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What Matters for Eighth-Grade Female Readers:

Experiences and Consequences of Sustained Reading Engagement

Reading engagement is a necessary component of education if teachers expect adolescents to read widely, deeply, and critically among a range of high-quality and increasingly challenging texts (Alvermann, 2002; Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Baumann & Duffy, 1997). When adolescents are engaged, they are fully invested, take responsibility for their learning, persevere when confronted with difficulties, and become aware of measurable skills and strategies they use in reading (Johnston, 2004). English classrooms have traditionally been spaces in which adolescents can "develop habits of mind that promote sustained and enthusiastic reading, which in turn, would provide the natural foundation for the development of skills such as interpretation, prediction, analysis, and comprehension of literary texts through constant negotiation of meaning with others" (Soter et al., 2008).

Rosenblatt's transactional reading theory (1987) explains how engaged reading of young adult literature can have a significant impact on the adolescent reader: "The aesthetic reader experiences and savors the qualities of the structured ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, emotions, called forth, participating in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions as they unfold" (p. 7). These transactions with text become objects of thought, just like other real-life experiences that readers encounter: "A poem, novel, a play . . . is an event in the life of a reader. It is an experience she or he lives through, part of the ongoing stream of life" (Donelson, 1990, p. 19). These engagement experiences become the foundation for increasingly sophisticated understandings of the human condition. This may happen when adolescents feel approval or disapproval of the characters' actions and behaviors and become aware of the tensions between their expectations about real life and the story world (Rosenblatt, 1982).

Young adult literature can give adolescents a different viewpoint that may encourage them to reconsider and update their own understandings about themselves, others, and their social worlds (Almasi & Gambrell, 1994). When adolescents have the opportunity to share these experiences with others, they can work out their tensions by sharing personal reactions, extend one another's ideas, clarify uncertainties, and verify or reject interpretive hypotheses of the text. These collective problem-solving processes can further encourage complex critical-analytical and socio-emotional thinking. Rosenblatt's transactional reading theory has been supported by exploratory case studies about adolescent literature circles that demonstrate growth in complex thinking (Park, 2012; Polleck, 2010; Smit, 2015, 2016; Smith, 2000).

Ivey and Johnston (2013, 2017) described what engaged reading looks like in a classroom of eighth-grade students as they had the opportunity to read and talk about multiple, high-interest, edgy, contemporary young adult fiction. Students reported how they related to characters, imagined what was going on in characters' minds, and struggled with emotional states of characters. Such connections led them to think about morally significant decisions in their own

lives. For example, one student reported that she learned about handling personal situations, such as how to stop bullying or how to engage with someone who is grieving. Ivey and Johnston also reported changes in students' self-perceptions as readers and an increased sense of agency.

This study extends Ivey and Johnston's (2013, 2017) conceptualization of adolescent reading engagement by describing what engagement looks like to eight eighth-grade female readers who have experienced extensive reading of multiple genres of young adult literature. Through interviews and group discussions about their reading experiences, I intend to answer the following questions:

1. What matters to eighth-grade female readers as they engage with young adult literature?
2. What are the consequences of sustained reading engagement with young adult literature on adolescents' understandings of the self, others, and the social world?

Finding out what matters to adolescents as they read has implications for teachers in selecting texts and promoting engaged learning communities for adolescents.

The Study

These readers were eighth-grade girls, ages 13–14, from a middle school in the Northeastern United States. I chose to focus on girls because I thought they would feel more comfortable talking to me (also a female) and each other about their experiences with young adult literature. Research on adolescent talk about literature has noted possible power dynamics involved in mixed-gender groups that has led to a silencing of voice (Evans, 2002; Evans, Anders & Alvermann, 1998). I thought that creating a same-gender discussion group would create an environment in which all students felt comfortable expressing their thinking.

With the help of the reading intervention coordinator, I approached two eighth-grade English teachers and asked them to select 10 girls who they believed to be readers—that is, girls who have expressed an interest in reading beyond the assigned classroom texts and who the teachers thought would enjoy additional opportunities to talk about books they love to read. I invited these girls to a recruitment session in which I explained my intentions for knowing more about how they engage with books. I asked them to join a discussion group that would be held during their lunch hour. As an added incentive, the intervention coordinator allowed the girls access to her extensive collection of the latest young adult fiction for them to take home, enjoy, and return. From this recruitment session, eight girls volunteered to join: Athena, Aviaei, Cassidy, Cookie, Jess, Katie, Liz, and Veronica (all self-chosen pseudonyms). Jess and Katie were from Asian heritage backgrounds, and the others were from Caucasian backgrounds.

