

## Connecting to Their Lives: Young Adult Literature and Student Achievement

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I think it is safe to speculate that most anyone who joins the ranks of Reading and/or Language Arts teacher harbors that undying hope that *all* of his or her students will fall in love with reading. We dream of in depth discussions and passionate debates about the literature we have assigned and personally love. We believe that we *will* find that right book to give to that particular individual at the exact moment that he or she needs it, and that it will, subsequently, positively change the course of his or her life. We believe it because we have experienced it in some way, with one or many students, and we want that feeling again. We believe it because we know that it can be true. Why, then, is this experience, for many teachers, the exception rather than the rule? As a secondary English teacher for 12 years, it constantly surprised and saddened me when I would hear myself saying things like, “Ok. Please just be honest, close your eyes and raise your hand if you did last night’s reading.” This question usually was followed by me frantically modifying my lesson plans on the spot because, let’s face it, it is impossible to have that powerful life-changing discussion over *The Scarlet Letter* when over two-thirds of the class has not completed the chapters.

At the same time, I worried about how my students interacted (or *didn’t* interact) with one another. How could the literature I presented to my students help foster in them both a love of reading and an exploration of diversity, empathy, and acceptance? How could my students, through reading, come to see that their lived experience is valid, and that they are all special, worthwhile, and unique? Could it be that if I were to stray from the traditional textbook and instead choose high interest Young Adult (YA) literature that portrays diverse characters with unique experiences, both my students and I would begin to feel the power of reading, the love of literature, and an understanding of others for which I had so desperately sought? What about their test scores? How would text selection impact their performance on both classroom assessments and high-stakes tests?

Although it has long been acknowledged that personal connection to literature will yield improved learning in general and reading in particular (Dewey, 1913; Rosenblatt, 1938), limited quantitative research could be found to confirm this point, especially at the secondary level and with YA literature. In fact, in an analysis of close to 400 articles about YA literature published between 2000 and 2010, Hayn and Nolen (2011) found that “Only 36 articles were empirical studies focusing on the use of the text, rather than on the text itself” (p. 9). With limited research on the effectiveness of using YA in the classroom, teachers may be hesitant to include it into their curriculum. In conjunction with a lack of empirical evidence to support the inclusion of YA literature into the classroom is the fact that many literacy researchers and language arts classroom teachers feel that YA literature lacks literary merit, sophistication, and value as a key component of the curriculum (Gibbons, Dail, & Stallwork, 2006; Jago, 2000; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2002). The lack of YA novels in the Common Core Standards (CCSS) Text Exemplar recommendations for grades 9-12 serves as further evidence that YA literature has not yet achieved wide acceptance as an appropriate teaching and learning tool.

Conversely, several scholars have written extensively on the benefits of incorporating YA literature into the language classroom. Not only may the YA novel be more interesting and applicable to students’ own lives, resulting in increased motivation and enjoyment, but the reading task itself may often be simpler, which can stimulate increased fluency, comprehension, and analysis for its readers (Kaywell, 1995). Says Crowe (2001), “Good YA books can knock the reluctance out of reluctant readers, can provoke critical thinking in sophisticated readers, and can provide hours of pleasure for most all readers” (p. 146). The key is to first get students reading, and to then let the other pieces fall into place (Broz, 2011; Crowe, 2001; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). There is evidence to support the theory that if students feel validated through the literature that they read, if they enjoy reading, and they experience success with reading, then they are more likely to continue reading and improving their literacy skills (Alvermann, Phelps, & Gillis, 2010; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003; Vacca & Vacca, 2005). YA literature like the novels used in this study may serve as such a vehicle for adolescent readers and provide justification for teachers who want to include these texts in their curriculum. Though I am no longer in the K-12 classroom, my questions about the potential of YA literature to impact student achievement remain, and I have found that I am not alone in this questioning. I decided to partner with another university professor and a middle school reading teacher to search for an answer to this question.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of reading YA literature on middle school students’ reading comprehension. The outcome of

interest was reading achievement as measured by curriculum-based measures and by state-developed benchmark assessments measuring the CCSS. In the intervention group, students read YA literature specifically chosen to represent their lives and interests, while students in the comparison group read selections from the traditional textbook. As such, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How does reading achievement on CCSS Literacy assessments compare between students who read YA literature and students who read traditional textbook selections?
2. How does reading achievement on classroom reading assessments compare between students who read YA literature and students who read traditional textbook selections?
3. What is the student perception of YA literature text selections?

