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# The Use of Diverse Young Adult Literature in High School Classrooms

Lauren Mohler

*Olivet Nazarene University*, [lnmohler@olivet.edu](mailto:lnmohler@olivet.edu)

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The Use of Diverse Young Adult Literature in High School Classrooms

Lauren Mohler

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Elizabeth Schurman

Olivet Nazarene University

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Dr. Summers and the Mayhugh Grant for generously providing the necessary funding for this project. Drs. Schurman, Lamszus, and Ingram, thank you for reading many imperfect versions of my thoughts and for providing guidance and encouragement every step of the way. Dr. Lisa Hazlett, thank you for permission to use the survey from the Hazlett, Johnson, and Hayn (2009) study that inspired my research and for sending me many additional resources that added fuel to the fire. To my friends who supplied endless encouragement and feedback throughout the entire process, thank you for caring about every misplaced comma and listening to me talk about this for the past year and a half. Lastly, to all of my students at Bradley-Bourbonnais Community High School, thank you for being my guinea pigs during student teaching and for reminding me every day why all of this truly matters.

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### **Abstract**

This departmental honors project outlined research that has been completed on the benefits of incorporating young adult literature in the secondary English Language Arts classroom and discussed the benefits of using young adult literature as a means of introducing students to various aspects of diversity. While young adult literature continues to grow in popularity among teen readers, there are many negative connotations associated with texts falling under this label and their merit within the classroom. Similarly, classroom dynamics are becoming more diverse each year through the number of students representing different races, ethnicities, ability levels, interests, socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, and more. However, there is very little quantitative or qualitative research on how young adult literature can be used in secondary curricula to engage students in assigned reading and to increase students' exposure to facets of diversity. Thus, this study aimed to reveal how a sample of secondary English Language Arts educators perceives young adult literature, how it is being used in the classroom, the challenges that teachers face when attempting to include it in the curriculum, and the extent to which teachers are addressing facets of diversity in their classrooms.

### **The Use of Diverse Young Adult Literature in High School Classrooms**

Young adult literature (YAL) is a genre that many claim came into existence in the 1960s (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). While books falling into this genre are becoming increasingly popular among students, they have not been as widely accepted by some educators both inside and outside of the classroom. Hazlett, Johnson, and Hayn (2009) reflect on the negative connotation associated with those studying the use of young adult literature, stating that colleagues “perceive them as having lower professional status than others” (p. 48). Bucher and Hinton (2010) and Cole (2009) claim that some critics see young adult literature as too immature for mainstream English classes (as cited in Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). Santoli and Wagner (2004) further the conversation by stating, “Many English language arts teachers are determined to make their students read ‘real’ literature...[by] authors such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and Willa Cather” (p. 66). Hazlett et al. (2009) attribute a portion of the negativity to the marketing techniques of young adult literature, the lack of a consistent definition, and the common use of traditional, canonical works in secondary English classrooms to meet the standards. Despite these negative connotations, Smith, Hazlett, and Lennon (2018) find that young adult literature is now being taught more consistently in secondary English Language Arts classrooms. Many proponents argue that the inclusion of young adult literature in the curriculum is beneficial for many reasons, including the following: its relevance to its readers (Glaus, 2014; Ostenson & Wadham, 2012); its ability to help young readers build strong literacy skills and an appreciation for reading texts (Santoli & Wagner, 2004); and its ability to aid in formulating a personal identity (Bushman & Haas, 2006).

While research indicates that there are benefits to incorporating YAL into secondary ELA curricula, the breadth of its benefits is still unknown. According to Hazlett et al. (2009), “At the 2009 Commission on English Education’s Conference session ‘Young Adult Literature: Defining the Role of Research,’ Hayn reported that in the past ten years, only 27 articles that could be described as peer-reviewed and designated as quantitative or qualitative research have been published in the field” (p. 49). Hazlett et al. (2009) also pointed out that *The ALAN Review* and *SIGNAL* have a variety of articles about YA literature, but they are mostly limited to unit plans or interviews with authors rather than research about the use of YA texts. Similarly, Kaplan (2006) collected and categorized dissertations about YA literature from 2000-2005, finding that nine were about the various roles of YAL in classrooms along with 23 dissertations and one master’s thesis analyzing YAL as a genre, not its applications (as cited in Hazlett, Johnson, & Hayn, 2009). These findings, while out of date, are the most recent large-scale studies on the use of YAL inside the classroom, therefore signifying the importance of continuing the study today. Smith et al. (2018) concluded their study by stating, “Finally, more research is needed on how YAL is actually taught in classrooms. Research and practitioner journals must continue to include articles about professional development effective in helping teachers choose and teach YAL” (p. 14).

In addition to the shortage of research regarding the use of YAL in the high school ELA classroom, there is also a lack of research regarding using YAL in order to expose students to diversity. While some publications pair a particular young adult text with a facet of diversity, there are no large-scale studies regarding the overall effectiveness of using YAL to create authentic learning experiences in the classroom about the many facets of diversity. Author

Kwame Alexander is quoted by O'Donnell (2018) saying that the "single narrative" that is told in many texts today, particularly in stories about people of color, needs to be challenged, arguing that "our vision—as readers, as humans—is blurred" (p. 43). Similarly, author Chad Everett (2018) refers to texts such as *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas and *The Distance Between Us* by Reyna Grande as "mirror, window, and sliding-glass door texts," arguing that teachers should be able to give students the access to books where they can see themselves as well as see and better understand others (p. 21). Alexander says that "we need diverse books to be mirrors and windows so all young people can not only see themselves in literature, but see outside themselves, which makes them more aware of our connections" (O'Donnell, 2018, p. 44). These opinions, coupled with the growing diversity both inside and outside of the classroom, demonstrate the need for more research to be done on how, or if, YAL is being utilized to its full potential in secondary classrooms to help students find characters that are like them as well as characters that will help them better relate to others.

