

Insider or Outsider?

Using Young Adult Literature and Experiential Learning to Understand the Other

Author Madeleine L'Engle (1993/2002) wrote, “Story makes us more alive, more human, more courageous, more loving.” Stories invite readers to experience lifestyles, habits, and perspectives that are different, foreign, or unusual in comparison with their own. On the journey through stories, readers often discover, however, that others’ customs, habits, and beliefs are not as dissimilar as they may have once believed.

Teachers, librarians, and authors have long understood the power of story to help readers expand their own perspectives and to see through the lens of the other. But how can we, as individuals who share this belief, create learning spaces for adolescents that bring these perspectives to life beyond the pages of a book? In this article, we—Dawan and Maichael—discuss how students in Maichael’s 7th-grade language arts class used young adult literature to explore the perspective of “the other” by investigating this theme within their own community. Specifically, we discuss how simulated learning experiences allowed students to experiment with social norms while investigating the question, “What does it mean to be an insider and an outsider?” These experiences invited students to reexamine their own communities and consider the “other” from potentially new perspectives.

“What Does It Mean to Be an Outsider?”

The Inquiry

As Maichael considered her inquiry question—“What does it mean to be an outsider?”—she knew

she wanted students to learn more than just textual analysis. Seventh graders often struggle to connect with scenarios they haven’t personally experienced, proving problematic not only academically as they try to understand texts, but also socially in situations that call for empathy. For this reason, one of her affective objectives required students to try and understand the perspectives of others. She hoped to use literature to help her students consider the perspectives of those on the margins, thus interrogating how it felt to be an “outsider” and how social pressure and expectations can affect their choices and lived experiences.

Recent changes within the once rural, predominantly white, farming community where she taught during the 2012–2013 school year prompted Maichael to consider this question. As fields were plowed under and neighborhoods sprouted, an influx of outsiders moved to the area, resulting in a 42% increase in population over the last 13 years. The new additions to the community included many families of Latino heritage. The number of Latino students in the district had almost doubled since 2006, increasing the diversity of religions, cultures, languages, and beliefs within the school. These changes necessitated increased awareness of and empathy toward differences among the students at her school and within the larger community. As Dawan (who taught at a nearby university) and Maichael discussed these changes, Maichael felt that exploring the perspectives of those who felt like outsiders through literature would help her students consider the implications of this question in their own lives.

The Text

Although Maichael's affective goals for this unit drove the inquiry, she also considered the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) as she thought about the texts she might teach as part of this unit. Her goals also included providing literature-rich opportunities to analyze the development of theme (CCRA.RL.7.2), to compare and contrast the points of view of characters (CCRA.RL.7.6), and to use evidence from the text to support written analysis (CCRA.RL.7.1). Ultimately, she wanted a text that would allow students to explore multiple perspectives, encourage students to relate to characters different from them, and foster an engaging reading experience.

Finding a single piece of young adult literature to explore the question wasn't the challenge; a myriad of engaging YA texts present provocative and thoughtful explorations of this question and provide a valuable entry point into this inquiry (see Fig. 1). However, her choices were limited by ever-shrinking book budgets (particularly inaccessible to a first-year teacher), as well as very strong community traditions governing the books and topics students were allowed to explore. She felt tensions pulling at her from both sides; she wanted to help bring about greater empathy and acceptance within the community, but to do so, she also needed a text that students would be allowed to read. Ultimately, school resources and district guidelines helped her settle on S. E. Hinton's 1967 classic *The Outsiders*.

The Rationale

As she considered her ultimate objectives, Maichael wrestled with questions about how to help students genuinely inquire into what it means to be an outsider, and she sought ways to make the themes real and relevant beyond the pages of the novel. As Richard Bullough (2006) explained,

We tend to learn what we do or are allowed and encouraged to do . . . inside and outside the school. On this view every non-trivial social interaction, not just those between the teacher and child, has an educational and moral weightiness. Similarly, every social institution carries an education burden, whether acknowledged or not, because "we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment" (Dewey, 1916, p. 22). (Bullough, p. 80)

In other words, students needed direct experience with these concepts to understand the import of the issues in their own lives. After brainstorming ideas with Dawan, Maichael realized that students needed opportunities to experiment with the question in their lives beyond the classroom, particularly within their community.

