

Young Adult Literature in the English Curriculum Today:

Classroom Teachers Speak Out

Many teachers have come to acknowledge that the reality of teaching the classics is similar to the reality of trying to teach a pig to sing: It does not work and annoys the pig. These teachers have paid attention to students' complaints about assigned works as well as questions about "Why are we reading this?" and have either replaced some of their traditional canonical selections with timeless works of young adult literature (YAL) or have expanded their literature curriculum by pairing YAL with the classics. Clearly, student engagement with a work of literature insures introspective writing, lively discussions, and perhaps most importantly—the students will keep reading, long after the required selection has been finished. Hipple sums this idea up in his statement, "The THAT of teenagers reading is more important than the WHAT" (15). The problem, however, resides in concerns about the "WHAT" of students' reading. Can young adult literature provide a means for meeting state standards in an English classroom, or is it destined to a peripheral role on classroom library shelves to reward students who have already completed more difficult, required readings?

Reviewing the session offerings at literacy and language-focused

national conferences and perusing the tables of contents of language arts journals reveals an ever-growing inclination among secondary English language arts teachers toward using YAL in the classroom. Many English teachers believe that YAL offers a sophisticated reading option for addressing standards, designing relevant curricula, and engaging twenty-first century young adults in rich discussions of literature and life. For years, proponents have concluded that YAL should be integrated into the middle and high school English classroom because such literature can (a) help improve students' reading skills; (b) encourage young adults to read more books, thereby improving their abilities to read; (c) facilitate teachers' abilities to incorporate more books of interest to adolescents into the curriculum, thereby avoiding the non-reading curriculum or workbooks and lectures; and (d) support the development of an inclusive curriculum (Reed).

However, others, including a number of English teachers, believe that YAL should not occupy a prominent position in the curriculum: they believe that YAL may be useful as an option for struggling upper elementary and middle school students or as out-of-school leisure reading. Teachers

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assuming this stance believe that such literature is not “deep enough” to include in the regular curriculum.

These conflicting views prompted us, as teacher educators, to seek methods for better understanding secondary English language arts teachers’ perspectives on YAL. Our first goal was to determine which YAL titles teachers use in their curricula, and we accomplished this by surveying 142 English language arts teachers in our state. Our second goal was to illuminate the methods that secondary English teachers use to purposefully and thoughtfully integrate YAL into their curricula. To accomplish this, we interviewed secondary English teachers who participated in the study and who regularly use YAL in their classrooms.

What We Found in Classrooms

During the 2003-2004 school year, we surveyed 142 English language arts teachers employed in 72 different public secondary schools in four distinct regions of our state to identify the book-length works they include in their curriculum, as well as their reasons for including or excluding young adult literature. Since this was a statewide survey, the names of all secondary public schools in the state were retrieved from the State Department of Education. This comprehensive list was first divided into four distinct regions—North, South, East, and West—to ensure a geographically representative sample. Second, the schools within these regions were categorized by school size, which was determined by student population as shown in Table 1.

Within these six class groupings for each of the four geographical regions, three schools were randomly selected, yielding a total of 72 secondary public schools.

After the selection process was complete, the principals of each school were contacted to secure their permission to contact their respective English teachers and to get the names of department chairs and/or senior English teachers. Survey packets, which included a self-addressed and stamped envelope, were then mailed to the department chairs and/or senior English teachers. To get a more varied response from schools surveyed, each department chair/senior teacher was asked to distribute a copy of the survey to a teacher for each grade level, which included grades 6-12. Completed surveys were gathered by the depart-

Table 1: Teacher Demographics

Teacher Demographics	
Gender	Male: 12 Female: 130
Ethnicity	African American: 8 Asian American: 1 European American: 124 Hispanic American: 2 Native American: 2 Other: 5
Years of Teaching Experience	1-5 Years: 33 6-10 Years: 30 11-15 Years: 27 12: 16-20 Years: 12 21 + Years: 40
School Community	Urban: 30 Suburban: 32 Rural: 78 Inner City: 2

ment chair/senior teacher and mailed to the researchers. Two-hundred and sixteen surveys were mailed, an average of three per school, and 142 completed surveys were returned, equaling a return rate of 66%. Table two details the demographics of the teachers who participated in the study.