Given the scarcity of data on YAL's presence in the high school ELA classroom and the need for additional research on using YAL to address diversity in the classroom, the purpose of this specific study was to collect data from a selection of high school English Language Arts teachers regarding their perceptions and use of young adult literature in their classrooms. More specifically, this study aims to address the following questions: Are local high school English teachers utilizing young adult literature in their classrooms? If so, how is it being used? Are teachers using diverse YAL texts? If so, what facets of diversity are they most frequently representing? If young adult literature is not being used, what are the reasons teachers are not using YAL?



## Review of Literature

### Teacher Considerations

When selecting texts to include in their curriculum, there are many components that teachers must take into consideration. These components include a wide variety of curriculum and student concerns that must be addressed and are not always under a teacher's control. One common struggle amongst teachers is facing curriculum limitations stemming from the need to address specific learning standards. Even more specifically, secondary ELA teachers must consider the complexity level of the texts that are used in their curriculum and students' engagement level with the texts, per the Common Core State Standards. Furthermore, individual school districts may have additional curriculum limitations stemming from sources such as decisions that are made by the school board that teachers must adhere to in their curriculum. The Common Core State Standards' emphasis on college and career readiness requires teachers to pick texts that are textually complex to challenge students and that have real-world application, two features that are commonly a part of YAL books. This directly connects to the belief that readers will engage more deeply with a text if they can relate to it personally. While these components can present certain challenges, the breadth of YAL that is available allows teachers a wide variety of choice and flexibility within the texts that are featured in their curriculum while working within these constraints.

**Text complexity within the Common Core State Standards.** Hinchman and Sheridan-Thomas (2014) describe the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as "new national standards that guide teaching and learning in the vast majority of public schools" (p. 100). In order to accommodate for the steady increase in complexity of texts used in college and career

settings, CCSS place an emphasis on increasing the level of complexity of texts that are used within the classroom as well. In accordance with the CCSS, the three components that make up text complexity are quantitative measures, qualitative measures, and reader and task considerations. The CCSS website gives the following definitions for these three terms: quantitative measures are “readability measures and other scores of text complexity;” qualitative measures are “levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands;” and reader and task considerations are “reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed)” (“Measuring Text,” 2019). These three terms work together to form a text’s level of complexity.

In order to provide students with necessary college and career readiness skills, teachers must choose texts that will interest and challenge the students; however, if a text is too challenging, many times students will not read it. Kittle (2013) states that the teachers she works with across North America believe that 20 percent or less of their students complete the assigned reading (as cited in Glaus, 2014). This is one of the problems occurring in many classrooms today. Glaus (2014) makes the claim that many of the texts found on the CCSS list of exemplars of complex texts suggested for teachers to use are the same ones that many students are not reading. This raises the question of how teachers can select textually-complex texts that will prepare students for college and future careers—a task highly encouraged by the CCSS—that students will take the time to read.

With stress placed on real-world application, the CCSS present an opportunity to utilize young adult texts in the classroom that reflect many of the diverse situations that can be found in

life today, including varying races, genders, cultures, and abilities. According to the Illinois State Board of Education's website, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA) "emphasize application of knowledge to real world situations" (ELA Learning Standards). Many texts that can be labeled as YAL fall into the same categories of text complexity that are recommended by the CCSS. Ostenson and Wadham (2012) validates the use of young adult texts through referencing Cole (2009) and Gallo's (2001) argument that the issues presented in YAL are most relevant to its readers, leaving students more motivated to read and more apt to make connections to the text. This links directly to Rosenblatt's (1967/2005) reader-response theory that a "...literary work must hold out some link with the young reader's own past and present preoccupations, emotions, anxieties, ambitions" (p. 65). The relatability of a text is a direct representation of one of the three factors that the CCSS use to establish a text's level of complexity and appropriateness for readers (see Figure 1 below). The reader and task oriented section of a text's complexity is "important for understanding that not all students will progress at steady, grade-level pace, and some will need careful consideration while working toward higher levels of text complexity" (Glaus, 2014, p. 408). Additionally, it also affords the opportunity to select texts that are beneficial for the class as a whole as well as individual students by using titles that connect with the students' knowledge and experience, two characteristics explicitly pointed out by the CCSS.



*Figure 1. The Standards' Model of Text Complexity.*

**Engagement with texts.** Another important aspect that teachers need to keep in mind when selecting texts for their curriculum is students' engagement with the text. Rosenblatt (1967/2005), a theorist known for her studies regarding readers and their responses to literature, asserts that "...the teaching of reading and writing at any developmental level should have as its first concern the creation of environments and activities in which students are motivated and encouraged to draw on their own resources to make 'live' meanings" (p. 27). Rosenblatt's (1967/2005) assertion opens up a discussion on the value of students' level of engagement with texts, a conversation that is still continuing today.

Ivey and Johnston (2013) conducted qualitative research regarding the process of student engagement with YAL texts and its outcomes in order to gain more information regarding the student perspective on engagement. For the purpose of their study, Ivey and Johnston (2013) relied on the definition created by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) that "engaged reading is strategic, motivated interaction with text and that engaged readers are 'motivated to read, strategic in their approaches to comprehending what they read, knowledgeable in their

construction of meaning from text, and socially interactive while reading” (p. 256). Ivey and Johnston (2013) collected data from four eighth grade English classes in which the teachers allowed students to freely pick from 150-200 different young adult books, many of which represented “stark realities (e.g., sexual abuse, suicide, and moral uncertainties)” for a nine-week period (p. 258). To analyze the results, Ivey and Johnson (2013) conducted interviews with each of the 71 participants two years after the transition was initiated. In those interviews, every student demonstrated at least one example of engaged reading, including reporting reading outside the allotted time in class and reading at home, and expressed that the book choices they were given were significant in this behavioral change, citing a total of 159 different titles over the course of the interviews. Additionally, many students noted a positive change in agency: 56 in agency in reading, 33 in social agency, 20 in moral agency, 27 in agency in life narratives, and 40 in agency of self-regulation. In the recorded interviews, students’ verbal reactions were caught on tape, including one student positively expressing, “Well, free verse made me get into reading. I used to not like [reading]” (p. 260).