Ultimately Maichael settled on a final assignment she called the "Outsider Experience" that required students to simulate a situation in which they were an outsider and then gauge and respond to the reactions of the people around them. Simulations, a type of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), are not new to the English language arts; teachers frequently use simulations to help students master content and themes (McCann, 1996) and to personalize central conflicts in the text through experiencing similar situations (Mindich, 2000). Because simulations bring abstract issues in texts to life, they help achieve affective objectives not easily met through traditional methods, particularly the building of empathy and the fostering of multiple perspectives (Arnold, 1998; Johannesen, 1993). They also provide a safe framework for students to "experience feelings of failure, poverty, excessive pressure, futility, hopelessness, and helplessness" within a controlled environment (Kachaturoff, 1978, p. 222). As a result, it seemed to be the perfect strategy for achieving the objectives.

Facilitating the Outsider Experience

Defining the Terms

With her objectives and standards aligned and with her culminating assessment in place, Maichael scaffolded her instruction to help students interrogate the question and prepare for their outsider experience. To begin the unit, students needed to understand the vocabulary associated with the inquiry question, the novel, and their impending experiences.

As the class began reading the novel, they simultaneously explored the connotations of the words "insider" and "outsider." To help students begin unpacking these terms, Maichael asked them to consider the following questions in an independent writing activity: *Think of a time when you have felt like an insider and then analyze your experience: What happened? Who was involved? How did you feel? Why did you experience those emotions?* As students began writing, they

Suggested Texts for Exploring “What Does It Mean to Be an Outsider?”

Time-Tested Whole-Class Novels

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian. Alexie, S. (2007). Arnold Spirit Jr. details in words and illustrations his experiences as he transfers to an all-White high school, causing the reader to question stereotypes about poverty, Native Americans, abilities, and culture. (Grades 8–12)

American Born Chinese. Yang, G. L. (2006). This graphic novel tells three separate but interconnected stories of characters with Chinese heritage. It calls into question stereotypes and assumptions we make about ourselves and others. (Grades 7–12)

The Perks of Being a Wallflower. Chbosky, S. (1999). Told through the eyes of the high school outcasts, this novel explores the challenges and triumphs of being othered in this volatile and exhilarating time of life. (Grade 11 and up)

Stargirl. Spinelli, J. (2000). Upon her arrival, the mysterious Stargirl purposely seems to push social norms and expectations at her high school. But once everyone stops critiquing her actions, they begin to ask questions about themselves and their own choices. (Grades 6–8)

Wonder. Palacio, R. J. (2012). This story details the triumphs and challenges experienced by Auggie when he begins his first year at public school as the kid with the deformed face. The narration allows readers to experience the story through multiple viewpoints. (Grades 4–6)

Classroom Library Must-Haves

The Beginning of Everything. Schneider, R. (2014). When everything Ezra knows seems to be falling apart, he discovers the difference between the person others think you are or want you to be and the person you choose to become. (Grades 9–12)

Eleanor and Park. Rowell, R. (2013). On the surface, Korean American Park and offbeat Eleanor seem unlikely friends or sweethearts, but the chronicle of their year together reveals that there is more to most everyone than what a first impression reveals. (Grades 9–12)

If I Ever Get Out of Here. Gansworth, E. (2013). Racism, poverty, and the delicate nature of adolescent friendships are explored through the stories of Lewis, a teen bullied because of his American Indian heritage, and George, the new kid in town. (Grades 8–12)

It’s Kind of a Funny Story. Vizzini, N. (2006). When the pressures and anxieties of attending a prestigious high school for future executives drive Craig to attempt suicide, he gets checked into the psych ward. Here, life with his new peers expands his perspective and causes him to question how much he really needs to live up to the expectations of society. (Grades 9–12)