Discussions involved their personal histories with reading, their favorite genres, components of young adult literature that mattered to them, and experiences talking to others about the books they read or were currently reading. I was interested in hearing about memorable experiences reading young adult literature that led the girls to think about themselves, others, and the world in new and different ways. (See Figure 1 for a semi-structured discussion protocol.) The girls discussed their favorite books from the public library, assigned classroom novels, and their own personal libraries. While these girls mentioned that they would recommend books to each other, they claimed that this was their first experience in engaging in extended talk about the books they love to read.

From the interviews and conversation transcripts, I used inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) to generate categories from the raw data. Table 1 and Table 2 display a sample of codes and their descriptions. These codes evolved to two primary themes: components of young adult literature and consequences of reading young adult literature.

- Have you read something recently that was so memorable, you kept thinking about it or you had to tell someone else about it?
- What about the experience of reading it made it special?
- Have any of the books you have been reading made you think differently about yourself? About others? About the world?
- How do you choose the books you read?
- When you are reading a book, what makes you keep reading?
- Do you normally talk with others about the books you read? Tell me about it.

Figure 1. Initial interview questions

Table 1. Codes that generated the theme "Components of young adult literature"

Codes	Description of code (examples from transcript)
Unexpected moments	Unexpected plot twists that surprised the girls Storylines that kept the girls in their seats: "I can't believe they did that" moments; "Why did that happen?" "WHAT IS GOING ON?" Putting the book down or throwing it on the floor but picking it right back up because they could not wait to find out what happened next "Reading it over and over, finally getting it in my head"
Book endings	Book endings that involve love or death (most likely where a character dies in the end) Book endings that are "bittersweet" "It can't be a fairy tale ending, there has to be some kind of twist." "A book has a good ending when it stands on its own." If girls find it lacking, then they alter it to suit their own storybook needs.
Choosing books to read	Looking at the front cover Reading the front inside cover and the back (synopsis) Wandering the young adult section and looking at titles that seem to be appealing Reading the first page and if it sounds really good, then reading the rest
Preferences and favorite genres	Drama and romance "A little romance but not overdoing it" Action (violence in books—wars—this is what fantasy provides) Twists on the stories we all know and love Details (sensory imagery) "Books that are like a movie in your head" "Cliffhangers that make you want to jump off of a cliff" The girls get angry when important book details in movies are overlooked. Ex.: In Percy Jackson movies and *Eragon*, they got the age and the appearance of the characters wrong. Love for strong female characters

Table 2. Codes that generated the theme "Consequences of reading young adult literature"

Codes	Description of code (examples from transcript)
Emotions elicited from books	Excitement, anticipation: "I need to find out what happened!" Sadness: "Not all stories have happy endings." Disappointment at unexpected moments/endings Anger and frustration that something happened that should not have happened Disappointment at how other characters treated others Endings cannot end in a happily ever after; it has to follow the reality of the context. Disappointment that the book ended: "Book Hangover" because there is nothing left to read.
Relating books to real life and connections to characters	"The main character wasn't confident, so she did bad things; it taught me to learn how to be comfortable with myself." Relating to the characters themselves Seeing yourself as the character: "You feel everything they are feeling." "By using sensory imagery, it makes you feel like you're there in the book." "Pretending I am a character in my mind—then I will get upset if something happens to them." The girls added themselves into the story world: "I had a date in my mind with a character from a book." The girls connected to the character's quality traits (for example, *The Outsiders*: "We have a lot in common and so it was easy to figure out their personality and why they did what they did in their situation. I'm totally like Cherry, a soc but a greaser at heart.")
Multiple perspectives	"Books can put you into other people's perspectives. They can open up your heart." Connection to characters: "Sometimes when there are characters in a book that remind you of somebody else that you know in your life, then it shows you that there is a perspective; what might be happening in their life may make you think differently about other people that you know." Delving into worlds unfamiliar with their own: "You see the differences in how poor people deal with things and it makes you realize how lucky you are from seeing things in different perspectives." Multiple perspectives in books: "When one chapter is in one person's perspective and the other is in another person's perspective, you can see both sides of an argument."

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Table 2. Continued

Talking to others about books	"If it's weird or exciting or unexpected, I have to tell someone. You don't want to keep it to yourself. It's in the pit of my stomach and I have to get it out!" Other people do not have to read the book for talk to occur. Recommended series to brother, who was not as enthusiastic about reading, but now trusts her judgment in choosing books. The girls needed to talk to others for clarification ("Why did this couple break up? What were the problems in the relationship?").