These findings support Ivey and Johnson’s (2013) claim that “features of contemporary texts, such as multiple narrators, shifting perspectives, and multimodalities, invite readers to consider varied viewpoints on personal and social problems, including those normally underrepresented” (p. 257). Ivey and Johnston (2013) state, “There is reason to suspect, then, that opportunities to select young adult literature, typically situated in the social networks with which adolescents identify, would foster engaged reading” (p. 257). This statement introduces the idea of using texts that are representational of the student population, which is directly connected to using diverse literature. Although this study does not include working directly with

students, therefore limiting the results to solely teachers' opinions, the study aims to see if high school English teachers who are using YAL in their curriculum are noting similar results as these middle school educators did when including YAL in their curriculum.

### **Young Adult Literature**

Although young adult literature has many varying definitions, it has been the topic of much discussion since its appearance in the 1960s. Many have researched the effects on students' level of engagement when reading YAL both in junior high and high school classrooms. However, the extent of large-scale research that has been conducted within the last decade is minimal. Furthermore, the topic of using diverse texts, diverse YAL texts in particular, is discussed less frequently, although student bodies seem to be becoming increasingly more diverse.

**Defining young adult literature.** There are many different definitions that are used when discussing young adult literature. Hazlett et al. (2009) attribute this in part to the lack of consistency in how the books are marketed. YAL texts can be found in libraries and bookstores within children's sections, popular adult texts sections, or mixed in sections of the traditional canon. For the purpose of this study, YAL will be defined through the following characteristics:

- “literature written specifically for adolescents in grades 6 through 12” (Hazlett, Johnson, & Hayn, 2009, p. 48)
- literature in which “teenagers are the main characters dealing with issues to which teens can relate (Herz & Gallo, 2005, pp. 10-11)” (as cited in Glaus, 2014, p. 408)
- literature in which the “outcomes usually depend on the decisions and choices of main characters (Herz & Gallo, 2005, pp. 10-11)” (as cited in Glaus, 2014, p. 408)

**The presence of YAL in high school classrooms.** Research regarding the use of young adult literature in secondary classes is not new. Bushman (1997) surveyed 380 students in sixth through twelfth grades regarding the frequency of their reading and what they most enjoy reading. Bushman (1997) found that as students advanced in their classes, they began to read less for both pleasure and book reports in school. Since then, however, there has been a wide gap in quantitative and qualitative research. Due to the limited amount of quantitative research, Hazlett et al. (2009) conducted a study where they polled secondary educators who are members of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Their goal was to collect quantitative data regarding the usefulness of young adult literature and gauge how it is perceived by educators, parents, and administrators (Hazlett et al., 2009). Of the 617 educators who received a survey, 52 were completed and returned. Of the 52 total respondents, 22 said YAL is incorporated into their curriculum; however, 29 respondents said that YAL was only used for independent reading time in class or on summer reading lists, showing that including YAL in their curriculum may not include teaching it in class. Forty-one teachers reported never feeling discouraged by fellow teachers, 46 by administrators, and 44 by parents, while 34 participants said that they wished other teachers, administrators, and parents were more accepting of including YAL in their classroom. Although these answers correspond to each other, many of the answers seemed to contradict each other on the returned surveys. Thirty-six educators said that YAL should be taught in high school as well as middle school, but, of the same 36 respondents, 10 claimed that adult classics were a more valuable option; two said they never use YAL; 13 said YAL is best in the middle grades or with remedial students; and one individual claimed YAL texts should be limited to suburban or private schools. While Hazlett et al.'s

(2009) survey did not end up producing any conclusive results regarding the use of YAL in secondary classrooms, they were able to gauge how a selection of secondary English educators feel about the usefulness of young adult literature in middle and high school curriculum.

Hazlett et al.'s (2009) study was replicated by Smith et al. (2018) with the goal of discovering why or why not YAL is being used in the ELA classroom. By using the same survey that was used in 2009, they were able to further the discussion of YAL's importance in the classroom and collect additional data from a large-scale study seven years after Hazlett et al.'s (2009) study. Smith et al. (2018) report that, according to their results, YAL has become more popular with middle school teachers but that it seems to disappear in curriculum after the ninth grade. One of the struggles that respondents from the Smith et al. (2018) study reported is a continued challenge of finding opportunities to use YAL due to the time demands and the materials that are required for meeting the ever-changing standards. However, they ultimately concluded that "YAL does not need defending, [and] it is desired that ELA educators will continue to teach YAL, expounding on its effectiveness in motivating adolescents to read" (p. 13).

Given the lack of current research on the use of YAL in the high school ELA classroom, the goal of this study is to take the survey originally used by Hazlett et al. (2009) and adapt it to work for a smaller scale, focusing on how YAL is received today, if it is currently being implemented into secondary ELA classroom curricula, and if it is being used to further students' exposure to diversity. Like Hazlett et al.'s (2009) study, one of results that Smith et al. (2018) found was that the majority of the respondents have not been discouraged from using YAL in their classrooms by colleagues, administrators, and parents. Ultimately, their study showed very



similar results to Hazlett et al. (2009) and concluded that “more research is needed on how YAL is actually taught in classrooms” (Smith, Hazlett, & Lennon, 2018, p. 14).