## **Review of Literature**

### **Reading Achievement and Motivation/Engagement/Attitude**

Tracing as far back as Dewey (1913), scholars have investigated the impact of interest and motivation on student learning and achievement. Several studies have found a positive relationship between reading achievement and motivation, looking specifically at aspects of reading comprehension, interest, and/or amount of reading a student does (e.g., Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Guerra, 2012; Guthrie, Van Meter, McCann, & Wigfield, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2007; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Krapp, 1999; Krashen, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1938; Schiefele, Schaffner, Moller, & Wigfield, 2012; Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, & Guthrie, 2009; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). Stanovich's (1986) Matthew Effect phenomenon explains how the more someone reads, the better a reader she or he will become. Conversely, when students fail to read, their achievement gap gets larger, negatively impacting all areas of the academic experience. Explains McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, and Meyer (2012), "The relationship between attitude and achievement is complex and possibly reciprocal, with the frustration associated with poor reading contributing to worsening attitudes, which in turn inhibit voluntary reading, which consequently constrains growth in proficiency" (p. 287). This is arguably even more crucial at the secondary level, as research shows that by the time they reach high school, with regards to reading, students, "are less motivated, less engaged, and less likely to read in the future" (Fisher & Ivey, 2007, p. 495).

Furthermore, Kittle (2013) posits that less than a quarter of students read the books that are assigned to them in class, and studies have consistently revealed that student attitudes about reading get more negative as they progress through

school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Simultaneously, literacy researchers know that if students do not enjoy, make connections with, or worse yet, don't *do* the reading that is assigned to them in English class, a phenomenon Broz (2011) calls "The 800-pound mockingbird in the classroom," then their reading most likely will not improve. However, numerous forces reify textbooks and classics as the preferred vehicle for teaching and learning critical reading skills, rather than YA literature, with which adolescents can identify.

When students do not see characters like themselves represented in their learning materials, it can not only affect their enjoyment and engagement with the material, but can also affect their self-esteem, self-concept, identity, and sense of agency (Blasingame, 2007; Bordieu, 1986; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Explains Guerra (2012) "The research is consistent: When youths 'see' themselves in terms of race, culture, and lived experiences in the literature they read, they benefit academically, personally and socially" (p. 388). Using YA novels that reflect the lives and interests of the readers to teach the CCSS may be one way to reverse the Matthew Effect for readers who have a history of struggling with reading in school. YA literature may have the capacity to impact student motivation and engagement with the text that can, in turn, improve students' classroom performance, specifically their comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development.

In addition, the more time students spend in engaged reading, the better their comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Enjoyment and connection to reading materials may yield more engaged reading, which could yield not only improved comprehension but also improved performance in the classroom. Improved performance on classroom assessments coupled with enjoyment of the class materials could yield further motivation and development into strong lifelong readers and learners (Stanovich, 1986).

## **Methods**

For this study, the achievement of students from two eighth grade reading classes in the Pacific Northwest were compared. This rural/suburban middle school has approximately 800 students grades six through eight. 82% of students in the middle school receive free or reduced meal services, and 9% of students in the school are in the migrant program. Teachers in this middle school have an average of 8.2 years' teaching experience, and 50% of the teachers have a Master's degree. The reading classes in this middle school were designed to provide support for students who tested a year or more below grade level in reading, with eligible students randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (YA literature versus traditional textbook). Ninety percent of the students in this study self-identified as Hispanic or

Latino. The two reading teachers involved in the study worked collaboratively in previous years, have similar backgrounds and educational experiences (both males, trained at the same University, with Masters' degrees), jointly chose the district-approved curriculum, and had 3 years' experience implementing it. The teachers were chosen because they are the only reading teachers in the school, and they expressed both interest in this research question and willingness to participate in the study.