Looks. George, M. (2009). Meghan and Amiee struggle with their weight in totally opposite ways, but for the same reason. Through their friendship, the two take to task their fears and challenges, telling the high school experience through the lens of these characters. (Grades 8–11)

Mexican WhiteBoy. De la Peña, M. (2010). Even with a 95 mph fastball, Danny’s appearance causes people to label him before they even have a chance to know him. But his story helps readers question their own identities and the definitions society imposes on individuals. (Grades 9–12)

Openly Straight. Konigsberg, B. (2013). Rafe: an athlete, a writer, and a teen who doesn’t experience discrimination because of his sexual identity but who also wants to be someone other than “the gay guy.” Stepping into the closet at his new school allows him the freedom he craved, but causes him to wonder about what it really means to be true to himself. (Grades 9–12)

Personal Effects. Kokie, E. M. (2012). Matt is devastated by the death of his brother in Iraq, but if he wants to hold on to the remnants of his brother’s life, Matt has to reconcile his assumptions about others with those his brother embraced. (Grades 9–12)

Ten Things I Hate About Me. Abdel-Fattah, R. (2010). Jamilah is a 16-year-old Lebanese Muslim. She has changed her appearance and name to become a blonde-haired, blue-eyed teen who wants to be called Jamie. She struggles to figure out how to embrace and honor her heritage while finding the acceptance and friendships she desperately seeks. (Grades 9–12)

Out This Year

All the Bright Places. Niven, J. (2015). One kid is popular; the other an outcast. But when one of them attempts suicide, the two are brought together and wind up navigating a series of adventures that help them both see through the eyes of the other. (Grades 10–12)

Fish in a Tree. Hunt, L. M. (2015). Life at Ally’s new school proves tough, as the big secret about her reading ability seems to be increasingly hard to hide. But as she learns more about herself, she realizes her own labels and those of others aren’t always accurate. (Grades 4–8)

The Question of Miracles. Arnold, E. (2015). Iris and Boris are middle schoolers on the outskirts, but their reluctant friendship takes them on an exploration of life’s big questions and possibilities. (Grades 4–7)

Figure 1. Suggested texts for exploring “What does it mean to be an outsider?”

identified and later shared personal “insider” stories of when they felt accepted or part of a group (see Fig. 2). For example, one student wrote this analysis about his football team: “I felt like we were kind of a family and helping each other out so we could do a good job. We could trust each other more because we came together and helped each other out.” Others shared similar experiences as a part of teams, clubs, church groups, or at gatherings of friends and family members.

To help students understand what it might mean to be an “outsider,” Maichael showed a clip of an old *Candid Camera* episode. This particular episode documents what happened when people did something simple, but outside the expected social order: in this

case, facing the back of an elevator instead of the front (access on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/61349466>, or access a more contemporary re-creation of this experiment on the TV show *Would You Fall for That?* at <http://abcnews.go.com/WhatWouldYouDo/video/fall-elevator-19922451>). As the students watched unsuspecting citizens rotate around an elevator in response to the movement of others, they hypothesized about the causes of such actions: *What did it mean to be an outsider in these situations? How much of the people’s behavior was motivated by desires to fit in? How did these people feel about being outsiders in seemingly innocent social situations?* In each class, students generally concluded that the experiment demonstrated

Insider Experiences

Think of a time when you have felt like an insider (examples: on a sports teams, with friends at school/church/clubs, at family gatherings). Describe your experience below.

Now analyze your experience:

What happened in order to make you a part of the group?

Who was involved?

How did you feel?

Why did you experience those emotions?

Figure 2. Graphic organizer to help students analyze an “insider” experience

that people don't like being outsiders and sometimes conform to feel like an accepted part of the group (see Fig. 3).

Synthesizing the connotations, experiences, and ideas shared in the discussion, students then crafted their own definitions of these terms. One student explained, "I think that being an outsider means that maybe you're a loner or don't belong or fit in with a certain group. I think that being an insider means that you have a lot of friends, you fit in with the group, and you feel accepted." Another concluded, "To me, an outsider is someone who doesn't normally fit in with the crowd. . . . Feeling like an insider is one of the greatest things. As an insider, you never feel as though you don't have anyone to rely on. An insider fits into every situation and understands how to socialize."