### **Role of Diverse Texts in the Classroom**

Classrooms today are becoming more and more diverse. For example, *The New York Times* states that since the 1990s the enrollment of Hispanic and Asian students in United States’ classrooms has increased by more than 5 million (Diversity in the Classroom). Additionally, in the 2014-2015 school year, 13 percent of the total number of students receiving public school education were being served under IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Children and Youth with Disabilities). Bushman and Haas (2006) state that “America’s ever-changing society now encompasses sex, age, national origin, physical and mental ability, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomica and experiential background into its contemporary view of diversity, creating an even more inclusive definition of the term” (p. 186).

With additional factors going into what makes a classroom diverse, a common struggle is deciding how to best meet the needs of every student in a classroom. One of the ways to accomplish this is to use YAL to meet the needs of all students, which includes providing opportunities to relate to characters found in the texts while also fostering an appreciation towards others’ unique experiences. For example, Wopperer (2011) argues that YAL depicting characters with disabilities are important tools as they help readers learn about the disabilities and connect to those with them. Graff (2010) continues the discussion by examining the importance of reading multicultural literature, claiming that it allows for “authentic representations of [marginalized groups]...and has the potential to disrupt readers’ understanding of the world” (p. 108). By disrupting students’ views of the world around them, they will be

exposed to new opinions and viewpoints of various situations. This would allow their knowledge to go beyond their immediate surroundings and to have a more expansive worldview.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (2013) defines diversity as “(1) Individual differences (e.g., personality, interests, learning modalities, and life experiences), and (2) group differences (e.g., race, ethnicity, ability, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, nationality, language, religion, political affiliation, and socio-economic background)” (p. 49). These categories will be used in the current study to evaluate what kinds of texts are being used in local high school English classrooms and whether the texts that are being used are representational of the school’s population.

**Individual differences.** The Council of Chief State School Officers (2013) denotes individual differences as including facets such as “personality, interests, learning modalities, and life experiences” (p. 49). For example, falling under the category of life experiences, English teachers Colantonio-Yurko, Miller, and Cheveallier (2018) outline the importance of using YAL to explore social justice issues, specifically the issues of sexual assault and rape, in order to help students “understand the issues of sexual violence as a traumatic and real part of the lived human experience, especially because young adults are heavily represented in sexual violence statistics” (p. 2). The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2018) states that “one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old” (“Get Statistics”). Statistics such as this one highlight the frequency with which students are encountering sexual assault, demonstrating the importance of addressing the issue of sexual assault with high school students. While Colantonio-Yurko et al. (2018) recognize the presence of sexual violence in traditional, canonical texts commonly featured in the ELA classroom—specifically *The Color*

*Purple*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*—they also make the claim that YAL can be an even more powerful vehicle with which to address sexual violence “because it is relatable and accessible to students” (p. 3). Although the topic of sexual assault is just one specific example, it is representative of the various kinds of experiences students face today that YAL can help teachers address from within the classroom. No matter the type of individual difference, it is important to provide students with opportunities to see themselves in the books they read so that they can form a personal identity, explore differing viewpoints on personal problems, and feel represented in their classroom (Bushman & Haas, 2006; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; O’Donnell, 2018).

**Group differences.** Similar to their list of individual differences, The Council of Chief State School Officers (2013) denotes group differences as including facets such as “race, ethnicity, ability, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, nationality, language, religion, political affiliation, and socio-economic background” (p. 49). While talking about group differences can seem daunting and leave teachers questioning what is appropriate for their students, there is much support behind the idea of having difficult conversations about the world with students. Bronwell (2018), a former elementary teacher, asks these questions: “To what extent should we protect or shelter the students in our classrooms from seemingly harmful news? In what ways are we also responsible for teaching them about the realities of the world?” (p. 14). Bronwell (2018) reflects on her experiences in the classroom as well as conversations she has had with other teachers and ultimately concludes that “‘sheltering’ students perpetuates white privilege and color blindness in our wider society,” claiming that “we must recognize that children are not apolitical beings but recognize that they are raced, classed, gendered individuals

who live out such identities every day” (p. 15). This idea directly correlates with what Stachowiak (2018) has to say about the importance of discussing gender stereotypes: “There is a problematic lack of candid, compassionate, and inclusive conversations about gender beyond ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ like this in our classrooms, but normalizing these types of conversations can make our schools much safer for students who don’t fit gender norms” (p. 29).

### **Methodology**

In order to determine if high school English teachers are using diverse YA literature in their classrooms and what factors determine if they use it, I reached out to high school English teachers who I have a relationship with either through Olivet’s local teacher education program or from those who Olivet English professors know from having worked with the teacher education candidates and asked them to participate in the survey. The instrument that was used is a modified version of Hazlett et al.’s (2009) survey that was used to gather information for the article “An Almost Young Adult Literature Study” (See Appendix).

The link to the survey was distributed electronically and remained open for approximately one month. I was in contact with the teachers as needed to facilitate communication and request their participation in the study when distributing the link. The survey includes 46 numerical questions ranging from demographic information to questions regarding their use and perceptions of YAL in the classroom. Additionally, participants answered eight open-ended questions, allowing them to provide additional information on the types of classes they teach, the racial makeup of their student population, and their own struggles with using YAL in their classroom.

Of the 36 teachers that were contacted, 34 of them responded and completed the survey. After collecting all the responses, I analyzed the data from each response in order to better understand teachers' perceptions regarding the role and use of YA in general and specifically to teach diversity in their classrooms. In order to analyze the qualitative data that was collected, I used an open coding method. Dyson and Genishi (2005) describe that through open coding a researcher might "keep a running list of all descriptors...to develop a more focused category system" (p. 85). This process was used to identify themes that were present in the open-ended questions where teachers could reflect on their own teaching methods in their classrooms and within their school. After analyzing data, results were presented at the Illinois Association of English conference and will be presented at Olivet's scholar week in April of 2019.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **YAL Use in the Classroom**