The Readers

The girls came from middle-class families in which their parents had professional occupations. Most of the girls recalled fond experiences of family members reading to them when they were younger. When I asked them at what age their parents stopped reading to them, there were a variety of answers. Athena claimed, "Last year!" which resulted in a chorus of "aaws" from the other girls. Liz stated fourth grade was when she became proficient enough in reading; "I was able to comprehend most things, so [mom] made me read it to her instead of her reading it to me." Veronica did not recall experiences reading at home with her parents, but considered herself a strong reader:

> When I was in preschool, I was one of the only people in my class who could read, so I felt special. In kindergarten, I was ahead of everyone because I knew a bunch of words that other people didn't know, and it made me feel special to be reading a chapter book.

The girls considered themselves different from other students by recalling these kinds of literacy achievements. Yet, such examples demonstrate the perceptions they hold of themselves as competent readers.

Table 3 displays favorite genres, favorite young adult novels, and a brief description of each participant. During our discussion sessions, the girls mentioned a variety of genres they loved to read: realistic fiction, historical fiction, science fiction, dystopian novels, mystery, horror, and psychological thrillers. Interestingly, this included memorable literature they read when they were younger, such as *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* (Levine, 2001); assigned classroom texts, such as *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967); as well as current self-selected genre fiction, such as their obsession with Rick Riordan's Heroes of Olympus series. Yet, the books they mentioned were not necessarily edgy or disturbing books that grabbed their attention, as highlighted in Ivey and Johnston (2013), but literature that helped the girls understand possible human interactions and their problems.

The girls' unique personalities created vibrant and fascinating conversations about their favorite books. Athena, the youngest of eight cousins and the only girl, was an advocate for strong female characters and empowering women. Avaiei drew on her experiences as an aspiring author who was working on publishing her first fantasy novel. The group frequently pulled from Aviaei's writing as a reference within our conversations. Cassidy was interested in encouraging the group to think through relational situations and would frequently mention the relationships between their favorite characters. Liz, an active member of a Christian community, shared her church experiences and teachings with the group. She frequently brought moral problems she faced while reading to the group to help her solve them. Liz noted:

> When you read a book and get to know the character, you find out they are a lot like you . . . and you see how other people figure things out, and you use it in your own life to figure your own problems out.

Jess, known to the other girls as being soft spoken and quiet, contributed ideas that the other girls thought were revolutionary. For example, she advocated that all people have "goodness inside of them." This was an understanding that none of the other group members considered before. Cookie, identified by her friends as the "lawyer," asked important explanation-seeking questions that drove our discussions forward, especially in our conversations about gender inequality. Katie encouraged us to look at our language carefully in terms of developing our ideas. Veronica left the project early because she had other commitments vying for her time.

Table 3. Student participant profiles

Name (age, heritage)	Favorite Genre	Favorite Book	Additional Description
Athena (13, Caucasian)	Fantasy	*Mark of Athena: Heroes of Olympus* (Book 3) by Rick Riordan	Athena has expressed an interest in reading books she read when she was younger because now she believes that she can understand them better. Athena believes that "books should have strong female characters."
Aviaei (13, Caucasian)	Fantasy	*Divergent* by Veronica Roth (2011); *Wolf Brother: The Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* by Michelle Paver (2006)	Aviaei is an avid fantasy reader and is currently in the process of publishing her trilogy of fantasy fiction. She was writing a fourth in the series. Aviaei believes that "books should have lots of action and less romance."
Cassidy (14, Caucasian)	Fantasy and Realistic Fiction	*Mark of Athena; Heroes of Olympus* (Book 3) by Rick Riordan; *Story of a Girl* by Sara Zarr	Cassidy is interested in classical music and plays the violin. She loves to read the Percy Jackson series as well as realistic fiction, especially books that involve music. Cassidy believes that "books should have a touch of romance."
Cookie (13, Caucasian)	Fantasy and Dystopian Fiction	*Blood Red Road: Dustland Series* by Moira Young *Divergent* by Veronica Roth*; Matched* by Ally Condie	Cookie loves to read books about "messed up societies." Cookie claims to throw the book across the room when she reacts to disappointing, unexpected, or surprising endings in books. Cookie believes that "books should have logical endings."
Jess (13, Asian)	Fantasy (Vampire Fiction)	*The Legacy of Trill: Soulbound* by Heather Brewer; *First Kill: The Slayer Chronicles* by Heather Brewer	Jess is interested in books that have vampires as the main character. Jess states that books should not be discarded but treasured. Jess believes that "books should have characters with different perspectives."
Katie (13, Asian)	Realistic Fiction	*The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton	Katie loves stories that keep her at the edge of her seat. She especially loves to read Aviaei's fantasy stories. Katie believes that "books should contain different worldviews and sensory imagery."
Liz (13, Caucasian)	Realistic Fiction and Romance	*Ingenue* by Jillian Larkin; *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell	Liz loves historical fiction. Liz has been designated by the rest of the group as reading the most books of anyone. Liz feels she has to talk out the problems she encounters in books with others. Liz believes that "books should have a lot of drama and details."
Veronica (14, Caucasian)	Fantasy Twist on Fairy Tales	*Snow Child* by Ivey Eowyn	Veronica loves to read and tries to encourage her brother and mother to read as well. Veronica is new to the school. She left our group halfway because she had other commitments on her time. Veronica believes that "books should be psychologically thrilling."