This discussion and the definitions crafted provided students with their first opportunities within the unit to brush up against one another's experiences and connect with the characters. Ultimately, the dis-

ussion and writing exercise served as the foundation for the essays students would write as the culminating assessment for the unit.

Dialoguing with the Reading

As the class progressed through the novel, discussions continued about what it might feel like to be accepted in a group as opposed to rejected as an outsider in society. Students identified and analyzed specific examples of this construct as evidenced by the Socs (Socials) and the Greasers from the text. The characters' opinions of each other, their actions around their friends, and their talk to one another all depicted stereotypical views of their rival groups. These components of judgmental biases, mirrored by so many other characters in other young adult novels, resonated with Maichael's adolescent students who constantly battled to be appreciated and accepted by their peers.

Inspired by the novel, class discussions explored how or why people are classified within their own communities in and out of school. Students examined

Outsider Experiences

Watch the Candid Camera clip of the man in the elevator. Then answer these questions:

How was his behavior influenced by his desire to fit in?

What did it mean to be an outsider in this situation?

How did he feel about being an outsider in this seemingly innocent situation?

Define the terms "insider" and "outsider" in the space below:

Figure 3. Graphic organizer to help students analyze an "outsider" experience

common stereotypes and then analyzed their own biases. This discussion led students to acknowledge the existence of an “in” accepted category and an “out” unpopular group in school as well as within other locations of social interaction. It also included speculation about why and how bullying occurs, merging schoolwide topics of interest into the language arts curriculum.

Through this strategy, students were able to make connections with the characters in the book. In the essay required at the end of the unit, students dedicated a paragraph to comparing their own experiences to those of a character from the text. They related to the loyalty felt between members of the Greasers as they spoke of their own insider experiences with friends and family. One student wrote, “I think the person I relate to the most in my experiences is Johnny. For example, when Johnny felt so happy for saving the children, it relates to me when I felt happy for making points for my team.” Similarly, students discussed feeling a connection to the Greasers when they were stereotyped and ostracized from social interactions. Referring to her outsider experience where she depended upon her family to help her feel comfortable in a foreign country, that same student wrote, “Since [Johnny] is the gang’s pet and is shy around people he doesn’t know, that relates to me and my outsider experience.” After doing this assignment, students expressed that it was now easier to find connections between themselves and the characters.

Nel Noddings (1984/2003) explained, “The purpose of dialogue is to come into contact with ideas and to understand, to meet the other and to care” (p. 186). Ultimately, the dialogues that resulted from exploring both the insiders and outsiders in the book initiated discussion about similar issues in the students’ own society and created a strong foundation for the concepts they were about to experiment with in their own lives. Their classroom dialogue began a process that continued throughout the unit as students began to see through one another’s eyes and listen to one another with care.

Creating the Simulation

At this point in the unit, students had analyzed “outsider experiences” multiple times within the novel, made personal connections to the experiences

of characters in the book, and formulated their own analyses as a class. Maichael then initiated the simulation component of the assignment with the following invitation:

As we have read S. E. Hinton’s book, *The Outsiders*, we have discussed what it might feel like to be an “insider” in a group as opposed to an “outsider” in society. Now it is your turn to experiment with the themes we have discussed. Choose an opportunity to act like an outsider. Then analyze how people acted in response to you and how you felt.

To help students consider what it means to experiment with the concept of “insider” and “outsider” within their community, the class revisited the *Candid Camera* clip they watched at the beginning of the inquiry. However, this time the discussions that followed explored what the experimenters (or insiders) did as well as how the participants (or outsiders) reacted. As the class unpacked the experience, they discussed how this clip modeled the essential components of their own experimental analysis.