While analyzing both the survey results and narrative comments from the 34 participants, three main themes emerged. The most significant finding was that teachers overwhelmingly feel that young adult literature should be taught in the high school ELA classroom. Forty-one percent of the respondents reported using young adult literature for variations of independent reading both throughout their school as a whole and their individual classrooms. When asked more specifically about how often they use it in their curriculum, 59 percent said that they use it "often," if not "always." However, when asked to specify how it is used within their schools, 41 percent reported conflicting responses, citing variations of independent reading or availability through classroom or school libraries. Responses such as these indicate that YAL is often viewed

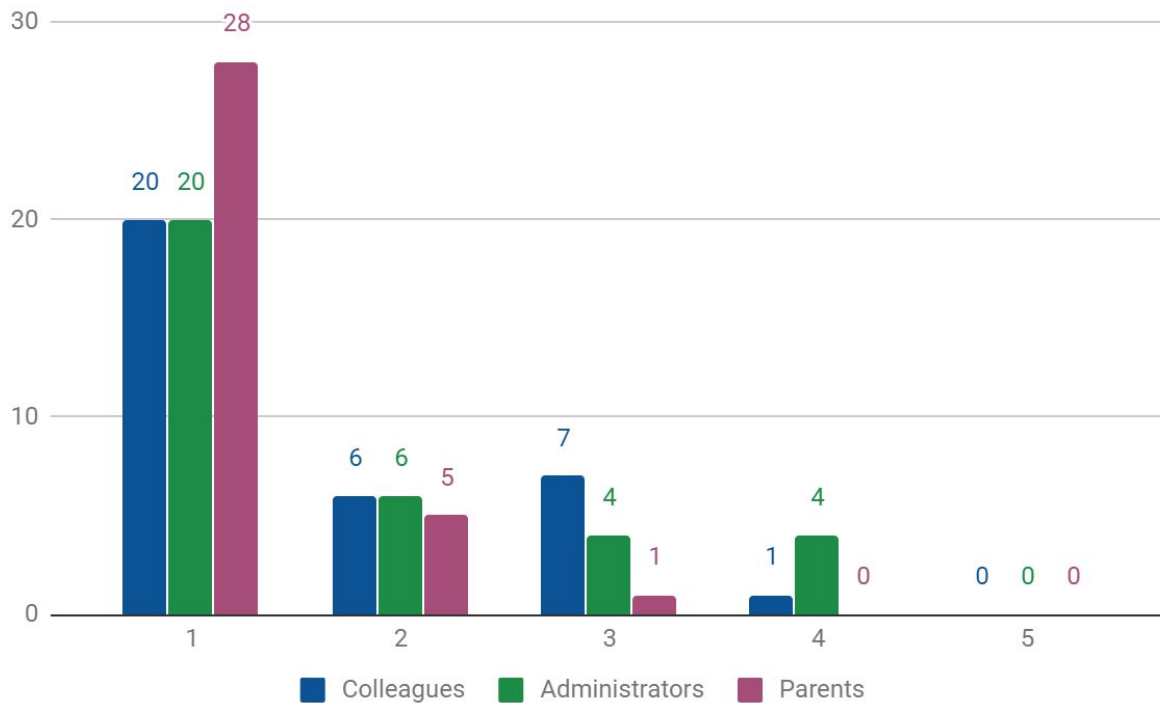
as optional or used for choice reading rather than required reading that is intentionally integrated into the curriculum.

While these forms of inclusion are valuable ways to begin exposing students to young adult literature, this raises the question as to what teachers consider being “in the curriculum” truly means. In one of the extended response questions, respondents were given the opportunity to elaborate on how YAL is used in their classrooms. One participant commented on the struggle of integrating YAL into the classroom by saying, “It is only incorporated into the curriculum if we are able to swing it.” This comment is unsurprising when considering the amount of practicing teachers who are still questioning YAL’s merit in the classroom. Hazlett et al. (2009) found that 28 percent of their respondents believed that adult classics, rather than young adult texts, are a more valuable option for secondary ELA students. This same thought directly connects to additional struggles that one participant noted by saying, “Efforts to replace the classics with YA novels on the same subject have been met with derision,” while another respondent commented that texts that fall under the definition that was provided for the purpose of this study are often not labeled as “young adult literature,” leaving her to “realize that YA Lit seems to have a bad connotation within the school district.” These teachers’ opinions confirm researchers’ findings that YAL is not always widely accepted and is frequently viewed as being less valuable in the classroom than other, more traditional options (Hazlett et al., 2009; Santoli and Wagner, 2004). These kinds of responses show a need for further studies that explore the breadth of YAL’s benefits when included in the curriculum as a class-read text so that teachers and schools can take advantage of all that it has to offer.

### **Support for Young Adult Literature Use**

The next theme to emerge from the data is that teachers, for the most part, rarely or never feel discouraged by colleagues, administrators, or parents from using YAL in their curriculum, a theme that was expressed by both Hazlett et al.'s (2009) and Smith et al.'s (2018) studies. In Hazlett et al.'s (2009) study, about 80 percent of their respondents stated they have not been discouraged by colleagues, administrators, or parents from using YAL in the classroom, while Smith et al. (2018) found that about 60 percent of their respondents have not been discouraged by colleagues, administrators, or parents from using YAL in the classroom. While these numbers show an overall positive view on the presence of YAL in the classroom, there was a significant drop in percentages of participants who have not been discouraged at all from Hazlett et al. (2009) to Smith et al. (2018). In this study, 59 percent of teachers said they were never discouraged by colleagues or administrators, and 82 percent said that they were never discouraged by parents, denoting a steady, positive trend in the acceptance of YAL's presence in the classroom similar to the results found by Smith et al. (2018) (see Table 1 below). In addition, when looking at the number of teachers who have been discouraged from using YAL, none of the teachers indicated that they were "always" discouraged, and only 15 percent noted being discouraged "often," 4 of whom listed administrators as the ones who were discouraging the use of YAL. About 35 percent of the respondents indicated that they were discouraged from using YAL "occasionally" by selecting the answer "3." Interestingly, of those who chose that answer, seven of them claimed to be discouraged by colleagues. These results, while coming from a more localized sample, remain consistent with those of both Hazlett et al. (2009) and Smith et al.