Results

Components of Young Adult Literature

The girls described the storyline as a component of young adult literature that was key to their engagement: "If it [the storyline] was like really, really good and it kept you on your seat, then I guess that would keep making me read" (Katie). Veronica mentioned how the tempo of the plot was a factor in her engagement:

> Usually, there is a book that is exciting in the beginning, then in the middle, it gets sooo slow and boring, and then in the end it's like, OK. I absolutely hate that. Usually if it gets boring in the middle, I usually give up on the book.

For these readers, the storyline should contain unexpected moments: "Those exciting moments where you don't think something is going to happen and it does . . . . Cliffhangers that make you want to jump off a cliff!" (Cassidy). Veronica described them as "plot twists. I like books that make me go 'WHAT?'" The girls described their feelings about these unexpected moments: "I throw the book across the room and then two minutes later it's like, 'Oh, I've got to read the rest,' so I go get it. Oh! I'm so sorry, book!'" (Cookie).

Endings

These readers were specific about endings in their favorite young adult literature. Endings "have to have something wrong with it, it can't be perfect. It can't be some happy-ever-after ending" (Cookie). For example, they discussed their frustrations with the ending in *The Sacrifice* (Duble, 2008), a novel they read in English class:

Athena: It was about the Salem witch hunt . . .

Veronica: Witch trial. She [main character] was sent to jail, but the judge in the story was saying how he was going to evict the Salem witch trials. So, it's like the story inferred that she [main character] got out.

Athena: The author could have made it a really good book but they . . .

Katie: they wasted it.

Cookie: You call this an ending? For shame! "You've been shunned! Now get out of my face!" [mocking the trial in the story] . . . It could have had a crazy ending but they [the author] were just like, "Yeah, whatever, let's just get this over with." Like what the heck!

The girls were insulted that the author would write an unbelievable and historically inaccurate ending that allowed the main characters to come out of the Salem witch trials unscathed. These findings were similar to Ivey and Johnston's (2017), who found that students routinely reject books with "*happily ever after* endings because they were left with little to ponder" (p. 160; italics in original).

However, a great ending is one that is also an unexpected moment. For example, the girls mentioned bittersweet endings in which "a main character or a semi-main character is in love and dies—like Romeo and Juliet" (Aviaei). Cliffhanger endings or endings that leave the reader wanting to know more are joyfully frustrating for these girls. For example, Athena described her hesitation and anticipation in finishing the *Mark of Athena* (Riordan, 2012):

Athena: I am so excited about reading *Mark of Athena,* but everyone is telling me that the bad parts are coming!

Cassidy: You have to keep reading, you have to!

Athena: I'm scared because Cookie said that when she read the ending, she threw the book across the room and then picked it up one more time to just read it again.

Cassidy: It's horrible, but if you read it slowly, it makes it even worse.

Liz: Just tear the Band-Aid off!

Jess: That's a good metaphor!

Liz: Instead of just going really, really, really slow.

Athena: I don't want a scab!

Athena followed the advice of her friends and soon after shared how she screamed and threw the book across the room because the ending "stabbed her in the heart." The book ended with the main characters of Percy and Annabeth jumping into the pit of Tartarus and not knowing whether they were going to survive. She mentioned how her father had to come in to see if she was all right. She continued to share with us about how she could not wait for the next installment of the series and would go on YouTube to satisfy her cravings for the "Percy Jackson experience."

Yet, endings also must provide a resolution or sufficient details to wrap up a story or lead to the next book in the series. Aviaei shared, "I will know if a book has a good ending if I stop imagining the ending in a different way. If I keep imagining something different happening in the ending to condolence myself, then the book has a bad ending." Cassidy had a different approach:

> If I don't like an ending, I will just change it. I will change everything in the book to make it how I want it, and I would literally start believing that that happened. People would be like, "No, it didn't happen that way," and I would be like "Yes, it did."

These readers were able to imagine additional details about the plot or the characters if the ending did not provide this for them.

