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Addressing Assumptions about Adolescents in a Preservice YAL Course

"I thought you were just typical teenagers."
"No one has ever called me typical. I can't say I like it."
—Sarah Nicolas, 2015, p. 158

For anyone who has ever taught teenagers, there is a strong temptation to congeal their quirky traits into one lump of coal. I say coal because our understanding of adolescents is usually filled with negative attributes of the unruly, rebellious, lazy sort. We seem to think teenagers belong on the proverbial "naughty" list. This deficit view around adolescents—one in which teens are perceived as being deficient or inherently flawed and in need of more knowledgeable others to guide them and/or lift them out of this incomplete and negative hole—is a too-prevalent theme discussed by adults and, more specifically and problematically, by teachers. As though an mp3 stuck on repeat on our iPhones, this single story about "typical" teens is hard to turn off. And as Chimamanda Adichie (2009) warns us in her TED talk, single stories are dangerous; they create "stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

Throughout my career as an educator, I have heard this single story of young adults many times. Well-intentioned friends have even joked about or bluntly asked me why on earth I would want to teach middle or high school students, and they conclude that I must have been a saint to do so. I can guarantee that I am no saint, just as I can guarantee that not all, in fact very few, of the students I encountered while teaching middle and high school were the devils my peers might think, despite the pervasive rhetoric.

Perhaps one might call me too optimistic about adolescents, since I hold the assumption that all teenagers can succeed and learn to love English language arts. However, if this is a flaw, I am happy to be guilty as charged. I am not naïve, though; I do know that some of my former students struggled in school, displayed inappropriate behaviors, or quite honestly were rude. However, I have always found the traits of my middle and high school students to be typical of humans, and not just of the adolescent variety. It is easy to say that teens are rude or apathetic, but I have met an equal number of adults who exhibit those traits. Part of the reason I have been and will continue to be adamant that the deficit view of teens is misinformed has to do with my own adolescent experience. Anyone who knew me as a teenager could attest to the fact that I was smart, conscientious, kind, hard working, and respectful of others. My story of being a teenager is not the one that is told in conversations among peers or shown in the media. There is a range of and diversity within adolescent experiences.

Although I wasn't exposed to young adult literature as an adolescent, as a middle and high school English teacher, I began to get to know the genre and

witness how it offered perspectives that gave depth and breadth to the teenage story. Of course, like any good English teacher, I know it is important to be critical of the literature that students read and to think about the messages it may send, so now, as an educator of preservice secondary English teachers, I focus on those questions. I ask my preservice teachers to talk about what it means to teach young adults, to question the deeply ingrained beliefs that they already have about teenagers, and to explore where those beliefs originated. For me, a good place to do this sort of work is in a young adult literature course.

I have taught Young Adult Literature (YAL) for preservice teachers for the past two years at the University of Georgia. This course is one of five that our undergraduates are required to take as preparation for their student teaching experience. The other four courses focus on methods and practicum field experiences. The YAL course both serves as the final requirement to earn the English content teaching credential and provides a space to apply the methods with real literature before students become student teachers. The course on young adult literature is housed in our College of Education, as opposed to the English department; I make this distinction because the tone and tenor of such a class may be quite different depending on where it is housed. YAL course syllabi in an English department focus primarily on literary analysis, while those in an Education department focus more on application and pedagogy. Despite this binary distinction, I chose to do a bit of both. Due to my own experiences as an "atypical"—yet very typical—teenager, as I taught the course, I felt compelled to not only read and analyze YAL with my preservice teachers, but also to talk about the young adults who read these books and how to effectively approach YAL with them in the classroom.

