a valuing of student voices in her reflections for her graduate course. She noted,

When I have my own classroom, I plan on carefully reading texts for controversial content and then, with the approval of my principal and [students’] parents, allowing open and honest dialogue in my classroom. I believe that if the students are afforded this opportunity, to be treated as adults who are capable of having adult conversations, then I will be able to build a repertoire of trust within my classroom. As I have previously stated, I believe that the importance of teaching YAL in the classroom is insurmountable, and this belief—although supported by research—comes directly from my own personal experiences in the healing nature of a book.

In this quote, Kathy shared her pedagogical beliefs and practices beyond what she had experienced through the dominant narrative. She acknowledged

the power that encouraging students' voices had in their learning and in their interpretations of texts.

If students aren't able to tell educators what they understand and how they connect to texts, those teachers are not addressing pedagogy in a culturally responsive manner. Kathy's insistence on and persistence in building a classroom based on trust and empathy was directly tied to her making room for students' voices through YAL.

Kathy situated her own experiences as equal to those from the research and, in doing so, made room for her own voice, positioning her counter-narrative adjacent to the dominant narrative. This ontological stance demonstrated that Kathy, like Lindsey, had started to value her own voice as well as those of her students and others. Kathy's valuing of her own voice did not eliminate the pressure she still felt as a beginning teacher, one whose limited experience and positionality within the dominant culture required her to continue to seek out permission to make changes in her own classroom.

Lindsay said, "I've always found YA characters to be complex while also being extremely relatable. Even the most reluctant students will participate in classroom discussions and activities because something about the plot and characters resonate[s] within them." Lindsay's comments pointed to a need for culturally responsive teaching. Students in her classes had not typically resonated with characters in classic texts such as *to Kill a Mockingbird* or *Romeo and Juliet*. However, her students had expressed feeling connected with adolescent characters and plot structures that related to the students' reality in YAL texts. She noted that there is "nothing better than discussing the plot of *The Giver* with 7th graders or analyzing the wild boys of *The Outsiders*."

Just as Lindsay discussed relatability of YAL in her Midwestern classroom, Kathy saw connections in her Southern high school classroom as well, not only with characters and plot, but also with cultures and experiences related to students' backgrounds. Kathy said, "Now that I have a broad understanding of not only YAL titles, but the importance of those on students' lives, I can incorporate those titles purposefully in my classroom: specifically, graphic novels, which I have come to understand the importance of due to research I have done, which I will be looking to incorporate into every unit that I do in my classroom." She continued, "What is important to note is the relevance to a student's life YAL can have, something that probably will not occur when reading 'classic literature' or when spending months at a time preparing for standardized testing."

Teachers like Lindsay and Kathy know that their realities include standardized tests that are not culturally relevant to their students' lives, and with the pressure that teachers have to prepare their students for standardized tests (especially with the connections in some states to teacher evaluation and job security), teaching in a culturally responsive manner is risky business.

As researchers, we aspire to unite their voices to identify and problematize the dissonance present in their individual stories and to emphasize the value of YAL as culturally responsive texts in these teachers' pedagogical practices. Their stories demonstrated an unexpected shift in the song of the dominant narrative, in which teachers' voices are prominent and students' voices are muffled. Through active mentoring from English teacher educators and mentorship from others within secondary education, Lindsay and Kathy felt valued within schools and grasped a sense of empowerment that had encouraged them to make tough decisions and had an impact by making real what they

envisioned as possible. Lindsay became a full-time teacher in a new rural district and has given birth to her first child. She completed her Master's degree in English and reentered the classroom with more of a sense of trust for her own judgment. Her stance changed from being inquisitive about culturally relevant texts to being convinced that she must meet her students' needs, even if that meant going outside the curriculum to do so. Lindsay said, "I feel that YA lit helps me stay relevant and reminds me of both the excitements and dangers that readers of this genre are often faced with." She felt somewhat more empowered and built confidence in her own knowledge and expertise so that when she made decisions about her lessons, Lindsay valued her own voice as well as those of experts in the field and school administrators. She noted, "It is my responsibility to my future students to not be complacent with the current canon, but to offer new and innovative ways to blend both the new young adult literature with the old." She met with her professional community and administrators to see which YAL texts she could bring into the curriculum.