The survey included both quantitative and qualitative components, with the quantitative portion asking teachers to list the book-length works for each grade level they taught during the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 school years. In the qualitative section, teachers responded to these open-ended questions related to their reasons for including or not including young-adult literature: (1) Do you include contemporary young adult literature in your curriculum? Why or

Table 2: School Demographics

School Classification	Student Population
1A	24-144
2A	145-205
3A	206-295
4A	296-424
5A	425-736
6A	737-1670

why not? (2) Which young adult authors do you include in your curriculum? (3) How would you describe your students' attitudes toward reading? (4) What other information about the current status of the middle and high school literature curriculum can you share with us?

Based on teachers' responses to the survey and themes that emerged during the analysis of data, we selected four teachers with whose classroom practices we were familiar and sent them additional questions to obtain detailed profiles of classroom teachers using YAL in their curriculum. We selected two middle school teachers and two high school teachers in order to represent the span of secondary English language arts teachers included in the study. In our discussion of our findings, we include two of these profiled teachers, one middle and one high school, based on the depth and extent of their responses to our follow-up questions.

The quantitative data were analyzed using the computer program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to determine which book-length works were taught most frequently in order to develop the lists of top ten works.

The qualitative data were studied to determine emerging patterns and trends using the constant comparative analysis (Miles & Huberman), which included careful reading and rereading of all the teachers' relevant responses by the members of the research team. After examining the data that were collected, recurring themes were noted. During subsequent readings, a matrix was developed using the themes. A table was created to code the frequency of the references made about uses (or lack thereof) of YAL. Quotations that were representative of the themes that emerged from the data were selected. To produce an accurate representation of the research findings, as well as to control for researcher bias, data were triangulated across the members of the research team.

Theme #1: YAL Lacks Sophistication and Literary Merit

An initial theme that emerged from the data analysis was the belief that young adult literature lacks sophistication and literary merit. Teachers in our study indicated that they feel that YAL does not have the qualities of canonical texts and, therefore, will not

help students to meet the same curricular objectives. Like some critics (Jago, Knickerbocker & Rycik), teachers in our study feel that YAL's role in the curriculum is, at best, peripheral, serving as independent reading outside of class and for motivating struggling readers. However, there is nothing simplistic about quality YAL. Stover points out that good YAL "deals with themes and issues that mirror the concerns of the society out of which it is produced. It does so in ways that help readers understand the complexities and shades of gray involved in dealing with these issues" (119-120).

In an educational system driven by testing and standards, teachers often view their curriculum as overcrowded as they try to teach their adolescent students the merits of quality literature: its devices, how to be critical readers, difficult vocabulary, etc. Often teachers view the canonical texts as a means of accomplishing these objectives and see young adult literature, while relevant to their students' lives, as easier—as literature to implement if time allows at the conclusion of the school year. However, Bonnie Ericson points out, "To limit our selections of novels, especially to the 'classic' novels, is to tell our students that all these other texts, perhaps the students' preferred types of reading have less value" (10).

Additionally, Ericson asserts that class reading needs to extend beyond classic novels and novels in general to encompass a variety of genres in order not to "limit students' bridges to the joy of reading" (10).

Young adult literature includes multiple genres and subjects and it does not solely focus on novels of teenage angst. Over the years, YAL has grown expansively to include genres such as poetry, biographies, memoirs, informational texts, and science fiction and fantasy, to name a few

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Conversely, some of the traditional canonical selections pose several obstacles for a student of the “microwave generation”; namely, these selections are difficult to read, irrelevant to the students’ lives and interests, and require a teacher’s assistance to decipher meaning.

(Donelson & Nilsen). While teachers complain that students in their classes struggle with difficult texts and, hence, with the presented literary concepts, YAL provides an excellent vehicle for introducing students to literary concepts through engaging texts that are written at an appropriate reading level. As Joan Kaywell points out in her series *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics*, “Part of the problem, as most teachers are fully aware, is that the classics are often too distant from our students’

experiences or the reading level is too difficult” (ix). Weaving young adult literature throughout the English language arts curricula proves a strategy for making the curricula more engaging for students (Stover).

Theme #2: YAL Relates to Students’ Interests and Addresses Time Constraints of a Crowded Curriculum

Another theme that emerged from the data analysis was that young adult literature relates to students’ interests as well as provides teachers with options for addressing the time constraints of a crowded curriculum. Repeatedly, teachers who participated in the survey told us that their students don’t like to read, but most of the teachers qualified this statement by adding that the majority of their students will read if they are given literature that relates to their interests and to their lives. One teacher synthesized the challenge of appealing to today’s students by remarking that the fast, action-packed plots in YAL “cater to this microwave generation.” Of course, YAL fits that description perfectly. Among others, teachers listed Lowery, Hinton, Myers, Voight, Marjorie, Weinman, Sharmat, Namioka, Cooney, and Duncan as authors whose works they have incorporated into their curriculum and that their students

enjoy reading. In this way YAL equips teachers to face the challenge of engaging students as readers in the classroom, with the long-term goal of fostering a lifelong love of reading.