Under my guidance, the course was both analytical and pedagogical, thus bridging the English world with the Education world. The class met 24 times (two times a week for 12 weeks). During this time, students participated in young adult book clubs, created lessons and units of instruction, and engaged in philosophical debates about the literary merits of YAL. They also read academic and practitioner-based articles about the themes and content of YAL and how one might teach and analyze various texts. For my undergraduate students, much of what I taught in this course was new. Many of them admitted that they had never read YAL before, and if they had read it, they felt they needed to do so "on the sly," perceiving it as somehow not as good as the British, American, and World literature canonical texts they read in their English courses. Not only was the literature I was introducing to them new, the concept that English teachers can and should use YAL in their classrooms was something they had not considered before.

The only classes my students had taken related to the study of adolescents came in the form of their educational psychology courses, which focused on the developmental aspects of what it means to be a teen and often failed to paint adolescents as living entities. In a response paper to some of the YAL course readings on young adults and young adult literature, one of my students, Carrie (all names are pseudonyms), wrote, "Many of the articles shocked me." This sentiment was repeated throughout the course by many of Carrie's classmates. The preservice teachers in my course, although only a few years removed from being teenagers themselves, had already accepted as reality the lump of coal—the negative view of teenagers and the accompanying literature—into their educator stocking.

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Considering Adolescence

"My overall conclusion might be that YA is the new punching bag for society's fears about teens' incipient adulthood. #giveteensmorecredit."

—Andrea Cremer, 2011

People fear the unknown, and for many people, the seemingly chaotic, over-emotional, and impulsive behaviors of teens are mystifying. Moje and van Helden (2005) rightly ask, "What is it about adolescence that

leads people to fear that certain influences will prey on the alleged confusion, vulnerability, and crisis of youth?" (p. 211). Rather than seeing teens as troubled, I think it is important to trouble exactly what it means to be a teen in the United States. Instead of giving a detailed history lesson on the development of the concept of adolescence, I wish to highlight some of the key scholarly thoughts on this stage of life as a basis for understanding what my preservice teacher candidates and I discuss throughout the course.

Fundamental to thinking about young adults or adolescents is Nancy Lesko's (2001) work on the cultural construction of adolescence. In her research, she found four "confident characteristics" (i.e., commonly held societal beliefs) of adolescence: 1) coming of age into adulthood, 2) being controlled by raging hormones, 3) being peer-oriented, and 4) being represented by age. Her work is fundamental in deconstructing how teenagers have been treated as stock characters over time by demonstrating how dominant ideas of adolescents are tied to a history of racism, sexism, and classism. Similarly, Vadeboncouer (2005) argues that the discourse of adolescence "take[s] on colonial aspects" in that the "adolescent is cast as an objectified entity, in need of leadership, guidance, and control from the adult" (p. 5). Because adolescence has long been thought of as resulting from biological changes and psychological developments, the idea that this stage of life may be constructed, rather than natural, was not questioned. Yet, as Eckert (2004) stated, "Adolescence is not a natural life stage. It is quite peculiar to industrialized nations, where people approaching adulthood are segregated from the adult world, and confined to schools where they are expected to interact and identify primarily with those their own age" (p. 362). Similar arguments have been forwarded by numerous other researchers of adolescence: adolescence is a "historical anomaly" (Epstein, 2010, p. 41); the adolescent is a "fiction" (Vadeboncoeur, 2005, p. 6); adolescence "often functions as a discourse surrogate for broader social, political, and/or nationalistic agendas and concerns" (Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2015, p. 510).

While it would be wrong to dismiss completely the psychological, biological, and developmental aspects of what it means to be a teenager, I think that these discourses have had the spotlight for far too long. Taking a social-constructivist stance on adolescents helps teachers be critical of the ways in which institutions such as media, government, and education fashion teenagers in a deficit stance in ways that other views of adolescence cannot. This is important because, as Lewis and Petrone (2010) wrote, "[H]ow adolescence is understood significantly affects the ways young people are advocated for/with, intervened on behalf of, and organized and taught in schools" (p. 398). Because perceptions do affect our notions of others, it was important that in my YAL course, my preservice teachers engaged with the notion of the young adult before they delved into young adult literature. My hope was that by examining their own experiences as young adults, hearing alternative viewpoints about teenagers from other scholars and educators, and examining images and opinions of adolescents in popular culture that my preservice teachers would be able to think about their future students in more positive and productive ways.