Kathy became a full-time English teacher at an urban high school, had her second child as well, and completed her Master's degree in Education. She noted that after reading YAL texts with her English language learners, they struggled with summarization without relying on direct quotes. Because she brought in graphic novels, however, she found that students were able to use the images as well as the language to make deep connections to the texts. Kathy said,

Although I am in no way perfect, I would like to think that by going down this [English Language Learner] rabbit hole, I have begun my journey of having culturally responsive pedagogical competency. By realizing that my students are unique not only due to their

cultural background, but even more importantly they are unique in and of themselves, I am able to begin helping them find their third space within my classroom.

Kathy listened to the multivocal nature of her classroom and to the counter-narratives surrounding her educational community. Rather than using only the literary texts that were given to her by the district, which were assumed to be relevant to all students' lives, Kathy attended the disparate needs of her students. In particular, she was part of the discourse where beginning teachers identify their students' needs, curricular deficiencies, and individual and class interests. In choosing to provide texts that were meaningful and accessible to her students, Kathy valued her own voice and her students' voices despite having been conditioned by the dominant narrative that those voices were supposed to be muffled.

Through our restorying of Lindsay and Kathy's narratives, Bakhtin's (1981; 1986) dialogic theory provided a conduit for researchers to interpret the beginning teachers' experiences while engaging in dialogue with participants and each other. The dialogic nature of the narrative research provided us with a new understanding of the beginning teachers' learning as multiple voices brought forth insight into Lindsay and Kathy's personal and professional identities. They became cognizant of students' cultural identities and needs as well as their own. Lindsay and Kathy, through dialogue and reflection, reflected on their practices and beliefs as well as their experiences as teachers-in-training taking courses in methods of teaching English and YAL. During these interactions tension and dissonance were welcomed as a part of the dialogic process. It is during this dialogic interaction that Lindsay and Kathy established connections not only to their lived experiences, teaching, and learning, but also to their students' needs.

## Implications

The valuing of students' voices is part of a wider response to the cultural needs of the community in which beginning teachers should participate. The pedagogical implications we discuss below were derived from Lindsay and Kathy's narratives, which suggest the following: YAL (1) can help beginning teachers create culturally responsive connections with their students, which provides relief from the dominant narrative; (2) serves as a conduit for cultural and intellectual inquiry; and (3) helps humanize the curriculum, which meets the goals of social justice.

First, YAL can help beginning teachers create culturally responsive connections with their students, which provides relief from the dominant narrative. Kathy's choice to bring in graphic novels helped her ESOL students to break through the barriers of the English language, identify with characters in similar life circumstances, and connect to their own lived experiences through images. Likewise, Lindsay's decision to use *My Friend Dahmer* was based on her desire to help students connect culturally to characters whose lived experiences are similar and to a setting that is geographically familiar and relatable.

Second, YAL can serve as a conduit for cultural and intellectual inquiry. Both teachers spoke about how their students approached the YAL in the same way that they approached classic literature. For Lindsay and Kathy, culture matters, and learning cannot take place in settings where student's cultures are not acknowledged. For example, Lindsay wants to help her students not only understand their own community better, but also to help them investigate "the bigger world that is around them." Kathy, too, sees the importance of providing a "full range" of texts for all of her students and the value of "a teacher leading his or her students through in-depth

inquiry and analysis" using both classic and YAL. In addition, Kathy and Lindsay have continued to seek out opportunities for professional development and intellectual inquiry through graduate courses and educational conferences. They have also maintained a relationship with their teacher educator mentors, which provides them a space for continued dialogue and inquiry. Furthermore, both Lindsay and Kathy have participated in meetings with administration and teacher leaders in which they stated their desires to incorporate more YAL, culturally responsive teaching, and texts that address the social inequalities that students are facing in the twenty-first century.

Third, YAL can also humanize the curriculum, which meets the goals of social justice. As Glasgow (2001) states, "We must create for students democratic and critical spaces that foster meaningful and transformative learning. If we expect students to take social responsibility, they must explore ideas, topics, and viewpoints that not only reinforce but challenge their own" (p. 54). She continues, "Young adult literature provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating worldview and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations" (p. 54).

