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

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank my faculty sponsor, Amber Simpson, for her support and guidance, as well as the high school teachers and students who made this research possible.

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

Abstract: In the high school English classroom, classic novels are taught as cornerstones of the curriculum. Although these canonical works such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) are revered for their literary merit, students often find them uninteresting and skim through the readings or decline to read altogether. Young adult literature (YAL), a genre written for teens, may be an effective genre to teach in high school to boost students' reading interest. This study aims to determine how teaching young adult literature in the high school classroom, as opposed to canonical works, might affect students' interest in the texts. A survey was administered to 57 high school students ages 15-17, studying YAL in the Southern Tier region of upstate New York. The survey asked students to describe their interest in an assigned YAL book and compare it to their interest in canonical novels that they have read in the past. Results indicate that teaching a combination of YAL and canonical literature may increase students' reading interest while also broadening their understanding and worldviews. Potential implications of this research include revising the English literature curriculum to accommodate students' reading interest and diversifying assigned reading lists to incorporate wider cultural perspectives.

Keywords: young adult literature, canonical literature, secondary school, reader engagement

Introduction

Canonical novels are taught in the high school classroom for their perceived literary greatness (Balinska-Ourdeva et al., 2014; Coles, 2013; Dyches, 2017; Hopper, 2006). These classic novels such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) are fundamental works to the secondary English literature curriculum, due to an "assumed view of quality and an assumption that adolescent readers should experience certain texts (the canon) as part of a progression to adult reading skills and appreciation" (Hopper, 2006, p. 56). However, student engagement with classic texts is often lacking (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Morgan & Wagner, 2013). Despite the perceived sophisticated language, literary merit, and intellectual depth of canonical works, they often do not spark students' interest or develop students' appreciation for literature (Hopper, 2006; Gibbons et al., 2006). Instead, students frequently believe that the texts are

uninteresting, stuffy, and irrelevant to their 21st-century lives (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Morgan & Wagner, 2013). This raises a question: though revered, are canonical texts the best reading materials to engage teenagers today?

Young adult literature (YAL) is a genre marketed for teens that “relate[s] so closely to the issues faced in young adulthood” (Govindarajoo & Mukundan, 2013, p. 77). Modern and increasingly representative of minority perspectives and experiences, “culturally relevant YAL refers to texts written specifically for young adults that connect to and bring insight into students’ diverse cultural and personal realities and identities in and outside the classroom” (Olan & Richmond, 2017, pp. 2–3). Research suggests that the teaching of YAL could increase student engagement with the texts due to the modernity, accessibility, and cultural relevancy of the genre (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Govindarajoo & Mukundan, 2013; Hopper, 2006; Pike, 2002; Olan & Richmond, 2017). This study aims to determine how teaching young adult literature in the high school classroom, as opposed to canonical works, might affect students’ interest in the texts.

Literature Review

Before conducting my research, I analyzed 20 full-text, peer-reviewed journals published from 2002–2020. To be considered, the studies had to focus on the teaching of YAL, the teaching of canonical literature, or on reading behavior, motivation, and engagement of high school students. In addition to its impact on students, the teaching of young adult and canonical literature was expanded to include teachers’ educational strategies, choices, and opinions regarding the teaching of those genres. This extension was implemented to better understand how canonical literature and YAL are taught in practice. Students’ reading behavior was

expanded to include their reading both in and out of class to understand what motivates, engages, and interests students in regard to reading.

Analysis of the literature revealed that both young adult and canonical literature instruction can provide benefits for students. From the studies on YAL, I identified two main findings: (a) YAL fostered a personal connection with students (Gibbons et al., 2006; Govindarajoo & Mukundan, 2013; Hays, 2016; Hopper, 2006; Park, 2012), and (b) YAL provided educational benefits for students (Gibbons et al., 2006; Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Hays, 2016; Hopper, 2006; Olan and Richmond, 2017). For instance, Hays (2016) found that young adult literature provides “emotional and psychological growth” for students due to its focus on teenage protagonists, teen issues, and current cultural anxieties (p. 72). Academic benefits of YAL included exposing students to works with literary merit (Gibbons et al., 2006; Hopper, 2006), developing skills in students such as reading, writing, and literary analysis (Gibbons et al., 2006; Hays, 2016; Hopper, 2006), and starting conversations about important issues (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Olan & Richmond, 2017).