(2018), demonstrating a positive trend of teachers feeling supported in the inclusion of YAL in their classrooms.



*Figure 1.* The frequency with which teachers feel discouraged from using YAL.  
1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = occasionally, 4 = often, 5 = always

Although respondents did not report being discouraged from using YAL in general and want to use it more frequently, they did indicate that they feel constrained by a variety of factors including the Common Core State Standards, gaining access to YAL texts, and having the proper training on how to use YAL effectively. Respondents shared their frustrations on these issues in an extended-response question. In reference to the emphasis on meeting required standards, one respondent explained how the push to meet state standards affects what texts are considered worthwhile for whole-class instruction: “I think that Common Core certainly affects



the use of YA lit, but I think more than that, it has affected literature in general. The standards are so focused on teaching the traditional texts (look at standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.7 or CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.9) that it makes it difficult to justify teaching YA lit to a whole class.” While Hazlett et al.’s (2009) study did not address this concern, the above results remain consistent with those of Smith et al. (2018). Smith et al. (2018) reported that a common theme found in open-ended responses is that teachers feel as though they have less time to teach novels due to the state-required standards and tests. While these feelings seem to be shared by many secondary ELA teachers who would like to use YAL texts in their classroom, many proponents of YAL argue that these new standards provide more opportunities to use YAL novels in classroom instruction (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012; Glaus, 2014). Another respondent described how she has limited options for texts due to budgetary restrictions by saying, “The district puts a large emphasis on using only the texts available on the online program, limiting, significantly, the amount of YA we can (officially) use.” This thought was reinforced by another respondent who reflected on the cost associated with getting access to the latest YAL texts: “The biggest challenge is finding the money! I would love to do literature circles in a ‘dystopian’ type unit, but I would have to buy a whole new set of books—75 at least.” Despite its merits and teachers’ desire to incorporate YAL in the classroom, each of these responses reflect struggles that many educators are facing today, demonstrating some of the possible reasons as to why YAL is not being used in high school ELA curriculum.

### **Consideration of Facets of Diversity**

The final theme from the survey reflects the frequency with which teachers consider various facets of diversity when selecting texts for their students. Sixty-five percent of

respondents reported that they believe they should always choose texts that reflect their school's population (see Figure 2). However, this belief is not reflected when looking at how often teachers reported considering various facets of diversity when selecting texts for their classroom. Teachers reported most frequently considering students' life experiences and abilities when selecting texts, both of which are important facets of diversity to focus on (see Figure 2). Connecting with students' life experiences allows students to make personal connections to the text and activate prior knowledge in order to better understand the text. Ivey and Johnston (2013) support this notion by stating that the features of a text that are found in YAL "invite readers to consider varied viewpoints on personal and social problems, including those normally underrepresented...foster[ing] engaged reading" (p. 257). Ostenson and Wadham (2012) also comment on the effectiveness of using YAL, arguing that the presence of relevant issues and conflicts in the text helps students to make connections more easily and increase their motivation to read. Furthermore, focusing on students' ability levels positively influences what texts are included in the curriculum by using books best matched to the students. Glaus (2014) asserts that contemporary YAL is one of the best tools to use when attempting to provide students with "diverse, sophisticated texts" (p. 407).

While focusing on these two facets of diversity positively impacts student learning, the results indicate that teachers tend to overlook students' gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, language, religion, and political affiliation when choosing texts to include in the curriculum (see Figure 2). On the Likert-like scale of one to five where one was "never" and five was "always," gender identity, sexual orientation, and nationality received an average score of 3.38/5.0; language an average score of 3.64/5.0; and religion and political affiliation an average

score of 2.7. These were notably lower than interests which were rated as an average of 4.18/5.0 and abilities which also received a very high average rating of 4.5/5.0. Race, 3.88/5.0, and ethnicity, 3.94/5.0, also received lower scores than interests and abilities and fell between “occasionally” and “often” rather than “often” and “always.” These findings indicate that teachers are paying attention to diversity among their students in choosing texts—a consideration that is highly encouraged by Wopperer (2011)—though some facets are being privileged more than others (see raw data from Table 1 and Table 2). While this is not necessarily a negative finding, it is an area that requires attention as teachers may inadvertently be overlooking an aspect of a student’s identity that is significant to him or her. Likewise, as YAL is often used as a conduit for students to better understand people and perspectives that are different from their own, overlooking these facets could potentially allow for gaps in students’ cultural awareness (Graff, 2010). Having said that, it is important to note that considering facets of diversity that might be sensitive, such as religion and politics, can be problematic if it is not done so carefully and appropriately.