Connections with Characters

According to these readers, the number and development of characters in young adult literature were important considerations for engagement. According to Katie, "A good book would have a limited amount of characters, especially if it's not really big." Veronica suggested, "A book shouldn't have seven characters, but maybe two or three. These readers described qualities or traits of characters that would allow them to make an emotional connection. Athena had a preference for strong female characters: "They are just inspirational; they make you want to be role models where you want to be more strong because of the female versus the male thing." Liz liked characters who shared some of her own personality traits and experiences. She described her connection to the main character in *There You'll Find Me* (Jones, 2011): "I related to her a lot because of everything she had been through and how she's just trying to find herself through the midst of tragedy [the death of her brother] and she was Irish." Liz also talked about her connections to *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967): "Ponyboy and Johnny—we have a lot in common, and so it was easy to figure out their personality and why they did what they did in their situation. I'm totally like Cherry, a Soc but a Greaser at heart."

These readers loved young adult literature in which they could immerse themselves within the story world, becoming a character and interacting with other characters. They admitted, "We're the only group that can say that we had a crush on someone from a book" (Liz). Aviaei added, "I put myself in the character's position a lot of times, pretending that I am the character in my mind, and then if something happens, I'll get upset." Katie attributed her engagement to sensory imagery: "By using sensory imagery, it makes you feel like you're there in the book. It makes you feel everything the character feels."

Consequences of Sustained Engagement in Reading Young Adult Literature

One major consequence for these readers was their compulsive need to keep reading, once they were hooked on a book. Cookie told us:

> I will read until the very end and you can't even stop me. My mom will call me down for dinner and I'm like, "Hold on!" Thirty minutes later, she's like: "Get your butt down here!" She rips the book out of my hands and it's like, "Fine!" So I shove my food in my mouth really quickly, and I go back to reading until I'm done, and then I'm like, "I have nothing to do!"

For these readers, their compulsions are born out of discovering unexpected moments and wondering about what is to come. Cookie explained, "You don't really know what's going to happen next. It's the curiosity that gets you. You have no idea what could happen." Athena agrees, saying, "You have to find out what's next! I need to know what the heck happened to this person!"

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For these readers, a great young adult novel will leave them with a sense of emptiness. Veronica stated, "After I finish a book that I have been reading a long time, after I finish it in one day, I'm disappointed because there is nothing left to read." Liz labeled this feeling as "book hangover": "It's like when you have a book hangover, you are reading a new book but you are still talking about the old one." A great book will leave the reader craving for more immersion in the author's story world. The girls mentioned some of the ways they re-engaged in the world after they finished a novel. Cookie mentioned how she would "search the Internet for the next book coming out because I'm like, 'I've got to read this! I've got to read this!' And then, I figure out that the series ended and I'm like, 'WHY! That was like Wow!'" In particular, Athena mentioned how she watched Percy Jackson fan videos on YouTube, visited fan blogs, and read fan fiction by others who also "crave the Percy Jackson experience."

A great young adult novel also encourages readers to share their experience with others. In the following conversation, the girls noted some of the reasons they wanted to talk to others about the novels they read:

Liz: Because they are just so damn good!

Katie: You don't want to keep it to yourself.

Athena: You feel like you have this pit in your stomach; you feel like you are going to explode if you don't get it out.

Liz: When I'm reading a really good book, I want to tell somebody—not because it's so good, but to figure things out sometimes, because I'm like "Why did you do that?"

Athena: You want people to help you out with it.

These girls recognized the need to talk to others about their experiences to help them solve the tensions or problems they faced as they read. These readers mentioned turning to friends and family: "We like sharing books a lot and we are like, 'This is really good. You have to read this!'" (Cassidy). Liz talked often about a male best friend with whom she would discuss themes from books they would read. Oftentimes, they talked to their parents about books: "I talk to my parents about it because sometimes I get really frustrated with characters, and I'm like, 'Mom, this person is being really stupid!'" (Liz). Veronica's friends and family did not share her experiences with young adult literature, but she would share them anyway, because "If it's so weird and exciting, then I have to tell someone; I can't just hold that story in." These adolescents appreciated when teachers engaged them in conversations about books. Athena remembers:

These readers attributed their transactions with young adult literature to new understandings about themselves and their larger social worlds.

> Mr. R, the seventh-grade teacher, he would talk to us about stuff that normally no other teacher would talk about, and he would help us relate it to real life. That helped me enjoy reading better. I loved reading before, but then I actually saw it in a different way.

Conceptual Understandings of the Self, Others, and the Larger Social World from Reading Young Adult Literature

These readers attributed their transactions with young adult literature to new understandings about themselves and their larger social worlds. Liz talked about how young adult literature had opened her mind to "the way the characters look at themselves; it influences the way that I look at myself." Jess said, "There are a lot of books where you learn how people act toward each other and you are like, 'Hey, that's exactly like sometimes how your life is.' Maybe learning from that you can apply it to real life."