While studies on YAL formed a consensus that it can have academic and personal benefits for students, studies about canonical literature were inconclusive. Some studies concluded that canonical literature does not engage students, while others concluded that classic literature could contribute to a twenty-first century education. Balinska-Ourdeva et al. (2014) and Coles (2013) found that the teaching of canonical literature failed to resonate with students. Rather than appreciating works of Shakespeare for their literary merit, students “failed to respond emotionally” to the readings and “did not come to appreciate them” (Balinska-Ourdeva et al., 2014, p. 344). Students indicated in interviews that the complex vocabulary and sentence structure, which is common among canonical writings, hindered their comprehension (Balinska-

Ourdeva et al., 2014). Moreover, Coles' 2013 study on canonical literature in England noted that teaching canonical works and testing students on them created a regimented, unstimulating classroom environment: "Reading becomes a passive activity, where students' own experiences and cultural knowledge are irrelevant and meaning is mediated by the teacher" (Coles, 2013, p. 63).

Conversely, other studies discovered that canonical literature could have educational benefits and relevancy in our modern world (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Connor et al., 2009; Dyches, 2017; Pike, 2002). In a study by Bowmer & Curwood (2016), students drew connections between Romantic poetry and pop culture through pairings of their own choosing, such as William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and Katy Perry's song "Walking on Air" (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016, p. 143). As a result, students engaged with the task (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016, p. 148). In a case study by Dyches (2017), a teacher in the southeastern U.S. "creat[ed] spaces intended to affirm students' experiential knowledges and connect these lived experiences to the required literature curriculum" (Dyches, 2017, p. 321). Dyches' findings demonstrate how canonical literature could be used to facilitate conversations about cultural diversity (Dyches, 2017, p. 314). Moreover, Pike (2002) found that studying canonical literature could help teens understand both history and their current realities. In a longitudinal study of students aged 13 to 16, Pike (2002) claimed that "exploratory reading of pre-20th-century texts provides opportunities for students to explore themselves as readers and to consider human experience in other times" (p. 359).

Studies showed a gap in the literature regarding students' reading engagement. In my survey of literature, the studies analyzed classroom reading motivation in the context of student motivation to read and choice of reading material (Allred & Cena, 2020; Judge, 2011; Locher et

al., 2019; Morgan & Wagner, 2013; Pitcher et al., 2007), and teachers' strategies in approach to classroom reading (Hastie & Sharplin, 2012; Lawrence et al., 2008). Studies looked at various aspects of students' motivation to read, including intrinsic motivation, or "if a student reads a book because he or she likes the story or the topic" (Locher et al., 2019, p. 2), and extrinsic motivation, or "outwardly determined" motivations such as "familial attitudes toward reading" (Judge, 2011, pp. 163–165). Pitcher et al. (2007) studied how intrinsic and extrinsic factors such as access to technology, class subject, teachers' instructional practices, and personal attitudes toward reading might affect students' reading motivation (pp. 380–386). However, the studies did not investigate how the teaching of different literary genres might affect students' reading motivation and interest.

This gap in the literature provided an opportunity for me to explore the effects of teaching canonical and young adult literature on students' reading interest. For the purposes of my study, I defined interest as how motivated the students were to read the books, the extent to which they connected with the works, and how much they identified with the characters. My study focused on how YAL and canonical literature might affect these variables.

Methods

My research used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. Given that I aimed to compare students' interest in YAL versus canonical literature, this research lent itself well to my study. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design includes a primary quantitative component and a secondary qualitative component to expand upon those initial results (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 15). The first quantitative element enabled me to quantify students' interest in YAL, while the subsequent qualitative element offered up the ability to investigate students' interest in YAL compared with their interest in canonical literature.

First, I collected interest data from high school students to examine the relationship between the teaching of YAL and the students' interest in those texts. Next, I collected qualitative data on the students' interest in canonical literature in contrast with their interest in YAL. The quantitative element allowed me to quantify my definition of interest based on its three components—how motivated the students are to read the books, the extent to which they connect with the works, and how much they identify with the characters. The subsequent qualitative component was implemented to give me insight into students' reasoning behind their interest levels in YAL and canonical literature.

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method. Teachers contacted included high school English teachers from the northeastern United States whose students were studying YAL. Two teachers agreed to recruit their classes for the research. Student participants were given a consent for research participation form, including details about the purpose of the study, target sample, time commitment for participation, usage of research data, and information about Qualtrics, the survey platform used for my study. Measures to protect privacy and data confidentiality included separating participants from their identifying information and using end-to-end encryption when sending information over the internet. Other security measures included never disclosing participants' personal information such as their name, address, occupational status, and racial background. Participants were informed of potential risks, such as the possible loss of confidentiality and participants' potential reluctance to answer questions. Furthermore, the consent form stated that participation in the study was completely voluntary. Participants could drop out at any time without loss of benefits or affecting their relationship with the researcher, research adviser, or university.