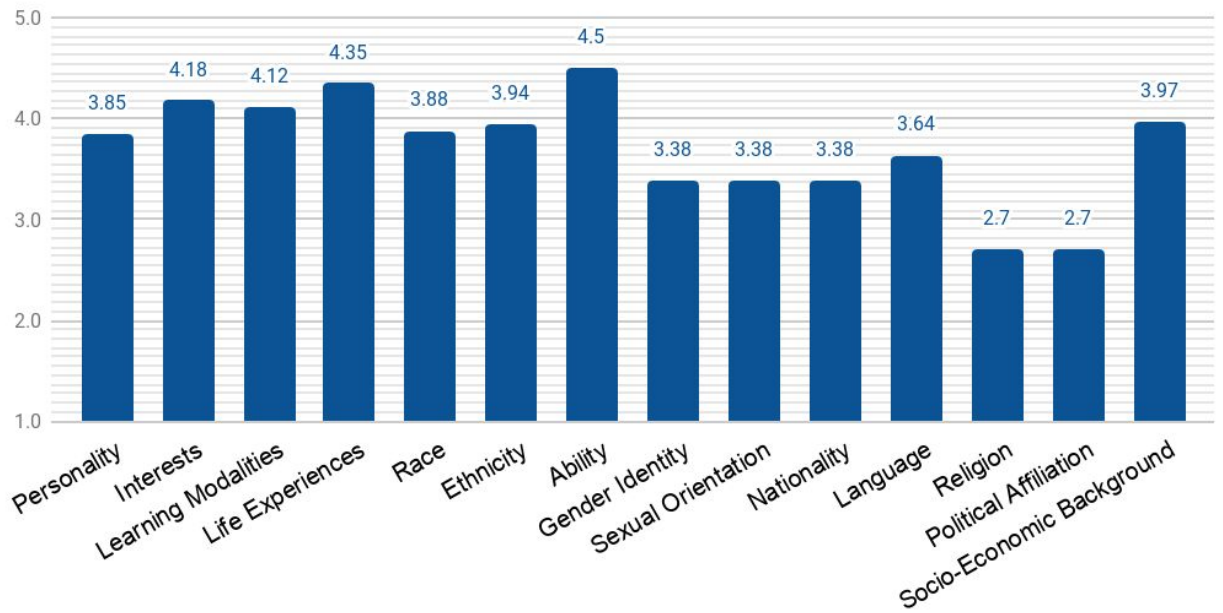


Figure 2. The overall frequency with which teachers consider various facets of diversity when selecting texts. 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = occasionally, 4 = oftens, 5 = always

	<i>Ability</i>	<i>Life Experiences</i>	<i>Interests</i>	<i>Learning Modalities</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>SES</i>	<i>Personality</i>
<i>N=</i>	1: 0	1: 1	1: 1	1: 0	1: 5	1: 1	1: 1
<i>34</i>	2: 1	2: 1	2: 1	2: 2	2: 3	2: 2	2: 2
	3: 3	3: 7	3: 6	3: 7	3: 6	3: 7	3: 10
	4: 8	4: 6	4: 9	4: 10	4: 5	4: 11	4: 9
	5: 22	5: 19	5: 17	5: 15	5: 15	5: 13	5: 12

Table 1. The seven facets of diversity teachers consider most often when selecting texts. Numbers represent raw data taken from the survey. 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = occasionally, 4 = often, 5 = always

	<i>Race</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Gender Identity</i>	<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Political Affiliation</i>	<i>Religion</i>
<i>N</i> =	1: 2	1: 1	1: 4	1: 5	1: 6	1: 9	1: 9
34	2: 1	2: 2	2: 3	2: 2	2: 1	2: 8	2: 5
	3: 7	3: 6	3: 11	3: 10	3: 9	3: 7	3: 10
	4: 13	4: 14	4: 8	4: 9	4: 10	4: 6	4: 7
	5: 11	5: 11	5: 8	5: 8	5: 8	5: 4	5: 3

*Table 2.* The seven facets of diversity teachers consider least often when selecting texts. Numbers represent raw data taken from the survey.  
1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = occasionally, 4 = often, 5 = always

### **Limitations**

There were a number of limitations in this particular study. The sample size of 34 participants was a good response rate for the smaller-scale research of local teachers; however, this number is only a small portion when considering the overall number of secondary English Language Arts teachers and, therefore, is not representative of all teachers. Similarly, the sample included a majority of respondents with five or fewer years of experience, closely followed by a broader range of teachers from six to twenty-five years of experience. When considering the results that were found from the teachers' answers, it is important to consider the fact that the answers were all self-reported and therefore swayed by the teachers' opinions on their school's practices. For example, when open-coding was used to extract themes, answers were based around my understanding of the respondents' qualitative answers.

### **Conclusion**

In order to gather more data on the presence of YAL in the high school English Language Arts classroom and its use in connection to diversity, this study explored how a sample of secondary ELA teachers use YAL in their classrooms and the frequency with which they

considered a variety of facets of diversity when selecting texts to include in their curricula. After examining the data, it is clear that more research needs to be done regarding the true application of YAL in the secondary ELA classroom. While there are many articles that discuss the benefits of YAL, the research regarding how it is being applied to curriculum is sparse, demonstrating that additional longitudinal quantitative studies are needed to fully understand the reasons behind its lack of use and the breadth of its benefits when fully incorporated into the curriculum.

Furthermore, there is significantly less research to be found outlining the benefits of using young adult literature to expose students to the many facets of diversity that exist. By continuing to research the use of YAL texts in secondary English Language Arts curriculum, researchers can obtain a more accurate account of how teachers are utilizing YAL in order to meet student needs, both through addressing academic standards and widening student perceptions of various facets of diversity. Educators may then be able to see the benefits of using YAL, apply the concepts and themes that emerge from the research to their teaching, and be encouraged to provide additional representations of the various facets of diversity in their selected classroom texts.

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## Appendix

### Survey Regarding the Use of Young Adult Literature in Secondary English/Language Arts (adapted from Hazlett, Johnson, and Hayn, 2009)

**This survey consists of five sections. For each item, choose the response that most accurately reflects your current situation or practice. Please complete both sides of each sheet.**

*For the purposes of this survey, the following terminology is utilized:*

- Young Adult Literature refers to literature containing the following characteristics:
  - “literature written specifically for adolescents in grades 6 through 12” (Hazlett, Johnson, & Hayn, 2009, p. 48)
  - “teenagers are the main characters dealing with issues to which teens can relate (Herz & Gallo, 2005, pp. 10-11)” (as cited in Glaus, 2014, p. 408)
- As adopted from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, diversity refers to “(1) Individual differences (e.g., personality, interests, learning modalities, and life experiences), and (2) group differences (e.g., race, ethnicity, ability, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, nationality, language, religion, political affiliation, and socio-economic background)”

#### Section One: Check the space applicable to you.

- 1) Gender:             Male     Female
- 2) Age:                 21-30     31-40     41-50     51+
- 3) School where currently employed: \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Teaching Experience:  
 0-5 years     6-15 years     16-25 years     26+ years
- 5) Education Level:  
 Bachelor's     Master's     Doctoral degree     Beyond highest
- 6) Do you regularly attend any professional conference sessions/in-services about young adult literature?  
 Yes     No     N/A
- 7) English/Language Arts Classes Currently Teaching: For each class you list, indicate the number of sections taught (e.g., 3 sections of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English, post-secondary English Methods, Graduate-level British Literature Seminar).