Young adult literature appeals to adolescent readers for multiple reasons. It is written about characters with whom they can identify based on issues such as age, conflicts, and world perceptions. It is fast-paced and will hold students’ attention in a rapidly increasing technological society where their world literally flashes before their eyes through television, video games, and computer images. YAL also includes a growing body of work that represents different ethnic and cultural groups, reflective of our ever-growing diverse society (Donelson & Nilsen).

Conversely, some of the traditional canonical selections pose several obstacles for a student of the “microwave generation”; namely, these selections are difficult to read, irrelevant to the students’ lives and interests, and require a teacher’s assistance to decipher meaning. YAL overcomes these obstacles, however. One teacher noted that she “include[s] contemporary YA literature because reluctant readers enjoy these books more than they do the ‘classic’ literature.” Her rationale for including the young adult works is that “reading these books makes them more comfortable with reading so that, hopefully, they will learn to enjoy classic literature.” In this way, the teacher indicated that a curriculum that incorporates YAL provides ways of engaging middle and high school readers.

Additionally, the teachers described several ways that they used YAL to combat the time constraints a crowded curriculum poses. One teacher concisely summed up the problem in her statement, “Too much to cover; too little time.” For this reason, time constraints prompt teachers to seek creative ways to incorporate YAL into their already crowded curriculum. Reading aloud, book study groups, and the Accelerated Reader program were methods the teachers reported that provided a means of incorporating YAL while requiring a relatively small time commitment.

Reading aloud promotes interest in reading (Vacca & Vacca). One teacher stated that all of her students—from the advanced ones to the reluctant and struggling readers—“enjoy reading aloud because I read with them and make voices and characters come alive.”

This teacher went on to explain that she usually reads aloud to her students at the beginning or at the end of the class period.

Several teachers noted that book study groups provide an efficient way to include more young adult literature in their curriculum while allowing their students more choice in what they read. Further, the teachers reported that students who “do not enjoy reading alone seem to enjoy reading in groups,” so in this way the students’ desire to socialize and interact with their peers can be channeled in a positive way that stimulates engagement and learning (Daniels 13).

Theme #3: YAL Helps Struggling and Reluctant Readers Build Literacy Skills

A third theme that emerged from the data analysis was that young adult literature helps struggling and reluctant readers build literacy skills. Research shows that the number-one method of improving reading skills is by practicing reading (Alverman & Phelps, Vacca & Vacca) and that the motivation to read affects reading proficiency (National Center for Educational Statistics). Because they feel unconnected to the books they are assigned to read in English classes, both struggling and successful readers feel antipathy toward reading (Stover). YAL is intentionally written to be accessible to struggling readers as they develop their skills in interacting with a variety of texts (Stover). It presents students with opportunities to read for enjoyment, thereby strengthening the reading and literacy skills we are trying to teach in our English language arts classrooms. Also, because YAL meets the needs of adolescent readers, it is more likely than canonical literature to motivate students to read (Stover). Additionally, as Louise Rosenblatt asserts, “Few teachers of English today would deny that the individuals’ ability to read and enjoy literature is the primary aim of literary study” (64).

As secondary English language arts teachers, we not only want but need to instill a love for reading in our students. Teaching students to truly love literature, which will inevitably lead to increased reading and increased aptitude for literacy skills associated with reading, requires that teachers challenge and re-think some of their traditional approaches to literature instruction. Performance on tests does not necessarily illustrate what students have gained from reading

literature. Competency exams measure the content students could draw from the text; they do not measure what students actually learned from reading literature, what they thought, and what questions it raised (Bushman & Haas).

One teacher notes the use of YAL in her ninth-grade classroom because it enables her “to teach multiple literacy concepts.” She specifically cites Louis Sacher and Lois Lowry as YA authors she uses in such contexts. This teacher also notes that the way to motivate students to read and improve literacy skills is to “make it relevant” to their lives.

Other teachers participating in the study note the fusion of contemporary novels (albeit not always YA novels) with classical novels. As Kaywell notes, classics are not always relevant to our students’ lives.