Participants consisted of 57 high school students ages 15-17, studying the young adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) by Sherman Alexie (shortened in this study to *True Diary*). The novel tells the story of Junior, a 14-year-old Indigenous American boy who transfers from his reservation school into a predominantly white high school. Seven participants chose not to disclose their age, gender, and ethnicity. Out of the remaining 50 students, 54% were 15 years old, 38% were 16 years old, and 8% were 17 years old. Half of the students identified as male, 44% as female, and 6% chose to self-describe their gender identity. Thirty-six percent of students were white or Caucasian, 24% were Black or African American, 16% were two or more races, 10% were Hispanic, Latino or Chicano, 4% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 2% were Middle Eastern or North African, 6% preferred not to respond, and 2% self-described their ethnicity as West Indian.

Interest data was collected through a survey, administered through the Qualtrics platform. The Dynamic Reading Motivation Measure (DRMM), an instrument developed by Sarah Rak Neugebauer (2017), was adapted to measure student reading interest. The DRMM was created to assess middle school students' "content-area-specific reading motivations"—for example, students' reading motivations for history versus science texts (Neugebauer, 2017, p. 131). The original survey consists of 18 questions in a Likert scale, asking students about their attitudes toward reading with responses ranging from 1 (not at all true for me) to 4 (completely true for me). Given the multidisciplinary bent to the survey, I adapted the instrument to focus only on English literature texts. I maintained the Likert scale while adapting the wording of the statements (see Table 2). For example, I changed the second item of Neugebauer's survey from a broad statement that could apply to any academic text ("I wanted to be knowledgeable about the

topic I was reading about”) to a statement that applies specifically to English literature (“I wanted to be knowledgeable about the book I was reading”).

The DRMM categorizes survey items as measuring either “involvement” or “curiosity.” Neugebauer specifies that the involvement “assesses students’ desire to understand what they are reading in the content area,” whereas curiosity “assesses whether students’ reading stimulated interest and current excitement about the reading task and topic” (Neugebauer, 2017, p. 139). I classified my survey items according to Neugebauer’s framework by identifying the items’ purposes and assigning them to the appropriate subscales (see Table 2). For instance, given Neugebauer’s definitions of involvement and curiosity, “I wanted to understand the book I was reading” falls under the involvement subscale because the statement aims to assess students’ desire to comprehend the reading material. Likewise, “I liked making connections between things I read and my own ideas” fell under the curiosity subscale because the item aims to measure the extent to which the text interested students.

To ensure the internal consistency of my survey items, I conducted a Cronbach’s alpha reliability analysis (Warrens, 2015). This process was implemented to determine that items coded as involvement properly measure that subscale, and likewise for curiosity. My reliability analysis revealed that my survey items were internally consistent across all subscales. My items for curiosity, involvement and the overall scale were all deemed acceptable, with the consistency of the curiosity items falling under “excellent reliability,” involvement “good reliability,” and overall “excellent” (Portney & Watkins, 2009).

Table 1 Cronbach’s alpha reliability analysis

	Cronbach’s alpha	N of items
Curiosity	.93	12
Involvement	.77	6
Overall	.94	18

For the quantitative component of my research, I analyzed students' survey responses, broken down into three subscales: curiosity, involvement, and overall scale. In this analysis, I determined the mean and standard deviation of each to determine the students' attitudes toward the young adult novel.

Table 2 Student reading interest survey

Please think about <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> when answering these questions.				
	Not at all true for me	A little bit true for me	Mostly true for me	Completely true for me
1. I liked thinking deeply about the book I read.*	1	2	3	4
2. I wanted to be knowledgeable about the book I was reading.**	1	2	3	4
3. I enjoyed thinking about the book that I read.*	1	2	3	4
4. My full attention was on the book when I was reading it.**	1	2	3	4
5. I wanted to understand the book I was reading.**	1	2	3	4
6. I read to get more information about the book.**	1	2	3	4
7. I felt interested to learn something new through reading the book.*	1	2	3	4
8. I created pictures in my mind while I thought about the book.**	1	2	3	4
9. I was interested in the book we were reading.*	1	2	3	4
10. I liked making connections between things I read and my own ideas.*	1	2	3	4
11. I read because I was interested to learn what would happen next in the book.*	1	2	3	4
12. When we discussed the book in class, I wanted to read more about it.*	1	2	3	4
13. I enjoyed reading the book and did not want to stop reading.*	1	2	3	4
14. I felt like I connected with characters in the book.*	1	2	3	4
15. I read because I was curious to learn more about the book.*	1	2	3	4
16. I was really focused on what I was reading.**	1	2	3	4
17. I found what I was reading gripping and exciting.*	1	2	3	4
18. I wanted to learn more about the book I was reading.*	1	2	3	4

Note. *curiosity **involvement

For the qualitative portion of my study, I created a set of open-ended response questions to explore the students' interest in *True Diary* compared with their interest in canonical novels that they have read for school in the past (see Table 3). These questions were created for two purposes: 1) to determine students' interest in YAL in comparison to their interest in canonical literature, and 2) to gain a deeper understanding of students' reading motivations both inside and outside of English class.