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Exploring Alternative Viewpoints

"I realized yet again how often I underestimate teens—how often we all underestimate them. I sometimes need an incident like this to remind me that teenagers are not bland, banal, perfected ciphers we see sleazing around the groves of So-Cal on HD-TV. Those are the teens created by panels of writers terrified to alienate any potential viewers. In reality, teens are conspicuously the opposite of bland and blank: They are incredibly eccentric, deeply impassioned about their interests, fantastically—even exhaustingly—knowledgeable on the subject of topics like, say, drum and bugle corps, or horse-riding, or the United Nations, or submarine warfare. Their commitment to complexity of thought is, if anything, fiercer than an adult's—because they have to fight so fiercely to defend it."

—M. T. Anderson, 2009

In order to help my students think about adolescence/ts in relation to our course on YAL, I had my preservice teachers engage in a variety of activities. I will discuss each of the activities here in order to show how other educators might explore similar topics in their YAL courses.

Grounding Their Understandings in the Personal

I first had my students partake in some reflective writing. I asked my undergraduate preservice teachers to think about adolescence, adolescents, teenagers, and young adults in relation to the following prompts, and then write a well-organized response:

1. Describe to me what being an adolescent is like. Hypothetically, how would you describe teenagers to someone who has never met them? What words or phrases come to mind?
2. What were your teenage years like? What were your interests? What do you think about this time in your life?
3. How does society portray teenagers in the news, media, and popular culture?
4. How do schools, teachers, principals, etc. tend to treat teenagers, in your opinion?

These questions allowed my students to reflect on their own belief systems prior to reading and responding to academic literature on the same topic. Students brought these responses to class, and we used them as a basis for a general discussion around their own perceptions of teens. As a common starting point, students came up to the whiteboard and engaged in a chalk-talk revolving around the words, phrases, and associations they generated related to adolescents. As the words filled the board, it became visually clear that their personal perceptions of teens were mostly negative and grounded in stereotypes. Elena's response exemplifies these ideas:

> I think the media likes to represent teenagers as this entity defined by black hair-dye, spiked collar necklaces, smoking cigarettes and likely to have on eye-liner regardless of gender expression. When I was little, this is what I envisioned teenagers to be, and honestly, for some reason, that image was so entirely glamorous. I always wanted to be a rebel, but I never was. In many schools, I feel that teachers treat teenagers like the rebel, decked in black and chains.

Descriptions such as this were fruitful starting points for conversations about how these visions of adolescents have become prevalent. Because I had also asked students to consider their own adolescent years in their written responses, I asked them whether they fit the stereotypes on the board. Elizabeth remarked, "I remember being taught that my teenage years would be a turbulent roller coaster of hormones and angst, but that was not my actual experience." What I attempted to show them, and Elizabeth and Elena seemed to understand, was that adolescence is *not* a universal experience. Instead, it is one that varies highly from person to person.

Grounding Their Understandings in the Academic

These discussions were just the beginning step in helping my preservice teachers consider young adults and the implicit assumptions they, as future educators, held. After taking a personal approach, the students then read various academic pieces and viewed a video to explore other people's beliefs about adolescents. Over a course of two weeks, students read and/or viewed the following:

- Lewis & Petrone's (2010) article, "'Although adolescence need not be violent . . .': Preservice teachers' connections between 'adolescence' and literacy curriculum"
- Excerpts from Epstein's (2010) book, *Teen 2.0: Saving our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence*
- YA author Laurie Halse Anderson's (2005) keynote speech, "Loving the young adult reader even when you want to strangle him (or her)!"
- YA author M. T. Anderson's (2009) Printz Honor Book Award speech, "On the Intelligence of Teens"
- Seigel's (2013) video, "Myths of Adolescence"

Each piece provided a counter-narrative to traditional and historical notions of what it means to be a young adult.