When I asked the girls to give examples of their thinking, they had a variety of responses. They mentioned self-discovery or identifying lessons or guidelines to live their lives by. For example, Cassidy discussed the unusual friendship between the main character and her horse in *Chancey of the Maury River* (Amateau, 2011):

> He [the horse] was blind, and he was trying to live his life and learn how to be blind, and he meets this girl and she takes special care of him because he was abused before. That was really good because they learned to live together and became each other's best friend.

From this novel, Cassidy learned the importance of friendship and adapting to life-altering events: "Everything can change for you even though you don't expect it to."

Transacting with characters in their favorite stories also helped them to imagine possible selves. Athena often talked about how she loved strong female characters in stories such as *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* (Levine, 2001) because it allowed her to imagine herself as a strong female. Oftentimes, she discussed the main character of Annabeth from Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series because Annabeth "was a tough and smart blonde." Athena (a blonde herself) recounted that she was the only girl in a family of seven boy cousins and would get picked on. She could relate to Annabeth and was inspired with how she reset the "dumb blonde" stereotype. In their conversations about Rick Riordan's Heroes of Olympus series, the girls talked about how the female characters saved the lives of the male characters, both physically and emotionally. According to Athena, "Percy had moments all the time. When Percy was having those weak moments, she pulled him up, and then when Annabeth was having those weak moments, Percy pulled her up." This led them to envisioning themselves as strong females who could stand up for "weaker" people. According to Liz, "All girls look for that. We look for someone strong to have

when we are going through weak moments, but when we are having a strong moment, we don't mind saving someone." Cassidy mentioned how she wanted to be a person that:

> Doesn't torment them [victims] and who will stick up for them, even though you aren't friends with them. They can see that maybe's there's hope and that I'm not going to be that kid that everyone picks on for the rest of my life.

Self-discoveries often included guidelines for how to think about, interact with, and treat others. Oftentimes, the girls would wrestle with this information by bringing relational problems to the discussion group. For example, Liz discussed the novel *Eleanor & Park* (Rowell, 2013), a story about two misfit teens who found each other and formed an intimate relationship:

> Park's mom absolutely hates Eleanor, and Eleanor is not your usual type of person; she is extremely funky, and I love her for that. She is very unique and dresses amazingly. I really don't get why she hates her so much.

In discussing this situation from the book, the other girls offered her a possible perspective from the mother's point of view. They imagined how the mother might not want her son to grow up and have a girlfriend, or how the mother could possibly see Eleanor as being a bad influence for her son.

Through literature, the girls experienced life situations and worldviews that they would not normally encounter. These experiences helped them to wrestle with concepts such as tolerance and difference. In another example, Katie was discussing the classroom text *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967):

> They show that there is separation between classes because of money. The Greasers or the poor and the Socs or the rich. The book shows how the Greasers have to face so many problems. But, the Socs have to face problems, too, and they unleash all their anger on the Greasers by jumping them. . . . it helped me to see that there are so many people who are less fortunate than me, and they face lots of problems.

Katie expanded this thinking by claiming, "You shouldn't judge a person by how rich they are, what they do, what race they are, how tall they are, what gender they are, and their age."

By extension, the girls also considered other social issues they never thought about previously. Athena explained her discovery about child poverty through her transactions with *Iqbal* (D'Adamo, 2003):

> Yeah, they are desperate, but there is this guy who is holding them captive, and it's like entire perspectives. There is one person that just needs to make more money, but there are some people who are working all day for three cents a day and not getting any of it at all, just giving it right to their families. I never realized how difficult it was.

Additionally, the girls claimed that they had an increased interest in nonfiction through reading their favorite series—Heroes of Olympus by Rick Riordan. Athena discussed how she enthusiastically absorbed facts about Greek, Roman, and Egyptian mythology:

> With the Percy Jackson books, I absorbed a bunch of the stuff. I can remember the names of the gods and the stories. That never happened to me before; I usually have a bad memory for that kind of thing, but when I was reading it, I could remember stuff like that because you needed to know that stuff for the books.

Self-discoveries often included guidelines for how to think about, interact with, and treat others. Oftentimes, the girls would wrestle with this information by bringing relational problems to the discussion group.

Discussion/Implications

Guthrie et al. (1996) described intrinsic motivation as internalized goals, values, and beliefs regarding reading: "Students that are intrinsically motivated have an inherent interest in what they are reading and enjoy figuring out meanings for themselves" (p. 309). Motivation is important for the maintenance of behavior in reading, particularly when the task can be cognitively demanding (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012). Literature has provided support for the idea that intrinsic motivation can lead to sustained engagement in reading, resulting in overall increases in cognitive proficiency and academic achievement (Guthrie et al., 1996; Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012), as well as gains in socio-emotional learning (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Smit, 2016). This study continues to illuminate what intrinsic motivation looks like by providing perceptions from eighth-grade female readers as to what matters for their sustained engagement in reading, and

what they perceive are the benefits from their engagement with their favorite books, especially their new understandings about themselves, others, and their social worlds.