Table 3 Free-response questions

1.	How has your interest in <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> changed from the beginning to your current location in the novel?
2.	How does your interest in <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> compare with your interest in the classic novels that you have read for school in the past? Classic novels include older books such as <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> and <i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i> .
3.	Do you connect with the characters in <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> ? Why or why not?
4.	Did you connect with characters in the classic novels that you have read for school in the past? You may write about any classic book that you have read for English class in high school.
5.	Do you enjoy reading books for English class? Why or why not?
6.	Do you like to read in your free time? Why or why not?

Responses were analyzed through open-ended coding, with all data organized in a codebook. Based on the data, I created five overarching domains (see Appendix). These domains were then broken down into themes such as “Change in interest,” “Prefer *True Diary*,” and “Enjoy reading for English class.” From there, I grouped responses into codes. For instance, the response “I just don’t really live the same life as the characters,” which fell under the “Connection with characters” domain and “No connection with characters in *True Diary*” theme, was coded as “different life” (see Appendix). In this example, the code “different life” reflected the difference between the students’ life and the life of Junior, the main character of *True Diary*. Likewise, the response “Yes because understanding the characters in the book makes it so much easier to understand and learn uncertain plots,” under the “Reading for English class” domain and “Enjoy reading for English class” theme, was coded as “gain understanding.” In this case,

the “gain understanding” code reflected the student’s belief that learning about the characters helped them understand confusing parts of the plot, hence “gaining understanding” of the book.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Results from the descriptive statistics showed that students scored positively for curiosity and involvement in YAL, with means of 2.53 and 2.79 for curiosity and involvement respectively.

Table 4 Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation
Curiosity	2.53	.71
Involvement	2.79	.66
Overall	2.61	.67

Qualitative Analysis: Question 1: How has your interest in The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian changed from the beginning to your current location in the novel?

Out of 57 total participants, 48 students responded to the first free-response question. Three responses were discarded due to unclear wording and/or meaning. The remaining 45 students reported a change (24.4%), no change (37.8%), an increase (35.6%), and a decrease (2.2%) in interest in *True Diary*. Here, students who indicated a “change” in interest either expressed variable interest (“It changed from being really interested during some parts of the story and not as interested during others”) or indicated a change in interest, but did not specify whether it was an increase or decrease (“My interest has changed throughout the book because I get more info about Junior’s life and his personality”). These responses were coded accordingly as “variable interest” and “character development,” respectively (see Appendix). Conversely, some students did not experience a change in interest. Reasons for this lack of change included a connection with the book (“My interest from the beginning of the book was intriguing and now I

do not want to stop reading and I always connect to some or most situations in the story”) and a dislike of the genre (“I don’t really like YA books”). Some students experienced an increase in interest in part due to gaining cultural understanding. One student stated, “I’ve become more invested in the book as we continue to read it because it gives me more of an understanding of how other people live.” However, other students perceived a decrease in interest due to disappointment: “I was disappointed at the end because it was uneventful.”

Question 2: How does your interest in The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian compare with your interest in the classic novels that you have read for school in the past?

Out of 43 responses, 13 were discarded due to unclear wording and/or meaning. While 20% of the remaining 30 participants expressed constant interest in both YAL and canonical literature, 40% preferred *True Diary* and 40% preferred canonical novels. For instance, one student described the assigned books as always uninteresting: “None of the topics I’ve read about in school so far have really interested me.” On the other side of the spectrum, another student described the books as always exciting: “They were all mostly fun and exciting to read upon.” Among students who preferred *True Diary*, reasons included relatability (“This one kinda puts us in their shoes like because we’re close to the same age”) and historical/cultural awareness (“It teaches me about different cultures”). However, other students preferred canonical novels that they had read for school in the past, particularly *The Outsiders* (1967) by S.E. Hinton. Reasons for this included the gripping nature of *The Outsiders* and the predictability of *True Diary*.

Question 3: Do you connect with the characters in The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian?