There were 25 students in the intervention group and 17 students in the comparison group. The composition of the two groups was compared with regard to student reading achievement, as measured by the previous year's state test and a nationwide test of basic skills, using independent samples *t*-tests. The number of students with available scores varied somewhat for the two tests. The group means on the state Reading test were determined to be statistically non-significant,  $t(37) = 1.38$ ,  $p = 0.18$ . Scores were available for 22 students and 17 students in the intervention and comparison groups, respectively. Similarly, the group means on the spring Reading scores on the Measures of Academic Progress were determined to have no statistically significant difference,  $t(36) = -0.19$ ,  $p = 0.85$ . Scores were available for 22 students in the intervention group and 16 students in the comparison group. In both instances, the assumptions of normality and equality of variances were satisfied.

The comparison group followed the general reading curriculum adopted by the school district and approved by the school's Board of Education, which entailed reading selections from the traditional textbook, *The Jamestown Critical Reading Series*, a series students had also used in both 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade. The selections read for this study were from the "Heroes" text and included the following: *Frank Serpico: An Honest Cop*, *Animals to the Rescue: Caring Creatures*, *Florence Nightingale: A Mission for Life*, and *Mother Teresa: Serving the Poorest of the Poor*. After each of the four units, students in the comparison group responded to the assessment prompts provided in the textbook. All assessments in the textbook followed the same format (Finding the Main Idea, Recalling Facts, Making Inferences, and Using Words Precisely).

The intervention group read two YA texts written by and with protagonists who are Mexican American – *The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez and *The Tequila Worm* by Viola Canales. These particular texts were chosen for multiple reasons. First, both titles had equivalent Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) reading levels as the textbook selections, so comparisons of the reading experience could be assumed to be fairly equivalent. Also, the novels chosen were similar to the textbook selections in that the chapters could be read as stand-alone vignettes. Additionally, the reading teacher, who had worked with many of the students in prior years, had

knowledge regarding what titles and topics would be interesting to the students based on their past reading responses. These particular YA texts were predicted to be of interest and relevant to the students' lives because of the protagonists' ages, cultures, and work, family, and life experiences. Because 90 percent of the students self-identified as Hispanic or Latino and had previously expressed concern that they did not have opportunities to read books about characters like them, these titles were also specifically chosen to fill that need.

Like the textbook selections, the novels were taught in four units of study. Following each unit, students responded to assessment prompts parallel in structure and focus (Finding the Main Idea, Recalling Facts, Making Inferences, and Using Words Precisely) to those provided in the traditional textbook. These classroom assessments were created jointly by one of the classroom teachers and researchers, and then were reviewed by the other classroom teacher and researcher. Every effort was made to create questions that were equivalent in complexity and mirrored the textbook assessments in format, including aspects such as the wording of the directions, spacing, and font size and style.

The reading teachers mailed copies of the assessments (with names removed) to the researcher. Student surveys regarding their opinions of the novels they read were also mailed to the researcher. Because the school was identified as needing improvement by federal accountability measures, state-developed benchmark assessments aligned to the CCSS were given through the year prior to the state standardized test in the spring. When results were available, the scores were also sent to the researcher. Students who did not finish the school year were removed from the study. Three research questions were addressed in this quantitative study.

### **Research Question 1: How does reading achievement on CCSS Literacy assessments compare between students who read YA literature and students who read traditional textbook selections?**

To address this question, intervention and comparison group scores on state-developed reading benchmark assessments were compared with an independent-samples *t*-test. A benchmark assessment was given mid-way through the study, after two of the four units had been completed. Another benchmark assessment was given after the study was completed. Both benchmark assessments measured mastery of CCSS for reading literature and reading informational text. The dependent variable in the *t*-test was the average score from both the mid-study and post-study benchmark assessments. For students missing one of the scores, their available score was used. Test scores were not available for three students in the intervention group and for two students in the comparison group. Standardized

tests were used both because of their widespread use in public school and also because they provided an objective reference point for this experimental research design comparing two curricula.