Next, the class brainstormed scenarios that might cause students to feel like “outsiders.” Ideas included sitting with a different group at lunch without being invited or performing acts that defied social customs, such as standing too close to other people while talking or wearing clothing incorrectly. These ideas ranged from the outrageous and loud to quiet acts of social defiance, but all students chose an experiment they felt would personally challenge them. Although student choice was encouraged, the class agreed that their experiments should not distract others from learning or do harm to others and that they would need parental approval. Allowing this choice not only differentiated the assignment to satisfy the unique needs of each student, it also provided students autonomy in making decisions about the kind of situation that would push them and allowed them to deal with the responses that resulted. Once they decided on their projects, it was time to turn them loose.

Students had two weeks to complete their projects and then one week to write and revise their essays, which consisted of three parts (see Fig. 4). First, students defined what it meant to be an “insider” using description and analysis of the insider experience they had identified at the beginning of the unit. Next, they described and reflected on their outsider experiences. Guiding questions similar to those listed earlier helped students describe and analyze their experiences in

“What does it mean to be an insider? What does it mean to be an outsider?”

The Task: As we have read S. E. Hinton’s book *The Outsiders*, we have discussed what it might feel like to be accepted in a group as opposed to rejected as an outsider in society. Now it is your turn to experiment with the themes we have discussed in class. You will brainstorm and write about a time when you have felt like an “insider.” Then to counter this, you will choose an opportunity to experience being an outsider and analyze how people reacted to you and how you felt.

Rules: Your outsider experiment cannot interrupt nor detract from any classroom experience in my or any other class. Check with your parents before trying an “outsider experience” outside of school. Be creative! The more you push yourself out of your comfort zone, the more you will be able to understand and analyze the experience of an outsider.

Some ideas of “outsider” experiences include: sit with a different group of friends at a different table at lunch; go to a service at a church in which you don’t usually congregate; do something that is usually seen as socially awkward (stand too close to people while talking to them, wear your clothes backwards, hiccup in between every sentence, etc.). You may want to check your experiment off with Ms. Mayans and your parents before proceeding.

Project Elements and Expectations

Part A: We have all had experiences where we feel comfortable in a group. These are “insider” experiences. Brainstorm times when you have felt like an insider. Choose one of these experiences as a basis for writing one paragraph (7–10 sentences) detailing the experience. Give details, reasons, and evidence of why you felt like an insider in the situation. Afterwards, write an analysis of the experience. Your analysis of this insider experience should be a strong paragraph (5–7 sentences).

Part B: Have an outsider experience. The experiment should push you to do something you haven’t done before. The purpose of this experiment is to do something that will make you feel “outside” of a group or culture. Reflect on this experience. Write a paragraph describing the experience in detail and another paragraph analyzing how you felt and how people acted toward you (similar to Part A).

Part C: Compare your experience to that of one of the characters in the book. Choose one character and analyze how your outsider/insider experiences are similar or different to that of this character. Give concrete examples from the book in your comparison.

Due Dates:

Project given:
Insider Rough Draft:
Outsider Rough Draft:
Final Draft of paper:

Essay Outline

Paragraph 1. Introduction and thesis
Paragraph 2. Your insider story
Paragraph 3. Analysis of your insider story
Paragraph 4. Your outsider experience
Paragraph 5. Analysis of outsider experience
Paragraph 6. Comparison between you and a character
in the book
Paragraph 7. Conclusion

Put all of these parts together to create your final essay.
You will have a 7-paragraph essay in the end.

Figure 4. Assignment sheet

writing, including how others reacted and what they themselves felt during the experience. Specifically, Maichael asked students to consider the following as they crafted their discussion of their outsider experience:

- What did you do?
- How did you feel?
- What did people do/say to make you feel this way?
- How do you think your experience might influence the way you interact with people in the future?

The final essay component required students to compare their own insider or outsider experiences to those of one of the characters in the novel. Drawing on textual evidence and specific examples from their own lives, students explored the similarities and differences between these comparisons. Figure 5 details the rubric used to guide and evaluate their essays.