<u>Class</u>	<u>Number of Sections</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

8) Grade Levels of Your Students: (Check all that apply): \_\_\_\_\_6 \_\_\_\_\_7 \_\_\_\_\_8  
\_\_\_\_\_9 \_\_\_\_\_10 \_\_\_\_\_11 \_\_\_\_\_12 \_\_\_\_\_13+

9) Total Student Population in School:  
\_\_\_\_\_ Less than 100 \_\_\_\_\_ 100-300 \_\_\_\_\_ 301-600 \_\_\_\_\_ 601-900 \_\_\_\_\_ 901+

10) Your Average Class Size:  
\_\_\_\_\_ Fewer than 12 \_\_\_\_\_ 12-20 \_\_\_\_\_ 21-28 \_\_\_\_\_ 29-35 \_\_\_\_\_ 36+

11) In the total population of students in your classes, what is the racial makeup?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Section Two: For the items below, choose the option that most accurately reflects your current practice. Numerical values represent equal distance on the following scale:**

**1= never      2= rarely      3= occasionally      4= often      5= always**

- 12) Young adult literature is incorporated into my school's curriculum.      1 2 3 4 5
- 13) Young adult literature is not incorporated into my school's curriculum, but I incorporate it into my teaching.      1 2 3 4 5
- 14) I read young adult literature for pleasure.      1 2 3 4 5
- 15) We have a variety of young adult literature titles available in my school.      1 2 3 4 5
- 16) We have young adult authors speak at our school, and/or attend events featuring YA authors and their literature.      1 2 3 4 5
- 17) My student teachers are familiar with young adult literature.      1 2 3 4 5 NA
- 18) Young adult literature was incorporated in other [i.e., not a course specific to YA literature] college/university courses I have taken.      1 2 3 4 5
- 19) My colleagues are familiar with current young adult literature.      1 2 3 4 5
- 20) My students read young adult literature.      1 2 3 4 5
- 21) I have been discouraged from using young adult literature in my teaching by colleagues.      1 2 3 4 5
- 22) I have been discouraged from using young adult literature in my teaching by administrators.      1 2 3 4 5
- 23) I have been discouraged from using young adult literature in my teaching by parents.      1 2 3 4 5
- 24) I refrain from using some young adult literature due to censorship concerns.      1 2 3 4 5
- 25) My classroom use of young adult literature has been productive.      1 2 3 4 5 NA
- 26) Describe how young adult literature is used in your school, if applicable:

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27) Describe how young adult literature is used in your teaching, if applicable:

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**Section Three: For the items below, choose the option that most accurately reflects your current views. Numerical values represent equal distance on the following scale:**

**1= never      2= rarely      3= occasionally      4= often      5= always**

28) My young adult literature coursework was instrumental to my use of young adult works in the classroom.      1 2 3 4 5

29) My professional experiences (conferences, in-services, etc.) were instrumental to my use of young adult works in the classroom.      1 2 3 4 5

30) I feel young adult literature is canonical [i.e., of lasting quality] and should be taught/used in middle and high school classes.      1 2 3 4 5

31) I feel young adult literature is canonical, but should be taught/used only in the middle grades.      1 2 3 4 5

32) I feel young adult literature is best used with lower level students, reluctant readers, or free reading.      1 2 3 4 5

33) I wish my colleagues, administrators, and/or parents, would be more accepting of young adult literature.      1 2 3 4 5

34) Describe why and how your use of young adult literature has changed from when you began teaching to the present, if applicable:

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35) Have increased standards, assessment, accountability, *No Child Left Behind* et al. affected the use of young adult literature in your classroom/school? If so, explain how:

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**Section Four: For the items below, choose the option that most accurately reflects your current interests. Numerical values represent equal distance on the following scale:**

**1= never      2= rarely      3= occasionally      4= often      5= always**

36) I am interested in using young adult literature more frequently in my classroom. 1 2 3 4 5

37) State any additional comments you have regarding the use of young adult literature in English/language arts classes at the secondary level:

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**Section Five: For the items below, choose the option that most accurately reflects your current interests. Numerical values represent equal distance on the following scale:**

**1= never      2= rarely      3= occasionally      4= often      5= always**

38) I feel that it is important to choose books that reflect my school's population. 1 2 3 4 5

39) I believe that my students are well represented through the texts that are used in my classroom. 1 2 3 4 5

40) I believe I use a variety of texts that expose students to diversity. 1 2 3 4 5

41) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's 1 2 3 4 5

- personality?
- 42) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's interests? 1 2 3 4 5
- 43) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's learning modalities? 1 2 3 4 5
- 44) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's life experiences? 1 2 3 4 5
- 45) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's race? 1 2 3 4 5
- 46) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's ethnicity? 1 2 3 4 5
- 47) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's ability? 1 2 3 4 5
- 48) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's gender identity? 1 2 3 4 5
- 49) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's gender expression? 1 2 3 4 5
- 50) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's sexual orientation? 1 2 3 4 5
- 51) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's nationality? 1 2 3 4 5
- 52) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's language? 1 2 3 4 5
- 53) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's religion? 1 2 3 4 5
- 54) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's political affiliation? 1 2 3 4 5
- 55) When choosing texts, how frequently do you consider a student's socio-economic background? 1 2 3 4 5