### **Research Question 2: How does reading achievement on classroom reading assessments compare between students who read YA literature and students who read traditional textbook selections?**

To address this question, intervention and comparison group scores on curriculum-based reading comprehension assessments were compared with another independent-samples *t*-test. Student performance on the curriculum-based tests was reported as an average of the reading comprehension section of 4 unit tests. For students missing scores on 1 or 2 of the unit tests, their available test scores were averaged and included. Scores from at least two of the tests were available for all the students in both groups. In each group, one student was missing scores on the last two tests. Three students in the comparison group were missing 1 test score; each of these students missed a different test. One student in the intervention group was missing one test score.

Because this study utilized two independent-samples *t*-test, the Bonferroni adjustment was applied and results were evaluated at  $\alpha = 0.025$ . Prior to conducting either independent-samples *t*-test, data were screened for outliers and normality of subgroups. Equality of variance was verified on both tests.

### **Research Question 3: What is the student perception of YA literature text selections?**

To address this question, students in the intervention group responded to a questionnaire after completing each of the two books. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-type items and a space for comments. The questions were developed by the teacher and researcher as they sought to provide requested evidence for the administrators at the school. Descriptive statistics were performed on the Likert items, and a qualitative content analysis was performed on the students' open-ended responses, tracking patterns and themes that emerged.

## **Results**

### **Research Question 1**

Scores were available for 22 students in the intervention group and 15 students in the comparison group. No statistically significant differences were found between the intervention group mean ( $M = 53$ ,  $SD = 11$ ,  $N = 22$ ) and the comparison

group mean ( $M= 58, SD=7, N= 15$ ) on the benchmark assessments,  $t(35)= -1.59, p = 0.12$ . Therefore, YA literature and traditional curriculum led to similar results on standardized reading achievement tests.

### Research Question 2

Scores were available for all students in both groups. Classroom measures of reading comprehension were higher for the group who read YA literature ( $M= 83, SD= 6, N= 25$ ) than for the group who used the traditional curriculum ( $M= 76, SD = 6, N= 17$ ). This difference was statistically significant,  $t(40) = 3.1, p = 0.003$ .

### Research Question 3

Overall, students in the intervention group enjoyed the YA literature that they read and were able to make personal connections to the texts, as evidenced by their responses to the questionnaire (see Table 1) and their comments in the open-ended section.

Table 1. *Student response to Young Adult literature selections*

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Response to <i>The Circuit</i>  <i>n=24</i>	1. I enjoyed reading <i>The Circuit</i> .	54%	29%	17%	0%
	2. I think <i>The Circuit</i> is one of the most interesting books I have ever read	33%	33%	29%	4%
	3. I would like to read other books similar to <i>The Circuit</i> .	46%	21%	29%	4%
	4. I was able to make personal connections to the story in <i>The Circuit</i> .	13%	29%	33%	25%
	5. I think more books like <i>The Circuit</i> should be taught in my city's schools.	38%	38%	17%	8%
Response to <i>The Tequila Worm</i>  <i>n=24</i>	1. I enjoyed reading <i>The Tequila Worm</i> .	54%	42%	4%	0%
	2. I think <i>The Tequila Worm</i> is one of the most interesting books I have ever read	33%	29%	29%	8%
	3. I would like to read other books similar to <i>The Tequila Worm</i> .	38%	38%	21%	4%
	4. I was able to make personal connections to the story in <i>The Tequila Worm</i> .	8%	63%	21%	8%
	5. I think more books like <i>The Tequila Worm</i> should be taught in my city's schools.	29%	46%	17%	8%

*Note:* Students completed each questionnaire after finishing the curriculum assessments for each book.



As Table 1 shows, 83% of the intervention group reported enjoying the first book and 96% the second. These enjoyment ratings were very high for students in a course designed to support readers who have historically performed below grade level. Forty-two percent of this group reported being able to make personal connections to *The Circuit*, while 71% were able to make connections to *The Tequila Worm*.

When students' responses on the open-ended section were analyzed, recurring comments fell into three major categories: enjoying the book, being able to connect the book to their own lives, and wanting to read the second book (*The Circuit*) or a similar book in the future. For example, of the 38 total combined comments, 27 (71%) comments indicated that the book was "good," "inspiring," "awesome," or that the reader "liked" or "loved" it. Five comments (13%) indicated specific connections between the book and the student's own life. For example, one student wrote, "I think *The Tequila Worm* is interesting because I could make real life connections of someone being a comadre," and another commented, "I can connect to this story because my family celebrates Christmas and we always put up casa de nacimiento." Finally, four comments (11%) mentioned that the student wanted to read the second book in the series, or another similar novel in the future.