Upon reading and viewing, I again asked my students to reflect on their views of adolescents, posing the following questions:

1. What did you learn about teenagers/adolescents that you didn't know before reading/viewing these texts?
2. What myths did you initially buy into? How do you think these myths affect the ways in which we teach our students?
3. If you could redefine what an adolescent is based on your readings and new insights, what would you say now?

Although we began to address the misconceptions and assumptions about teens through personal experiences, these articles and video seemed to hit my students hard. Michael wrote that he "definitely bought into the myths" of adolescence discussed in Siegel's (2013) video, and that learning "the teenage years were practically nonexistent a few hundred years ago was a lot to process at once. . . . It was strange to find out that something that you had always accepted as a universal truth was actually, to some extent, a creation of society." Another astute student, Robert, confessed that he was subject to, in his words, "the tyranny of common sense" that led him to "many incorrect assumptions on adolescents." Robert's reflection ends with powerful thoughts on his newfound knowledge about the dangers of the construction of the adolescent as lazy and rebellious:

> I think addressing the falsity of these myths to our students themselves is important. If students believe they are inherently inadequate and immature due to their adolescence, they will play into these myths by default, but if we empower them by showing that these myths are in fact myths, they will be motivated to live beyond them. The more we can show our students we believe in them, the more successful they will be.

While Robert's response has the wonderful optimism of a new teacher who wants to conquer the world, I find it refreshing that he, and others in his cohort, will be entering this career not grumbling about the behaviors of students but, instead, championing them. Although these are but a few examples of the rich insights my students developed and articulated, it gives me hope that there will be more teacher candidates like Sarah who said, "If I could re-describe the teenage experience, I would consider it limitless."

Analyzing Assumptions in Popular Culture

I could have stopped the discussion of adolescents with just personal and academic responses, but I felt that it was important to begin moving that discussion to a more broadly defined literacy. So, rather than jumping straight into reading young adult novels, we moved into an exploration of how teens are portrayed in popular culture, as evidenced in teen magazines and comic strips. I wanted my students to explore Moje and van Helden's (2005) question: "What do popular discourses—everyday talk, images, and signs—communicate to people about what an adolescent is?" (p. 211).

Teen Magazines

As a part of our exploration of this question, I asked my preservice teachers to bring a teen magazine to class. I did not tell them what teen magazine to bring, only that they should bring one that they didn't mind cutting up. I divided the class into four groups; each group was given a different topic to explore in relation to how these magazines portray the young adults who comprise their primary audience:

- Adolescent Intellectual/Academic Interests
- Adolescent Social Life/Personal Interests
- Adolescent Problems/Crises
- Adolescent Relationships

Students worked in their groups, looking through their teen magazines for words and images that helped exemplify how the magazines portrayed teenagers relative to their assigned category. Students then created a collage on poster paper of what they were seeing.

I offer two examples of what my students created. In Figure 1, students assembled a collage of words and a few images that convey some of the conceptions of what the problems and crises of adolescents

Figure 1. Teen magazine collage of "Adolescent Problems and Crises"

entail. Students noted that they found lots of images and words related to body image, peer pressure, gossip, relationships, and school. A cursory glance at the overall message of this particular poster literally elicits the word "UGH . . . ," seen in the upper right hand corner of the poster, and perhaps even a guttural sigh. Not surprisingly, my preservice teachers noted that adolescent problems and crises were portrayed in overly dramatic ways, making teenagers appear to be druggies, bullies, and highly superficial, tuned out, and anxious individuals.

In a second example (see Fig. 2), my preservice teachers explored what teen magazines had to say about adolescent academic or intellectual interests. Unfortunately, as the collage demonstrates, what they found generally failed to promote academics or intellect in thoughtful ways. Instead, they identified articles on how to excel at looking good in appropriate school outfits and keeping up with beauty regimens, as indicated by the advice to "ace your face" and the guide to essential make-up that should go in one's backpack. Although there were some serious clippings about books some teens might want to read, the overall message about school was that it was about maintaining a persona and that school and academics were hard and therefore not fun.