Adolescents read young adult literature because they want to be intellectually thrilled. These girls loved experiencing what Almasi and Gambrell (1994) labeled as socio-cognitive conflict (i.e., encountering characters and worldviews different from their own that made them reconsider, restructure, or update their current understanding of themselves, others, and their social worlds). While "emotionally disturbing books" (Ivey & Johnston, 2017), which tackle commonly taboo subjects, can promote this type of thinking, less disturbing books, such as Rick Riordan's series Heroes of Olympus, or *Ingenue* (Larkin, 2011) can also be significantly thought provoking because they provide complex situations and relationships that adolescents can wrestle with.

Ultimately, the most significant consequence arising from their engagements with young adult literature was their compulsive need to keep reading once they were hooked on a particular story.

In selecting young adult literature for adolescents, these girls suggested books with descriptive details, relatable characters that allow for close personal interactions (Parsons, 2013), unexpected and bittersweet moments that are frustrating yet enjoyable, and endings that make readers want to throw a book across the room, but then pick it back up because they had to know what happened next. Similar to Ivey and Johnston's (2013, 2017) study, these readers also hated the happily ever after endings. They insisted on plausible or realistic endings.

When asked what they have learned from reading young adult fiction, the girls talked about a variety of new understandings about themselves and their larger social worlds. Table 4 is a collection of their responses. Some of these examples were taken from a previous investigation (Smit, 2016) as foundational understandings these girls have gained from reading their favorite novels. From there, I continued to explore how these understandings evolved to more sophisticated understandings, as the girls continued to connect to their favorite characters and to each other in subsequent discussions. Table 4 highlights moral discoveries or guiding lessons, visions of possible selves, discoveries involving interactions with others, discoveries about social concerns, and their developing appreciation for nonfiction texts. The girls imagined themselves as being certain kinds of people, those who are strong women or those who do not bully others. Like the eighth graders studied by Ivey and Johnston (2017), they too became more sensitive to what others endure, and, in turn, learned about important social issues, like child labor. Teachers can take advantage of the kinds of understandings adolescents gain from young adult literature by supporting their interests in certain topics, such as pairing a discussion on *Iqbal* (D'Adamo, 2003) with an article on current-day child labor.

Ultimately, the most significant consequence arising from their engagements with young adult literature was their compulsive need to keep reading once they were hooked on a particular story. These girls complained of feeling empty or having a "book hangover," during which they would think about the book well after they finished it. Similar results have been documented in personal recollections and student self-reports (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, 2017; Reed-Schuster, 1999; Tracey, 1999). Results of this study also confirm previous findings that students also have a powerful need to talk to others about what they read (Ivey & Johsnton, 2013; 2017; Nichols, 2006). These girls needed to talk because they "have to get it out." It did not matter whether it was friends, family, or teachers, as long as someone was willing to share in the reading experience with them.

These findings are not entirely surprising because research has long investigated discussions, literature circles, and book clubs as beneficial classroom practices (Broughton, 2002; Encisco, 1996; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; Parsons, 2009; Reninger & Rehark, 2009; Soter et al., 2008). What is noteworthy is that adolescents can engage in sophisticated conversations about young adult literature without having all discussants necessarily read the text beforehand. Adolescents can pull from their own personal life experiences, experiences encountered from reading books in the same genre, or experiences from other media forms or