Such a pairing of contemporary literature and YAL with canonical texts at least bridges the distance between students’ lives and the textual world. Teachers in our study also note choosing age-appropriate literature for their students, which directly speaks not only to readability but also to relevance. One teacher who cites providing students’ with choices based on age-appropriateness says, “I guess that’s why I have a variety of favorite authors so I can recommend them to reluctant readers.” In

conjunction with her use of YAL in her classroom, this teacher clearly recognizes that YA authors are the ones more likely to hold relevance for her adolescent students.

The Voice of Classroom Teachers

Elizabeth, an 8th Grade Language Arts Teacher

Elizabeth, an eighth grade teacher, discusses her use of YA novels that have proven successful in her classroom. She “developed interest in young adult

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literature through a graduate school course (Young Adult Literature). The course offered many strategies of incorporating young adult literature into the classroom.” Of this course, Elizabeth declares:

By reading over thirty books in a short period of time, I realized the plethora of young adult literature that existed and how easily students could relate to the texts. Also, we created projects and book talks with various novels; therefore, my students now create projects and book talks as well. Students give an oral book talk each six weeks and have various choices of presenting their talk. This also helps students gain confidence in public speaking and introduces their peers to other reads they might be interested in reading. Hooray for Young Adult Literature!

Elizabeth’s experience with her university course in YAL speaks strongly to the need for such courses. It was through this course that she gained exposure to quality YAL and learned the benefits of integrating it into her language arts curriculum. It is entirely probable that in addition to the aforementioned reasons for not integrating YAL into their English

language arts curricula, many teachers do not have enough exposure to quality YAL to make selections that achieve this end.

YA novels that Elizabeth utilizes in her curriculum include *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech, *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli, and *Somewhere in the Darkness* by Walter Dean Myers. She chose both *Night* and *The Giver* because they complement

other texts in her classroom curriculum. She integrates *Night* as “part of a text set that students read for our Holocaust unit. Students read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and then read several young adult novels, including *Night*.” On the other hand, Elizabeth notes that *The Giver* complements “a short story we read in my advanced classes, ‘There Will Come Soft Rains’ by Ray Bradbury.” She chooses this pairing because it provides a means in her crowded curriculum through

which she can “allow students to examine texts that focus on science fiction.” Within the context of this pairing, Elizabeth has students “contrast present-day society with the other two settings” in order to help them “view the advantages and disadvantages of our world.” Not only does YAL paired with shorter texts address the time constraints that are a reality in classrooms, but it provides a vehicle through which teachers can explicitly teach targeted reading strategies.

In considering her implementation of YAL, Elizabeth also reflects on her students’ attitudes toward reading. She notes that their “attitudes about reading are influenced by a number of issues.” The first issue impacting her students’ attitudes toward reading is that of daily habit. She notes that her students who read daily “are usually very open to any type of reading.” On the other hand, and not surprisingly, Elizabeth observes that “students who have been reluctant to read or have struggled in reading have a negative attitude about reading in general,” making comments such as “Man, reading is stupid” or “Reading is for nerds.” How does Elizabeth hook these reluctant readers who are reflective of many in our own classrooms? She incorporates YAL. She recognizes that “some of the ‘traditional’ reads are sometimes too complex in plot or vocabulary for struggling readers”; YAL enables these readers to successfully read fast-paced texts while benefiting from practicing with varied reading skills. The experiences of Elizabeth’s students with reading and the integration of YAL directly reflect the power of YAL to transform students’ attitudes toward reading and speaks to the lack of appeal that the classics hold for many struggling and reluctant readers. In fact, Elizabeth advises other teachers:

Young adult literature offers numerous advantages in your classroom. First, young adult literature covers a plethora of themes and topics. For example, students reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* can also read young adult novels that provide an array of perspectives from the Holocaust. Therefore, students gain a more in-depth understanding of the topic because of additional texts. Second, students develop a love for reading through adult literature. Personally, I have seen students start reading novels on their own because of a young adult literature book that really “spoke” to them. Some students have faced unspeakable struggles in their life. Therefore, they can appreciate a character like Melinda Sorino in *Speak* who has been raped and can’t seem to talk

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about it. In addition, young adult literature gives students characters they can identify with. Characters struggle with peer pressure, self-identity, and changes; as a result, teenagers can readily identify with these same issues. They can also see how characters deal with these struggles and how they, in turn, can. Some teachers argue that “classic” novels should only be taught. I disagree. I feel both “classic” novels and young adult literature are valuable and have their place in the classroom.

Elizabeth’s experiences and resulting advice to other English teachers directly reflects research on the uses of YAL in the curriculum.