Lindsay and Kathy recognize that the learning their students experience is not as fulfilling as it could be with only the standardized curriculum in place. YAL provides a way to meet the emotional needs of students in both settings because for many of their students, there is more opportunity for tapping into characters' emotions through YAL. Kathy identified the frustration and disconnect that her ESOL students were experiencing with the classic texts selected for them without regard for their personal or cultural histories. She chose to bring in *Maus* to help students consider various global perspectives while not eliminating the power of their individual

perspectives. While Kathy tended to focus her concern on her ESOL students' needs, she was well aware that all her students were sharing the same sentiment. Both Lindsay and Kathy developed a stronger ability to listen for their students' needs (individual and cultural), which helped them in turn to enact a more humanistic educational stance. They also became more reflective about their own experiences and needs. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), "We need to listen closely to teachers and other learners and to the stories of their lives in and out of classrooms. We also need to tell our own stories as we live our own collaborative researcher/teacher lives. Our own work then becomes one of learning to tell and live a new mutually constructed account of inquiry in teaching and learning" (p. 12).

Our stories throughout this research study have changed as well. Like Lindsay and Kathy, we have reflected and become reflexive through the process of restorying their narratives and considering how our own positionings have transformed as English teacher educator researchers. In addition, we have revisited the programmatic needs of our English Education students and more fully acknowledged the dominant narrative that prevails in our field and the counter-narratives at play. In fact, while writing this piece, we reconsidered our own methods courses, discussing specific texts used, assignments created, assessments employed, and field experiences required, and made plans for course revisions based on our interpretations of these beginning teachers' narratives. Moreover, we were reminded to be authentic and responsive to our own students' needs while exposing them to different theoretical and pedagogical perspectives through YAL and culturally responsive pedagogy.

## Limitations

The results of this study are limited in several ways. First, the two participants were educated in public institutions and were from the same ethnic background and socioeconomic status. Because educators come from varied backgrounds and can be educated in private, public, and alternative teacher education programs, it is not possible to make generalizations from our research to all teachers of English. Second, data examined included only self-reported information (e.g., narratives, messages, conversations, etc.), which cannot be independently verified. Third, the sample size (which included two teachers) was small; thus, the results of the study are not generalizable or transferable. Finally, our interpretations of the data could be biased based on our knowledge of and interactions with our participants, and our positionality within our institutions and communities. In order to mitigate the limitations mentioned above, both teacher educator researchers employed respondent validation throughout this study.

Future studies for this research might consider whether the questioning of the status quo is related to the actual appropriation and use of culturally responsive teaching and if using YAL to question the status quo helps humanize the curriculum and meet the goals of social justice as Glasgow (2001) and others posit. Additionally, researchers could examine how the stories of beginning English teachers from other socioeconomic, ethnic, or cultural groups could enhance their understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and/or the use of YAL in the secondary classroom.

## Conclusion

This narrative research study sheds light on how two undergraduate English education students transitioned from graduate schools into their first



teaching jobs and grappled with how to incorporate YAL into their (mostly standardized) curricula while meeting the individual and cultural needs of their students. Both Lindsay and Kathy are actively listening to their students' voices while trying to position themselves within a chorus of teacher voices that appears to be harmonious but which does not seem to allow for individual variation. This study provides a window into how these teachers established connections between the texts, their students' lived experiences, and their own lived experiences, and why they struggled with the application of culturally responsive pedagogy during their early teaching experiences.

As English teacher educators, completing this research has helped us redefine the role of YAL in the secondary English classroom. That role has changed from tangential to essential. YAL better informs students' understanding of canonical texts by providing texts that offer accessible language, parallel plots and themes, culturally and historically relevant settings, and opportunities for empathy through relatable characters. As Rybakova et al. (2013) state, YAL allows students to "recognize injustice, question the status quo, develop their own opinions about others, and learn to overcome the angst and pains of adolescence" (p. 39). YAL also helps beginning teachers create culturally responsive connections with their students, which provides relief from the dominant narrative, and also serves as a conduit for cultural and intellectual inquiry for their students and for themselves as educators and members of diverse communities. The beginning teachers can engage in dialogue to bring forth their own - and their students' - lived experiences so they can frame their teaching within a culturally responsive lens.