Students in all four of the groups noticed that adolescents were portrayed in a less than positive light, tending toward superficiality. Many were disturbed that they had not ever noticed these subtle (or not so subtle) messages before. My preservice teachers also discussed the large gaps in content within these teen magazines. Several students noted that almost all the pictures and stories in the magazines were of White, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual students. This brought up very thoughtful conversation about the target audience for the magazines and their purpose in our society. Although there were a few preservice teachers in my courses who identified as non-White, none of them brought in a magazine that depicted teens of their race or ethnicity. In addition, most teen magazines were aimed at girls, and some of my male students said that they had a hard time finding teen magazines for young men other than *Sports Illustrated Kids,* which technically isn't a gender-specific magazine. When asking my preservice teachers if these collages represented who they were as teenagers, most acknowledged that they did not find much in common with the portrayals.

Figure 2. Teen magazine collage of "Adolescent Academic Interests"

Comic Strips

In addition to analyzing teen magazines, I also had my students look at how adolescents are portrayed in comic strips. Comics are meant to be funny and usually do poke fun at or satirize societal issues, but sometimes they can also highlight dominant ideologies. Two comic strips written from a young adult perspective that I have found particularly useful to analyze are *Zits* by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman and *Family Tree* by Signe Wilkinson. According to the Comics Kingdom website, "*Zits* centers on Jeremy Duncan, a self-absorbed teenager, as he endures the insecurities, hormones, and hilarity of adolescence. *Zits* depicts both teenage and parental angst like no other comic strip" (http:// comicskingdom.com/zits/2015-09-10). *Family Tree* is described on the Cartoonist Group website as "tackling everything from shopaholic teens to the real differences between girls and boys"; it is "a groundbreaking family comedy that draws on Wilkinson's wit (and her years of close personal experience with teenagers)" (http://www.cartoonistgroup.com/properties/familytree/). Before even looking at the two comic strips, these brief overviews indicate very clear assumptions about the young adult experience.

Almost any single comic within these comic strip series could be used to analyze the societal construction of adolescence. However, I will discuss two, of many, that my preservice teachers deconstructed in

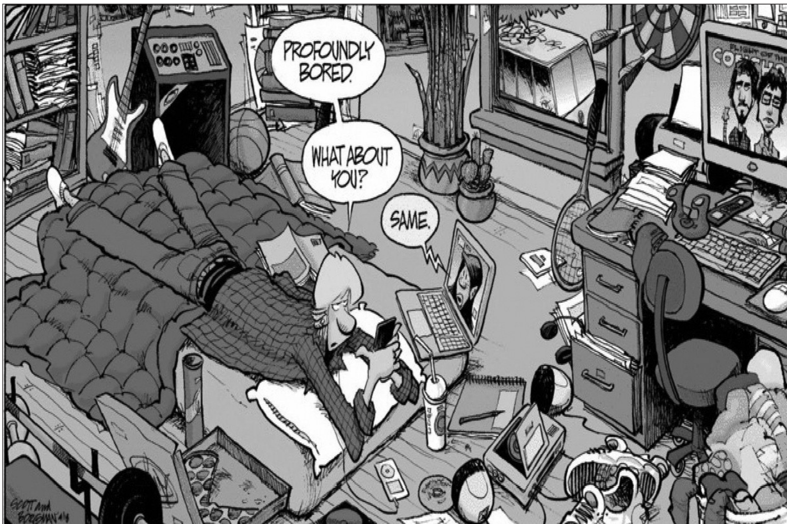

Figure 3. *Zits* by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman, April 18, 2010. Zits ©Zits Partnership. All rights reserved.

my YAL course. The first (see Fig. 3) depicts Jeremy in the middle of his bedroom surrounded by numerous technologies, games, and books, yet he claims he is bored. In the second (see Fig. 4), Twig Tree—yes, that is her name—talks to her friend on the phone about a bunch of activities she is trying to get done all at once, including doing a science project, reading English homework, and figuring out what to wear for the upcoming dance.