### **Limitations**

Conducting an experimental research design in a school setting is limited by structural constraints. While we made every attempt to control for variability, this study did compare different students, who had different teachers, and who took different classroom tests. This is a relatively small sample size, and there are multiple factors that could explain student achievement on both classroom and standards-based assessments. Students who read the textbook selections were not given the survey to measure their enjoyment of the text selections. While both teachers shared that students often complained about the textbook, having survey data would quantify students' individual opinions. Furthermore, it is possible that the novelty of having new books (instead of the textbook) contributed to student motivation. Unfortunately, as the teacher has since moved to a new position, it will be challenging to track the long-term reading achievement and motivation of these students. However, despite its limitations, we feel that the results of this study are compelling, and that they contribute to the limited existing empirical evidence to support the use of YA literature as a vehicle for developing student reading skills. Further research on the impact of using YA and other relevant texts should be conducted to add to this gap in the literature.

## Discussion

Reading and Language Arts teachers have long known that performance improves when students are excited about and engaged in the works they are reading. The results of this study indicate that for this particular group of students, reading YA texts resulted in improved performance on classroom assessments and overall enjoyment of the reading itself. Moreover, reading these YA texts did not negatively impact their standardized assessment performance. As multiple studies have identified that YA literature is at or near the top of students' preferred reading lists (Becnel & Moeller, 2015; Guerra, 2012; Wilhelm & Smith, 2014/2015) it seems logical that teachers should use those texts to promote growth in their students, particularly for their students who may be reluctant readers. In this study it is worthy to note that most students who read YA literature enjoyed reading these books. All of the students were required to take a reading class because they had scored one or more grade levels below Proficient on standardized reading assessments, and there was evidence through discussions and written work that reading was not something the students as a whole enjoyed or spent time doing. Therefore, the fact that 83% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed reading *The Circuit* and 96% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed reading *The Tequila Worm* is meaningful in and of itself. Likewise, students were largely able to make personal connections to *The Tequila Worm*, and, while only 42% of the students indicated that they could make personal connections to *the Circuit* (which takes place in the 1940's), 76% of students agreed that, "more books like this should be taught in my city's school."

In addition to survey results, anecdotally, the teacher relayed that students were excited about the books they were reading. For example, the teacher shared, "When I passed out the book, (the student) looked at the picture on the cover and exclaimed, "Holy sh\*t! This kid looks just like me!" Additionally, the school librarian shared that upon finishing *The Circuit*, many students rushed to the library to request the next book in the series. While these anecdotes relayed were not a formal part of this research study, they are integral in illuminating the power of particular texts to affect students' engagement. This excitement about reading cannot be dismissed as insignificant, as it follows that if students continue reading, their skills will continue to improve (Stanovich, 1986). Moreover, the students who read the YA texts did perform statistically significantly better on their classroom assessments when compared to the students who read from their textbook. Again, success begets success, and one can speculate that finding success on classroom assessments will boost students' confidence and motivate them to continue reading

and putting time and effort into developing their literacy skills (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Guerra, 2012; Guthrie et al., 1996; Guthrie et al., 2007; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Krapp, 1999; Krashen, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1938; Schiefele, et.al., 2012; Taboada et al., 2009; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). Finally, given that there was no difference in achievement on standardized assessments whether or not students read the traditional textbook, and given that the students reported making personal connections to the YA novels and wishing they could read similar titles in school, teachers would be justified to choose the latter.

## Conclusion

This is one more study to build upon existing research on what we teachers already know to be true. If students enjoy what they are reading, they are more likely to be engaged, are more likely to perform better on classroom assessments, and are more likely to read the next book we offer them. Future studies like this one, performed by both researchers and currently practicing teachers, can help to build this body evidence. Whether it is the traditional textbook, YA novels, comics, or digital stories, teachers of reading and language arts need to continue to trust themselves in selecting texts that meet the diverse learning needs and interests of all their students—texts that not only connect to their lives, but also connect them to one another, and to the world.

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