Responses from 44 students were split among fully connecting (29.5%), not connecting (52.3%), and somewhat connecting (18.2%) with the characters in *True Diary*. Among the

reasons for fully connecting to the novel, students indicated that they shared a common experience with Junior, the teenage protagonist of the novel. One student commented upon how they related to Junior's experiences of being bullied: "No one likes getting bullied. I was bullied at a young age as well." Furthermore, another student indicated that they would perform similar actions as the characters, writing that "Some things the characters do I may have done the same or said the same or acted." Among the reasons for not connecting to the characters in *True Diary*, students highlighted the different life ("I just don't really live the same life as the characters") and sociocultural difference ("I am not 'poor' or oppressed by people trying to change my culture") between themselves and Junior. Students who felt that they somewhat connected with the characters noted contrasting and overlapping experiences, relatable experiences, and lack of reading immersion as reasons for sometimes connecting with the novel. One student stated, "The only character I mostly connected to was Junior but not very much. Junior is an interesting character that some people might relate [to], but for me not that much... I'm more of an optimistic/friendly person but Junior [does] not [come] close to relat[ing] to me. But the only thing I can relate to him is going off to believe in yourself and to keep on going."

Question 4: Did you connect with characters in the classic novels that you have read for school in the past?

As with *True Diary*, some students connected with the characters in canonical novels while others did not. Out of 44 responses, seven were discarded. The remaining 37 participants were divided among connecting with characters in canonical novels (26.7%) and not connecting with characters in canonical novels (81%). For example, one student described canonical novels as "unrealistic," as "Those books always have 'secret meanings.' Like 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." On the contrary, some students connected with characters in classic novels due to common experience: "Some of the characters that have gone through stuff I have also went through."

Question 5: Do you enjoy reading books for English class?

Out of 45 participants, I retained 44 responses to this question. From those responses, I found that 43.2% of the remaining students enjoyed reading for English class, 20.5% disliked reading for English class, and 36.4% sometimes enjoyed reading for English class. Some students specified that reading for English class can help them gain a further understanding of the reading material ("Understanding the characters in the book makes it so much easier to understand and learn uncertain plots"), while others attributed reading enjoyment to a good teacher ("Some teachers make reading fun"). Other students disliked reading for English class due to a general dislike of reading ("Reading is not for me") and a 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"). Other students indicated that they sometimes enjoyed reading for English class, with one student expressing that "It depends on the story. Some are extremely boring and some are pretty interesting."

Question 6: Do you like to read in your free time?

Forty-four students indicated that they enjoy (29.5%), dislike (47.7%), and sometimes enjoy (22.7%) reading in their free time. For those who liked reading in their free time, independent reading could allow for individual interest and autonomy. For example, one student described "being told" to read as a barrier: "I like to read when I'm not told to, like when my mom tells me to read, I'm not really interested in doing [it], but without my mom telling me, I will actually read." However, other students disliked reading in their free time due to having

little focus, enjoying other activities, and having no time, among other reasons. Students sometimes enjoyed reading in their free time depending upon the book and to alleviate boredom.

Discussion

This study aimed to assess how the teaching of YAL, as opposed to canonical literature, might affect high school students' interest in the texts. I implemented an initial quantitative component, designed to measure students' interest in the YAL novel, and a secondary qualitative component, implemented to compare students' interest in the young adult text with their interest in canonical literature.

Both the quantitative and qualitative portions of my study showed that students demonstrated interest in *True Diary*, indicating that the teaching of *True Diary* may promote students' interest. In the quantitative component, students' responses indicated a somewhat positive interest in *True Diary* in terms of curiosity, involvement, and the overall scale. Furthermore, the open-ended responses revealed that *True Diary* resonated with students due to its relatability: students connected with the events of the novel and saw themselves in the characters. In addition, students noted that the novel's depiction of 21st-century life for Indigenous Americans helped them gain understanding of other cultures. These findings stand in line with the previous literature on the subject. Other studies have found that YAL can foster a personal connection with students (Gibbons et al., 2006; Govindarajoo & Mukundan, 2013; Hays, 2016; Hopper, 2006; Park, 2012). For instance, Gibbons et al. (2006) observed that YAL can align with students' concerns and interests, as the genre features teenage protagonists, teen issues, and current cultural anxieties.

Furthermore, previous literature shows that YAL can teach students about different cultures, expand their viewpoints, and bring diverse topics to the classroom conversation. Glenn

and Ginsberg noted that YAL instruction gave students “permission to address... contradictory, uncomfortable, and/or temporary identities” (2016, p. 100), while Olan and Richmond found that YAL can be used to discuss “difficult and sometimes controversial topics” (2017, p. 23).