Through our restorying of Lindsay and Kathy's narratives, we have rediscovered the power of the beginning teacher's voice. We were surprised at how loudly the dominant narrative resonated in beginning English teachers' lives and classrooms. We learned that beginning teachers can strategically position YAL to supplement, enrich, and disrupt the dominant narrative to better inform their students' understanding of canonical texts. Additionally, we learned that these teachers used YAL to help their students talk about difficult and sometimes controversial topics in ways that are beneficial to all stakeholders. We also found that beginning teachers and we, as researchers, better recognized and analyzed social and educational inequity. Educators need to identify any disharmony within the

standardized curriculum and blend our voices into a synchronized performance of education.

This research provides an example for English teacher educators and others as to how beginning teachers might question and/or disrupt the

dominant narrative while finding harmony in their first years of teaching. We should provide opportunities for our former, current, and future preservice teachers to share their stories with each other and us in non-threatening spaces beyond the methods courses. We encourage teacher educators, and particularly those in English Language Arts, to listen carefully to their students' stories. Moreover, we encourage them to become more aware of their potential as agents for change and transformation in an era of standardization and accountability. Teacher education researchers are encouraged to continue examining how beginning teachers can question and/or disrupt the dominant narrative while creating spaces for their students' voices and lived experiences.

**“Educators need to identify disharmony within the standardized curriculum and blend our voices into a synchronized performance of education.”**

Finally, we urge readers to look to YAL as a possible conduit for enacting culturally responsive pedagogy. After all, by creating harmony

between the canon and young adult texts, the voices that are most often muted become relevant in the secondary English classroom.

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Table 1

*Excerpt of Communication*

Data	Lindsey	Kathy	Phenomenon Identified	Metanarrative
Email communication (N=20)	I know <i>The Book Thief</i> isn't considered part of the canon; however, I do teach it with my 10th graders and thought of including <i>Maus</i> with it next year before we read the novel. I like that both deal with abandonment issues concerning parental figures and one is told from a German's perspective while <i>Maus</i> is told from a Jewish perspective. Is that something I could do? I am also teaching <i>Frankenstein</i> next year with my seniors and thought that maybe, just MAYBE, a book like <i>My Friend Dahmer</i> could be used with it? I might be way out	I struggle as a new teacher with having resources for all my students and beyond that selecting YA Literature/graphic novels that are culturally relevant for all my students, especially my ESOL kids that need all the help they can get. I can do what I want. My principal said, "Go ahead Kathy try that." I just wanted him to tell me what to do.	POSITIONALITY Who do we have trouble with – seasoned teachers who don't want to bring in YA lit. Lindsay is more hesitant b/c she's been indoctrinated in the culture already as a young but experienced teacher who is being expected to (and living the expectations of) teach(ing) the canon and knows the system. Kathy doesn't have that fear of taking risks with YA lit.	When they get into their own classrooms, they share with us the dominant narratives - told by the teachers, principals, etc. - and those dominant narratives are not generally supportive of change. Confined, restrained positions of new teachers and fear of taking risks limits what they KNOW they can do and puts them back into a subordinate position like felt they were in college and didn't have their teaching certificate yet.

	in left field on this, but was wondering if this was a start?			
Storied responses (N=4)	“Instead by craftily placing the main characters in a high school setting, suddenly readers are able to not only relate to such main characters like Backderf”	“What is important to note is the relevance to a student’s life YAL can have, something that will probably not occur when reading “classic literature” or when spending months at a time preparing for standardized testing	Noticing the relatability and relevance of YA lit to students’ lives	“Reliability of characters in YA lit is better because of diversity of characters and their experiences E.g., it’s not another war narrative about a boy going off to serve his country (many canon texts) – ex: SPEAK is about a young girl surviving sexual assault. YA lit brings in stories that have been subverted by the dominant culture because looking at them makes us squirmy and uncomfortable (the untold stories, the stories of women, LGTBQ, oppressed individuals, etc.)