I asked my students to analyze each comic strip in terms of society's perceptions about adolescence and then to explore how this message is potentially inaccurate based on their reading and our previous class activities. For example, students in one group discussed the *Zits* comic strip, noting the irony in the fact that Jeremy has a lot of items surrounding him—iPod, basketball, guitar, computer, book, dartboard, weights, etc.—that could ease his boredom. Lisa, one of my preservice teachers, described this phenomenon through the hashtag #firstworldproblems. Other members of her group commented that the *Zits* comic "demonstrates the stereotype that teenagers easily lose interest, even though there is a plethora of stimuli around them." Students in this group also drew from the readings, arguing that this comic portrays "a huge generalization; M. T. Anderson mentions about the common mistake we make when we underestimate teens. . . . [H]e wrote 'how often we all underestimate them . . . they are incredibly eccentric, deeply impassioned about their interests.'"

Another group examined the *Family Tree* comic. Students noted that Twig's dialogue suggests she is more concerned with her clothing than her studies. However, when they thought about the panels more, they came to a more complex interpretation. Carrie described the images in this way:

> In the first panel, she appears to be looking at her picture frame and her book simultaneously. However, in the third panel we see that she is actually oriented more toward her book, and the picture frame is closer to the trash can. In the final panel, only the book is in the frame. This implies that while she is most concerned with her social image, most of her time is actually consumed with her studies (as represented by the book).

Figure 4. *Family Tree* by Signe Wilkinson, October 27, 2008. Family Tree ©Signe Wilkinson. All rights reserved.

Across the board, my preservice teachers were able to examine the stereotypical images found in the portrayal of adolescents in *Zits* and *Family Tree* and offer counter-narratives to those viewpoints. Their analysis of both magazines and comic strips supported other research about the construction of adolescence in popular culture. Moje and van Helden (2005) write, “Popular culture is all too often reduced to crazy stuff that kids listen to, watch, and wear”; they also state that young people are represented as “caring about nothing and nobody else and living their lives in a swirl of brands, logos, music, television, film, and Internet pages” (p. 214). By having my preservice teachers first read and analyze images of adolescents in popular culture texts, such as comic strips and teen magazines, I helped scaffold their abilities to engage critically with the YAL we read throughout the course.

Several students commented that they believed the authors who were the most successful at challenging the stereotypical portrayals of teens were those whose protagonists were not cast as victims or did not make readers feel sorry for them.

Connecting the Young Adult to Young Adult Literature

“The stories we like define us. They embody our experiences, hopes, fears, and dreams. Dismiss a person’s stories, and you dismiss that person. If we encourage kids to enter adult territories through the vehicle of literature, and to value what they find there, shouldn’t we repay the courtesy now and again with a visit back to the realms of childhood and adolescence? . . . What better way to convince a teenager of the importance of her views, the validity of her feelings and concerns, than to say to her: ‘I like your stories. They’re interesting. They’re good. And . . . can I borrow that book when you’re done?’”

—Jennifer Donnelly, 2004

As preservice teachers in my YAL course began to read young adult novels, many for the first time, they were better able to understand the value of the young adult perspective and the literature named after its readership. More important, they also learned that just because a book is categorized as “young adult,” not every student will connect with it. One student, Sarah, posited that “every young adult has experiences that make them unique. Not all students can relate to or identify with content the same way. It is important to keep an open mind when assuming how students will react to literary works and characters.” Furthermore, since we had already critically analyzed magazines and comic strips, my students were able to think about their selected young adult novels through an adolescent lens. Of course, many teachers already use literary lenses, such as feminism, Marxism, and reader response, as described in Deborah Appleman’s (2009) book, *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*. A Youth Lens (see Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2015) is just another tool that my students acquired and were able to tap into throughout the semester.