Controversial topics present in YAL include race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status—topics that are often absent or glossed over in canonical literature. Thus, in addition to connecting with the students on a personal level, YAL may offer the diverse stories and perspectives that have been largely absent from the English literature curriculum.

However, some students also did not connect with *True Diary* and preferred canonical works. Students who did not connect with *True Diary* perceived the book as unrealistic, predictable, not aligning with individual interest, and not gripping enough. Additionally, they did not connect to the characters in *True Diary* due to leading a different life, taking different actions, and possessing a different sociocultural status. Just as students related to characters in *True Diary*, they also related to characters in canonical novels due to sharing common experiences and similar actions. Students noted higher interest in the canonical novel *The Outsiders* in comparison with *True Diary*, both in terms of their desire to read more and their connection to the characters. The findings indicate that canonical literature may offer potential for promoting students’ reading interest.

However, students also expressed a lack of interest in the canonical literature that they have read for school in the past, perceiving it as uninteresting and unrealistic. These observations have been addressed by other researchers and pose a problem for the traditional English literature curriculum. Canonical literature has been criticized for being too white, elite, and homogenous, resulting in a disconnect between students of diverse backgrounds and canonical works (Balinska-Ourdeva et al., 2014; Connor et al., 2009; Dyches, 2017; Olan & Richmond, 2017).

Building off research by Cherry-McDaniel and Young (2012), Olan and Richmond (2017) researched the exclusivity of the canonical literature curriculum: “twenty-first century English teachers have learned the viewpoints of the dominant (White, male, heterosexual, Western) culture through the literary canon” (p. 2). In Dyches’ 2017 case study, a British literature teacher conveyed his “[struggle] to modernize a curriculum that ‘is just so white’”: “[*The Importance of Being Ernest*] is hard to teach because we’re talking about a completely different lifestyle... rich, white, upper-class people in the Victorian era who live totally opposite lives than the kids we have (p. 310). As a result of this socioeconomic and cultural disconnect, “the kids don’t respond to it as well” (Dyches, 2017, p. 310).

These findings indicate that teaching canonical literature in isolation may not be an optimal strategy for prioritizing students’ reading interest. Likewise, students’ interest and disinterest in *True Diary* suggest that teaching YAL in isolation also might not be ideal. Thus, teaching both genres in tandem may balance cultural relevancy and educational benefits with students’ interests. Pike (2002) found that canonical literature can be used as a tool for students to navigate their twenty-first century lives. Based on a longitudinal study, Pike (2002) concluded that “justification for a canon of pre-20th-century literature in today’s classrooms lies in its power to enable 21st-century readers to understand themselves and others in the present” (p. 367). Furthermore, when paired with innovative and modern instructional approaches such as combining literature with popular culture (Bowmer & Curwood, 2016) and developing a “warm, dialogic classroom community” through a “canonical counter-curriculum,” canonical literature can open up conversations about cultural diversity (Dyches, 2017, p. 314). For example, in Olan and Richmond’s 2017 study of beginning English teachers’ use of YAL for discussions of diversity, the researchers noted that “beginning teachers can strategically position YAL to

supplement, enrich, and disrupt the dominant narrative to better inform their students' understanding of canonical texts" (p. 23). YAL could therefore serve as a supplement for canonical literature—an opportunity to think critically about the “dominant (White, male, heterosexual, Western) culture” that has largely populated the English literature curriculum thus far (Olan & Richmond, 2017, p. 2).

In addition to focusing on students' interest in both YAL and canonical literature, a critical portion of students must also be addressed: those who do not like, or do not have time, to read. In my study, some students reported that they did not like reading in class due to a dislike of reading and the rigidity of the mandated curriculum. Outside of class, students cited a general dislike of reading, lack of focus, and lack of available time as reasons for not reading for fun, along with finding reading uninteresting and preferring to do other activities.

To address the students who dislike reading for school, two instructional methods may increase reading engagement: increasing students' autonomy in selection of reading material (Allred & Cena, 2020; Hastie & Sharplin, 2012; Judge, 2011; Locher et al., 2019; Morgan & Wagner, 2013; Pitcher et al., 2007), in-class group work, and peer discussion (Allred & Cena, 2020; Lawrence et al., 2008). When students are required to read books for school, their motivation for reading can be lowered, which may result in the perception that reading is a school-based activity (Locher et al., 2019; Pitcher et al., 2007). In Pitcher et al. (2007), the structured nature of assigned reading prevented some students from identifying as readers and writers. However, studies have discovered that giving students autonomy with their reading can increase readers' motivation and engagement (Allred & Cena, 2020; Hastie & Sharplin, 2012; Judge, 2011; Locher et al., 2019; Morgan & Wagner, 2013). For example, a student interviewed by Morgan and Wagner (2013) stated that after being able to choose his reading material, his