As students completed their experiments and worked on their essays, informal discussions buzzed throughout the classroom. For example, as one student animatedly explained what she had done, students nearby commented on and questioned her about her experience. The discussions proceeded naturally and were not limited to just the student and the teacher. Instead, everyone present in the classroom encouraged everyone else. These informal classroom discussions ultimately helped build anticipation as students prepared for the final presentations where they shared their experiences with one another. The discussions also seemed to motivate many of the students who had not yet completed an experiment to do something. At the end of the unit, the statistics reinforced what these observations suggest: While Maichael averaged about 75% participation on assignments and projects from the students in her classes throughout the year, 95% of her students submitted essays about these projects and participated in the analytical discussions that followed.

Analyzing Their Work

Student responses demonstrated significant insights that resulted directly from the simulation and likely would not have been possible if students had not been able to experiment with these ideas in the community. First, students discussed feelings of discomfort that resulted from breaking social norms. For example, Bracken, a shy, petite girl, described the stares and

disapproval she experienced as she paid for a candy bar and a drink at a local store in pennies and dimes. She wrote, “When the cashier saw all the money, he looked at me like I was joking and then started counting them. I heard someone behind me in line mutter, ‘Pennies, really?’ I started feeling really uncomfortable and awkward after they said that.” Her reaction was akin to many other students’ who described feeling judged because others didn’t understand the motivations behind their behavior. Bracken’s experience and others like it provided opportunities for the class to discuss differences in habits, customs, and approaches that may differ from the norm but that aren’t necessarily wrong. As students explored the varied motivations behind the choices they made, they began to realize that the wrong assumptions made about them paralyzed those they sometimes make about other people.

Some students went beyond challenging social norms and entered real situations as legitimate outsiders. In her presentation, Leah described attending a different church when she visited her cousin in Mexico. Both as a religious and a linguistic outsider, she wrote:

My cousin introduced me to many of her friends [but] I felt awkward. They talked about school stuff, and it felt weird because I didn’t know anything they were talking about. I stood out a lot. I lost my way to class and couldn’t pronounce the words well, so I only spoke English to my cousin.

In this and other instances, students labeled their feelings as “awkward” or “weird,” and then described empathizing with Cherry, Johnny, and Ponyboy, drawing parallels between the alienation felt by the characters and those they felt as a result of their simulations or personal experiences. Experiencing, even briefly, what it meant not to be a part of the dominant group helped them see the challenges faced by the characters more clearly. Sharing this kind of experience led to class discussions about people who might feel like outsiders in their own community as a result of language or religious differences and how students might bridge these differences and help others see the value of diversity within the community.

Many parents and community members proved eager and willing to participate in the students’ experiences by supporting and pushing their students’ learning at school into the home and community (Darling-Hammond, 1996). For example, one father wanted to maximize the learning for his daughter, Ashlee, an

Grade Rubric for Insider/Outsider Essay

Name: _____

Class Period: _____ Date: _____

1. Ideas (40 points) _____

- Essay reflects the guiding theme (“What does it mean to be an insider? What does it mean to be an outsider?”).
- Effective and interesting stories/examples are chosen.
- Sufficient detail is included to allow the reader to imagine the experiences.
- Analysis paragraphs address 2–3 key points about each experience, which are easily applicable given the stories explained.
- Comparison to a character in the book is accompanied by both similarities and differences.

2. Organization (15 points) _____

- Organization follows the set format given by the teacher (P1- intro, P2- insider experience, P3- insider analysis, P4- outsider experience, P5- outsider analysis, P6- character comparison, P7- conclusion).
- Paragraphs contain clear information that pertains to the topic sentence.

3. Voice (10 points) _____

- Voice is unique to the author and makes the essay both personable and insightful.

4. Word Choice and Sentence Fluency (20 points) _____

- Essay is balanced with concrete detail and commentary from the student.
- Words have been carefully chosen to make the essay detailed.
- Comparison paragraph effectively uses a combination of concrete detail taken directly from the book and commentary about how this compares to the student’s experience.

5. Conventions (10 points) _____

- Essay is free of errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Sentences are varied (simple, compound, and complex) and add diversity to the paragraphs.