Katherine, a 9th and 11th Grade English Teacher

Just as Elizabeth’s interest in teaching young adult literature evolved through her participation in a university course focusing on this genre, so did Katherine’s interest. Katherine asserts, “Through these classes I became aware of that genre of material and fell in love with the content of the books.” Once she had a familiarity with texts in the YA canon and a knowledge of possibilities for implementing them in her curriculum, Katherine was able to utilize YAL in her classroom. At this point, she “saw students’ interests spark with excerpts and then full works integrated into the classroom.” Katherine, however, does not complacently integrate YAL in her curriculum. As noted above, she developed a love for it. Katherine reflects, “I enjoy reading and teaching the books; my students enjoy reading and learning from the books. That is a perfect combination.” Teachers who are genuinely passionate about books and reading stand a better chance of instilling a similar love in their own students because they truly model the readers they hope their students will become.

Katherine implements YA novels such as *Dacey’s Song* by Cynthia Voigt, *Tangerine* by Edward Bloor, and *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse as part of her curriculum. She also uses additional YA novels as part of literature circles (Daniels) in order to provide students with additional reading opportunities in which they have ownership regarding their selections. Of great interest is Katherine’s rationale for incorporating *Tangerine* as a novel read by her entire class. She notes that she first read it in her university course on YAL. In previous years she had taught *Dacey’s Song* and had “found many students had read the book already in elementary or middle school.” *Tangerine* offered an alternative title that she could implement.

Katherine notes the specific draw of implementing *Tangerine*: “It is hard to find a book that will appeal to boys that does not have strong censorship issues, and this book has strong appeal to boys and lacks profanity or sexual situations.” This speaks strongly to research supporting that male readers prove a more difficult audience to find books with appeal than do female readers (Smith & Wilhelm). However, as Katherine also notes, *Tangerine* does have “a few girl characters with whom [her] female students can identify,” thereby maintaining appeal for her female students as well.

Katherine’s teaching experience has shown her that “Overall, most students, regardless of academic ability, do not like to read.” Even the few students she has annually who do enjoy reading for pleasure, become “bored when reading the textbook in class.” For years research has supported the notion that textbooks lack appeal (Vacca & Vacca). In reflecting on this, Katherine says, “I think they *expect* textbooks to be boring and see a ray of hope that this material outside of the book could be more appealing.” Katherine also notes that because novels are shorter in length than textbooks, that they seem more manageable to students and that students “stay more interested in YA literature than in traditional works.” This level of interest takes the form of attentiveness during class, completion of assignments, and discussion about the content of the novels.

All of the issues that Katherine has observed pertaining to students’ attitudes toward reading support the implementation of YAL within the English language arts curriculum. For example, YA novels are of a length that is manageable for student readers and for time constraints of classroom curriculum, as was also reflected by Elizabeth’s implementation of YAL.

Katherine advises novice classroom teachers to “not let traditionalists squelch [their] desire to use these books.” She continues, “There is research-based evidence of successful teaching through their use, and if you can meet required learning objectives with a YA

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book's use, then use it." Katherine and Elizabeth both have classrooms that live this advice in their curriculum; it can be done. Katherine warns veteran classroom teachers not currently integrating YAL in their curriculum that they "are missing out on a fantastic teaching tool." The reality is that it can be difficult for teachers, especially high school teachers, to make YAL fit with their curriculum due to constraints of literature classes such as time periods. Aware of this, Katherine advises, "if you don't use YA authors because you teach 10th grade early American literature and no authors writing in that time period, of course, write YAL, then find a contemporary YAL title SET during the time period you are locked into and pair it with a traditional work."

While Katherine's advice is grounded in her own classroom experiences, it directly aligns with the arguments current research make for using YAL.

Recommendations

The findings of our study firmly support what research on reading and the use of young adult literature in the English language arts curriculum already asserts. They show that young adult literature:

- offers teachers reasonable options for implementing full-length works of literature in their curriculum that do contain sophisticated literary devices,
- matches students' interests,
- addresses the time constraints of a crowded curriculum,
- provides a bridge for reluctant and struggling readers in successfully reading classic works of literature, and
- builds literacy skills in readers.

One teacher surveyed in our study states that many of her students "like to read as long as it relates to them." Another participant states, "Most are reluctant readers. However, many of them will read a book if they can figure out what interests them." These are the most basic, yet salient, arguments for integrating YAL. As teachers, let's give students material to read that is relevant to them and then use that to meet all of the standards and assessment objectives in today's classroom. With creativity, passion, and planning, it can be done, as this small sample of teachers demonstrates.

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