interest in reading was renewed. The student reported, “I like just reading which I haven’t done a lot since all the assigned books I had to read the last few years... This more relaxed style is really nice... My book is very interesting and captivating making me look forward to this class” (p. 665). Thus, if students choose the books they read, they may feel motivated to read them because they are genuinely interested in the stories (Judge, 2011; Locher et al., 2019; Morgan & Wagner, 2013). Increasing students’ reading autonomy may address students’ perceived disconnect between their reading interests and the mandatory curriculum. Furthermore, Hattie and Sharplin (2012) found in interviews with English teachers that to increase students’ engagement, it is also important for teachers to have autonomy over the selection of reading material.

Peer collaboration and discussion can also increase reader engagement (Allred & Cena, 2020; Lawrence et al., 2008). Allred and Cena (2020) found that when high school students discussed books together, they had an enriched learning experience. Lawrence et al. (2008) observed that classroom discussion allowed students to “display authentic responses” (p. 52) to the texts and “demonstrate higher levels of engagement in classroom activities” (p. 58). Furthermore, peer collaboration and group work increased students’ engagement and reading skills, along with creating meaningful, constructive dialogue about the books (Lawrence et al., 2008). Thus, students can have much deeper learning experiences and engage with classroom readings if they are given autonomy and the opportunity to spark dialogue with their peers.

The portion of students who either dislike, or do not have the time to, read for fun stresses the importance of engaging students in the classroom. Teachers cannot control students’ daily commitments and responsibilities outside of school, but they can change students’ relationship with reading within the classroom walls. Engaging students with meaningful,

valuable discussions of texts may begin to change their viewpoints of reading, encouraging them to pursue leisurely reading when they get the chance.

Conclusion

My study suggests that teaching a combination of YAL and canonical literature may increase students' reading interest by increasing relatability, while also broadening students' understanding and worldviews. While students scored positively for curiosity and involvement with *True Diary*, they also connected with characters in canonical novels such as *The Outsiders* (1967). The students' connection and lack of connection with characters in both genres suggests that a mixed-genre approach may prioritize students' reading interest.

However, given that my study consisted of 57 high school students studying one young adult book, the results from my study can only indicate a possible trend. Students' interest in *True Diary* may not translate to other young adult books and cannot be generalized to the entire genre of YAL. Further research is required to determine whether similar results could be extrapolated to include YAL and canonical literature overall. Moreover, I acknowledge that some readers may question the inter-rater reliability of my study and may wonder about the validity of my claims. My results convey the opinions of the students interviewed and would not apply to all high school students in the U.S: the students' observations of the books that they have read for school largely reflect the curriculum of the two public high schools in the Southern Tier of New York state. Private schools and public schools from other states or areas may differ in curriculum and approach.

The students' engagement with *The Outsiders* (1967) in my study raises questions about the boundaries of literary genre. *The Outsiders*, "a novel written for young adults by a teenager frustrated with the failure of literature to represent the 'grittier' elements of adolescence," has

become a part of the literary canon since its publication (Tribunella, 2006). Its initial classification as a young adult novel and subsequent incorporation into the canon of the high school classroom casts uncertainty about the novel's genre. Although there are two sides to the debate, in my study I treated *The Outsiders* as a canonical novel due to its "cultural legitimacy and institutionalization" in the high school curriculum (Tribunella, 2006, p. 87). *The Outsiders*, "safely ensconced on approved reading lists for schools throughout the United States," has achieved a status of merit and "literary snobbishness" shared by other canonical novels (Hopper, 2006, p. 61; Tribunella, 2006, p. 87). Therefore, I treated it as a canonical work.

Despite the limitations and acknowledgements discussed above, my study contributes to the body of literature demonstrating the relevance of YAL in the English literature curriculum (Gibbons et al., 2006; Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Govindarajoo & Mukundan, 2013; Hays, 2016; Hopper, 2006; Olan & Richmond, 2017; Park, 2012), and opens questions about the implications of teaching YAL in the classroom. As stated in previous literature, YAL can enrich the high school English literature curriculum by bringing modern and culturally diverse issues to classroom conversation (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2017; Olan & Richmond, 2017). Works that feature minority groups, such as *The Hate U Give* (2017), *The Kite Runner* (2003), or even culturally diverse and academically rich graphic novels such as *American Born Chinese* (2006), can broaden the curriculum beyond a white, elite perspective. These YAL novels may pair with canonical novels that offer complimentary dialogues: for instance, a discussion of LGBTQ+ rights when pairing *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) with Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and a discussion of Black rights in America when pairing *The Hate U Give* (2017) with *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Furthermore, works such as *The Outsiders* that

feature elements of both canonical literature and YAL could balance reverence to the literary canon with students' interest in YAL.