6. Process (5 points) _____

- Student had a rough draft on the specified due date.
- Student adequately peer-edited another student’s paper.

Total Points Possible: 100

Figure 5. Essay grading rubric

attractive, academically successful student who was popular among her peers. When he heard about the project and Ashlee's initial idea, he challenged her to consider doing an experiment that would really push her beyond her current realm of experience.

With her father's help, Ashlee dressed to appear homeless and overweight, then walked into the local Walmart to do some shopping. Stares and whispered comments immediately made her feel uncomfortable. In her analysis, she wrote,

During this experiment I felt so embarrassed. I didn't even want to walk around in front of people. I wanted to just put my head in the corner and not even make any eye contact with anyone. The only people I even wanted to look at were my close family. Right then I felt like I hated everyone. Just because of the looks and comments they made. I am glad that I did do this project though. I have learned so much and now I know I will not judge anyone for what they look like or act like.

As she talked about her experience with the class, Ashley's feelings resonated with most of the students; they all felt a measure of discomfort and self-consciousness. But more significant, all had their eyes opened to the impact of their actions and opinions on those they saw as "outsiders" from the dominant cultures in our area. Through her simulation, the help of her parents, and a desire to learn something personally relevant, Ashlee admitted that her view of people who are different from her had changed.

Nearly all of the students wrote about their increased awareness of social norms, empathy toward others, and their new insights concerning how these themes played out in our community. In addition to relating to the characters, students found ways to relate to each other and to others in their community. The personal relevance of their simulated and actual experiences emanated from essays that demonstrated strong understandings of themes in the novel as well as connections to characters' experiences.

Incorporating Outsider Experiences with YA Lit: Considerations and Cautions

Young adult literature can serve as a catalyst for student learning when it comes to issues significant to young people and their community. Although the discussion here uses *The Outsiders* as the text that guides this approach, a myriad of quality YA texts center on this theme. The list of suggested texts in Figure 1

(p. 47) provides a variety of novels for different grade levels and interests. The suggestions that follow discuss additional ideas and recommendations for those interested in implementing this assignment in their own classrooms.

Initially, Maichael feared that the outsider experience component of the assignment might alienate shy students and discourage them from participating. However, allowing students to choose a situation that would push them individually helped them willingly engage. Allowing additional student choice in both the text and the outsider issues studied may also prove motivating. For example, a similar inquiry could be conducted wherein teachers create book clubs or literature circles organized around a variety of texts. At their weekly book club meetings, students could discuss the shared text with other members of their group. As the different groups finish reading their texts, the teacher could use a jigsaw strategy to organize students in groups with those who read different texts. This arrangement facilitates discussion across stories, helping students see multiple perspectives and connect with characters from a variety of backgrounds.

Students also seemed motivated by opportunities to discuss issues already at the forefront of their minds—specifically, the defying of social norms, significant social pressures, and being "othered"—through personal and group reflections on their simulated experiences and connections to their books. Just as students benefitted from hearing about a variety of different outsider simulations, students may also benefit from listening to their peers relate to characters from a variety of self-selected texts. Building in moments for reflective dialogue might help ensure that students ultimately benefit from the simulation as a learning experience and make meaningful connections to the texts. Embedding opportunities for debriefing and discussion of the experience in the final assessment helped students build strong connections to their books and make the themes relevant to their own lives.

Finally, engaging with applications of the ideas in the texts ultimately provided students with opportunities to wrestle with issues relevant to them while also taking an active role in their own learning. This process also reached beyond the students and maximized the learning experiences when parents and commu-

nity members became involved. As teachers conduct simulations with their classes, monitoring student participation and, if possible, involving parents and community members to most fully enhance the learning experience, they will find that these lessons have the power to move students beyond the initial reading of the text and influence society outside of school.

We encourage teachers to consider how experiential learning and simulations can help extend student learning beyond the walls of the classroom and into local communities. Through sharing both our stories and our experiences, we can come to better understand and empathize with those around us even as we undermine stereotypes and learn to recognize elements of the “other” in ourselves.

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