Students read a total of seven different YAL texts, although they were exposed to over 50 by the end of the course (see Appendix A for a list of texts/authors students chose from). During each of their book club meetings and throughout the subsequent book blogs they wrote, my preservice teachers used the activities around young adults as a springboard to analyze and critique the ways in which adolescents were portrayed in the novels. Several students commented that they believed the authors who were the most successful at challenging the stereotypical portrayals of teens were those whose protagonists were not cast as victims or did not make readers feel sorry for them. Instead, the characters were portrayed as agentive and empowered. For example, in response to the book *The Skin I’m In* (2007) by Sharon Flake, Elizabeth wrote that Maleeka, the main character, “became empowered through the voice of Akeelma,” a character Maleeka created in her writing. Elizabeth argued that Maleeka’s character helped to show “that young Black women are not one dimensional like the media wants them to be.” Similarly, Kara was able to critique the novel *Wintergirls* (2009) by Laurie Halse Anderson as another young adult literature text that showed the agentive and empowered teen, as opposed to the “typical story of ‘damsel in distress saved by xyz . . . .’” Kara noted that the main character’s recognition of “her own

inner strength" and "deciding to live . . . is important for any adolescent to gain."

Other preservice teachers talked about how YAL opened up their minds to "othered" stories and revealed their own biases toward certain groups of people. Lacey had an epiphany about the single story she had about Mexican Americans as she read Gary Soto's *Buried Onions* (2006):

> While reading the novel, I had to reframe my ignorant mindset more than once. Despite our lessons on the dangers of a single story, I found myself noticing the difference between my Mexican friends from Georgia and the Mexican Americans from California. Honestly, I found myself concluding that I must be wrong about the Mexican Americans I know on a more personal level. They must be more like the gang members in the novel than they let on. I am ashamed to say it took me so long in the novel to realize I had fallen prey to such an ignorant, lazy, and harmful mindset. After reframing my thinking, my views about my friends and Eddie [the main character] became more complex. This occurrence goes to show how important multicultural young adult literature is in the classroom among minorities and White students alike.

Both Bennett and Robert commented on how *Monster* (2008) by Walter Dean Meyers also challenged misconceptions about adolescents, in particular how society views African American adolescents. Robert wrote, "Similar to what we have been discussing in class, this book made me think of the role of prejudice. We have been talking about the many misconceptions about adolescents, and this book made me think of that in light of the many misconceptions about Black culture." During the book club discussions, students connected these ideas to current events surrounding Black teens. The discussion was difficult but timely, given the tragic incidents involving teens Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown and countless other recent news stories.

Furthermore, students found that successful YAL offered counter-narratives to those typically told about teenagers and/or specific groups of people. For example, Kara noted that Jacqueline Woodson's novel *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (1994) turns "stereotypical race roles . . . on [their] head and places White people of the community in a position of poverty." When considering *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012) by Stephen Chbosky, Lynn noted that "theoretically, [Charlie, the main character] is your average heterosexual, middle class White boy," but the beauty of the novel for her was that it "authentically portray[ed] an aspect of the human struggle that is rarely identified: the trauma of those who remain in the background." Similarly, Liv and other preservice teachers in her book club discussion group commented on how David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2013) "plays off the old adage 'boy meets girl,' a story trope that permeates our media and the stories the human race has been telling for centuries. . . . The only difference is, this time, it's a homosexual relationship." Students thought that the make-believe world that Levithan created offers a counter-narrative to the traditional love story—a story that often negates the stories of LGBTQ youth.

Overall, my students came to an appreciation of young adult literature that I don't think would have occurred had they not spent significant time thinking and reflecting on the societal and personal construction of adolescents. One student, Elizabeth, had an impassioned response quite similar to that of YA author Jennifer Donnelly. She argued:

> By using YA novels in English instruction, we can give adolescents the representation in literature that they crave. We can empower them to challenge the stereotypes of not only youth, but race, class, and gender. Young Adult Literature taught me, and still teaches me, that I can break the mold. I can make foolish, selfish decisions and yet still care about social justice. I can be strangely enthusiastic about explicating poetry and still get the guy. I can embody all the idiosyncrasies of personhood at age 12, 17, 21 and beyond because I am a whole person. One of my greatest victories as a teacher would be to make my students believe that they are whole people, too.

