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Young Adult and Canonical Literature Instruction in the High School Classroom: Assessing Students' Reading Interest

Alexis Yang

BACKGROUND

- In the high school English classroom, classic novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* are taught for their literary merit (Balinska-Ourdeva et al., 2014).
- However, students often skim through the readings or decline to read altogether (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016).
- Teaching young adult literature (YAL), a genre written for teens, may boost student reading interest.

AIM

- Determine how teaching YAL in the high school classroom, as opposed to canonical works, affects students' interest in the texts.

METHODS

1. Distributed survey via Qualtrics, consisting of a 4-point Likert scale and open-ended questions measuring students' interest in YAL.

Demographics: 57 high school students ages 15-17 studying YAL in Binghamton and Johnson City, NY.

2. Performed Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis, descriptive statistics and open-ended coding.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Students:

- Expressed interest and disinterest in both YAL and canonical literature.
- Scored positively for curiosity and involvement in YAL.
- Connected with characters in both genres due to common experiences and similar actions.
- Did not connect with characters in both genres due to their different lives.



Teaching a combination of Young Adult and canonical literature may promote students' interest.

Students read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a young adult novel about a 14-year-old Native American boy who transfers from his reservation school into a white high school.

Prefer The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian	Prefer canonical novels
Less Boring "I am much less interested in older books because they seem too boring to me."	Gripping "[True Diary] doesn't have me wanting to read right after we end class as much as I did when in 8th grade we read <i>The Outsiders</i> ."
Connection with characters in True Diary	No connection with characters in True Diary
Common experience "No one likes getting bullied. I was bullied at a young age as well."	Sociocultural difference "I am not 'poor' or oppressed by people trying to change my culture."
No connection with characters in canonical novels	Connection with characters in canonical novels
Unrealistic "Those books always have 'secret meanings'... I remember last year reading about three sisters going to school to learn to act like a human after being raised like wolves. That's not really something you can relate to."	Common experience "Some of the characters have gone through stuff I have also [gone] through."



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Enjoy reading for English class
Enjoy class discussion "I get to be a part of lots of very good discussions, and I like to hear other people's opinions on the book we are reading."
Captivating "I enjoy it if it is captivating and interesting and leaves you surprised at the end of every page."
Dislike reading for English class
Mandatory curriculum "I wouldn't say I like reading the books my teachers pick out because they don't know my types of books I like reading."

Reliability Analysis

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Overall	.940
Curiosity*	.932
Involvement**	.773

Descriptive Statistics

Scale	Mean	Standard Deviation
Overall	2.6140	.670066
Curiosity	2.5278	.71328
Involvement	2.7865	.66499

*Curiosity: assesses whether students' reading stimulated interest and current excitement about the reading task and topic

**Involvement: assesses students' desire to understand what they are reading in the content area

(Neugebauer, 2017)

DISCUSSION

- Students were curious about the YAL book and wanted to understand it, indicating that teaching YAL may promote student interest.
- Teaching books that students relate to may increase interest. However, students noted that reading books about characters with different cultures also increased their interest and enriched their understanding of others (Olan & Richmond, 2017).
- Increasing student autonomy may promote reading interest, as some students noted that while they enjoy reading books of their own choice, they do not enjoy the books selected for class (Morgan & Wagner, 2013).
- Teaching a combination of YAL and canonical literature may increase student reading interest while also broadening students' understanding and worldviews.

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