Table 4. Knowledge gained from experiences with young adult literature

Categories	Evidence from individual interviews and initial group sessions
Self-Discoveries: General	That everything is not always going to go in your favor but it will work out eventually in the end. Just in some way. It might not be perfect, but it will all work if you have someone standing beside you. (Cassidy) [Describing the book *Chancey of the Maury River*, Amateau, 2011] It was about horses—he [the horse] was blind, and he was trying to live his life and learn how to be blind, and he meets this girl and she takes care of him because he was sort of abused before. That was really good because they learned to live together and became each other's best friends. . . . How I'm lucky to not have any problems or disabilities and how important friendship is and how everything can change for you even though you don't expect it to. (Cassidy) Maybe you're not as special as you think. Like don't make a big deal out of nothing. . . . Don't brag. (Veronica)
Self-Discoveries: Possible Selves	The author of *Ella Enchanted* wrote a book called *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* (Levine, 2001). . . . I would read it a lot because it was about these two girls who were strong. I like strong female characters . . . they are just inspirational; they make you role models where you want to be more strong because the female versus the male thing. . . . Sometimes it would switch where the woman had to rescue the man, instead of the damsel in distress thing. (Athena) [Discussing the series Heroes of Olympus (Riordan)] I want to be someone who doesn't torment them [victims] and who will stick up for them, even though you aren't friends with them; they can see that maybe's there's hope and that I'm not going to be that kid that everyone picks on for the rest of my life. (Cassidy) I read a book, I think it was last year or before, elsewhere; it made me really question what happens when you actually die. It just opened up a whole new scenario. A whole new way to imagine what it would be like after you died. (Veronica)
Self-Discoveries: Interactions with Others	People have different motives for why they do things. . . . all people have different views and relationships and people are never perfect. (Aviaei) I think the way that I treat other people, because if you lie to them continuously, then your relationship will be like nothing at all; it will be a lie. (Liz) [Describing the book *Blood Red Road* (Dustlands trilogy, Young, 2011)] I don't understand, if they are trying to help her, why is she pushing them away? There are some things you just can't do by yourself. She should be grateful, they helped her get out of that cage-fighting place, and she's pushing them away. . . . Don't push people away. (Cookie) [Describing the book *Eleanor & Park* Rowell, 2013)] Park's mom absolutely hates Eleanor, and Eleanor is not your usual type of person. She is extremely funky, and I love her for that. She is very unique and dresses amazingly. I really don't get why she hates her so much. (Liz) I realized that everyone has a story and you can't just judge a book by its cover. Literally and figuratively. (Athena) [Discussing the book *The Outsiders* (Hinton 1967)] You shouldn't judge a person by how rich they are, what they do, what race they are, how tall they are, what gender they are, and their age. (Katie)
World Discoveries: Social Concerns	One of the books that I read this summer that gave me a different aspect on third-world countries and like how they live, and I literally almost cried when I read that because I was so awestruck about just how bad it was. (Liz) [Talking about *Iqbal*, D'Adamo, 2003] Yeah, they [the characters] are desperate, but there is this guy who is holding them captive and it's like different perspectives. There is one person that just needs to make more money, but there are some people who are working all day for three cents a day and not getting any of it at all, just giving it right to their families. I didn't realize how bad it was. (Athena) I once read this series Companions Quartet [Golding, 2006–2007] and it was all these Greek and Mythological creatures and stuff. The creatures got mad because everyone was polluting the sea and they almost destroyed the world because of it, and they didn't want humans around so they just tried killing all the humans. So yah, just the cause of pollution. I didn't really know how bad it was until I read that. Maybe this is worse than we think it is. (Cookie)
World Discoveries: Nonfiction	With the Percy Jackson books, I absorbed a bunch of the stuff. I can remember the names of the gods and the stories. That never happened to me before; I usually have a bad memory for that kind of thing, but when I was reading it, I could remember stuff like that because you needed to know that stuff for the books. (Athena) Even some fiction, like fantasy, even in the Percy Jackson books, it's fantasy but you learn Greek Mythology, and even in his other series you learn Egyptian mythology and stuff, so you get something out of it. (Aviaei)

expository sources to help solve problems and generate new understandings. When adolescents are invited to pull from multiple sources, rather than a singular text, conversations naturally grow to sophisticated understandings about themselves, others, and the social worlds they live in.

The girls discussed how it is acceptable for characters and, in turn, people in real life to have different perspectives on issues from their own.

In my recent study (Smit, 2016), I discuss how the girls gradually developed complex conversations—from their initial discussions about the actions and consequences of heroes and villains to more sophisticated discussions on society's conceptions of good and evil, such as whether criminals should be forgiven for their crimes and whether good people can commit bad acts for noble reasons. This article also explored their resulting understandings about themselves, others, and their social worlds through the concept of perspective. The girls discussed how it is acceptable for characters and, in turn, people in real life to have different perspectives on issues from their own. They also valued the different perspectives their friends brought to the conversations and learned that they did not always have to agree with each other. The girls also claimed that their current transactions with literature had changed in that they were paying closer attention to character development and details in the books. They also noted how their academic writing had broadened to include different perspectives. As they wrote, they wondered what others in the group might say on a particular issue and tried to include those views in their writing.

Developing reading communities of young adult fiction can be the first step in developing inquiry communities of self-directed learners. I found that toward the end of my time with the girls, they started bringing in their own resources to share in the form of comics, newspaper articles, and photos about social issues that mattered to them. Such self-directed inquiry communities are ideal, as students who have an invested interest in their own learning become more reflective about their own thinking, become more intentional as listeners, and more open to alternative ways of thinking; they are also often more willing to engage in the kinds of complex and critical thinking needed to be college and career ready. Re-envisioning the way we structure talk surrounding young adult literature may provide a comprehensible way to navigate the multiple reading interests, reading abilities, and expertise of students in English language arts classrooms.

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