Another student, Lacey, argued that "ultimately, the perspective of teenagers as people, instead of tall children that are simply to be dealt with, must be the foundation of literary education. Treating adolescent literature with respect and attention is the first step." It was my sincere hope that in my YAL course, my students would make these connections between young adults and young adult literature, and by all accounts, they did.

Conclusion

"We need to quit whining about teenagers and begin to celebrate them instead."

—Laurie Halse Anderson, 2005

Overall, I feel that a young adult literature course that doesn't address the young adult in some meaningful way is a course that is not fulfilling its full responsibility. Some researchers have found that preservice teachers hold potentially negative dominant conceptions of adolescence (Lewis & Petrone, 2010; Petrone & Lewis, 2012) that include coming-of-age narratives around identity formation, deficit views, and discourse that sees adolescence as a dangerous and tumultuous time, thus serving to distance or other themselves from their future students. However, I found that when my students were given space to carefully examine their own beliefs, academic texts that offer alternative viewpoints, and examples of adolescence in popular culture—as well as to explore how these play out in young adult literature—they, for the most part, were able to move beyond negative conceptions of adolescence. Petrone et al. (2015) support these efforts, stating that when instructors "engage their students in analysis of a range of media texts and cultural artifacts," there is "the potential to help students develop their understandings of adolescence as a construct and how media texts and cultural artifacts participate in the process of naming and knowing adolescence/ts" (p. 528).

I feel that a young adult literature course that doesn't address the young adult in some meaningful way is a course that is not fulfilling its full responsibility.

Of course, not all students get there. For example, even after a semester of thinking about young adults and young adult literature, David still believed that "the adolescent experience *requires* a search for identity. It is a right-of-passage [sic] into the adult world, and adolescent students *struggle* to find their place amidst that transition" (italics added). However, the greater portion of my undergraduate students did have a change in opinion and addressed the assumptions about adolescence they previously held. Andrea summed this up well when she stated, "Adolescence, after all, does not have to be a period of darkness, and while it may contain an immeasurable amount of growth, this growth can take so many positive forms rather than the presumed dangerous, raging-hormone period of life that is simply inevitable and something that one must survive in order to achieve." Just as Lesko (2001) concluded when she delved into the confident characteristics of adolescents, I agree that "we must seek to advocate for young adults and children in new ways" (p. 194), and I believe the Young Adult Literature course provided an effective place to do it.

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Appendix A:

YAL Book/Author Choices

Topic 1: Body and Self-Image

- *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio
- *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* by Chris Crutcher
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie
- *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* by Carolyn Mackler
- *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson
- *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake

Topic 2: Overcoming Obstacles

- *Buried Onions* by Gary Soto
- *Monster* by Walter Dean Meyers
- *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson
- *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *Push* by Sapphire
- *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins

Topic 3: Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

- *Winger* by Andrew Smith
- *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan
- *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters
- *Openly Straight* by Bill Konigsberg
- *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky
- *If You Could Be Mine* by Sarah Farizan

Topic 4: Dystopian Worlds

- *Unwind* by Neal Schusterman
- *Legend* by Marie Lu
- *The Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld
- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry
- *Feed* by M. T. Anderson
- *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer

Topic 5: Graphic Novels

- *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi
- *The Complete Maus* by Art Spiegelman
- *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang
- *Anya's Ghost* by Vera Brosgol
- *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf
- *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier

Topic 6: Author Selection

- Laurie Halse Anderson
- John Green
- Sarah Dessen
- Jacqueline Woodson
- Chris Crutcher
- Walter Dean Meyers
- Rainbow Rowell