However, phasing YAL into the curriculum may prove to be a challenge. In public schools, teachers must adhere to state-mandated standards, which describe the skills that students must acquire and how they acquire them. The ELA (English Language Arts) standards for eleventh and twelfth graders in New York state require "reading or literacy experiences" that develop students' "ability to make meaning of increasingly complex text" (New York State Education Department, 2017, p. 107). Under the Text Complexity Expectations section, the report specifies that students "will read and comprehend literary and informational texts that are at or above grade level" (New York State Education Department, 2017, p. 108). Thus, it can be debated whether YAL falls under this requirement as an "increasingly complex" literary text. Furthermore, the dominance of canonical literature as standard texts may pose as an obstacle for some schools' curriculums.

As we launch further into the modern world, future research can reveal the trajectory of English literature curriculums. How might students' reading interest affect their willingness to think critically and independently about the texts? How can teachers design writing assignments, group projects, reading journals, etc. that encourage students to develop their own analyses of assigned books? How might teachers increase students' autonomy of reading material to encourage lifelong reading habits? My research and review of the literature suggest that secondary English classrooms can find genres that engage students' interests, develop culturally aware curriculums, foster important conversations about past and current issues, and advance students' literacy skills through the students' reading material. If we find a balance between the state-mandated curriculum and students' autonomy in reading choice, English curriculums may

maximize students' engagement. Most of all, they can help teenagers become informed readers and writers for the future.

Appendix

Codebook of Open-Ended Responses

Domain	Theme	Codes	Example quote
Interest in <i>True Diary</i>	Change in Interest	Character development	"My interest has changed throughout the book because I get more info about Junior's life and his personality."
		Variable interest	"It changed from being really interested during some parts of the story and not as interested during others. I would say that for most of the story I was interested."
	No Change in Interest	Connection	"My interest from the beginning of the book was intriguing and now I do not want to stop reading and I always connect to some or most situations in the story."
		Constant interest	"No it hasn't changed I continued to have fond of the book till this day."
		Dislike the genre	"Not really cause I don't really like YA books."
		Individual dislike	"My interest throughout the book did not change because I did not like it."
		Didn't finish the book	"No because I did not finish the book."
		Dislike reading	"I just don't like reading."
	Increase in Interest	Gain cultural understanding	"I've become more invested in the book as we continue to read it because it gives me more of an understanding of how other people live."
		Connection to characters	"Yes because at the end you know the characters better but even from the beginning it was still interesting."
		Plot development	"I got a little bit more interested as the book started changing."
		No reason provided	"I am more interested in the novel than I was in the beginning."
	Decrease in Interest	Disappointed	"I was disappointed at the end because it was uneventful."
	Contrasting interest between <i>True Diary</i> and canonical novels	Constant interest	No perceived difference
Always uninteresting			"None of the topics I've read about in school so far have really interested me."
Always exciting			"They were all mostly fun and exciting to read upon."
Prefer <i>True Diary</i>		Prefer YA	"I prefer young adult novels over classic novels."
		Relatable	"This one kinda puts us in their shoes like because we're close to the same age."
		Less Boring	"I am much less interested in older books because they seem too boring to me."
		Individual interest	"Last year I read 'Touching Spirit Bear' and at first I thought the same thing, that the book would be boring. But as time went on I realized that I truly liked the book. I guess that I'm just drawn to books that take place in schools."
		Historical/cultural awareness	"It teaches me about different cultures."

Prefer canonical novels	Gripping	“This book is 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> ... like when you watch a show and the episode ends and you want to watch the next episode.”	
	Unrealistic	“It did not compare to any good novel that I have read mostly because some of the plot was most likely made up or exaggerated.”	
	Individual interest	“The book we read this year really just wasn’t my speed although I have to admit Junior’s was a story worth reading.”	
	Predictable	“...other books that I have read were more wow to me like <i>The Outsiders</i> ... they had expectations that I didn’t expect. <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> was surprising but not that surprising sense I kinda knew what was going to happen.”	
	No reason provided	“My interest is far greater in the classical stories over <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> .”	
Connection with characters	No connection with characters in <i>True Diary</i>	Different life	“I just don’t really live the same life as the characters.”
		Different actions	“I couldn’t connect with the characters in the book. It’s just my actions and characteristics don’t match.”
		Fictional	“I did not connect with the characters because they do not act like a normal person would and are most likely made up.”
		Unengaging	“I just wasn’t immersed in the book.”
		Sociocultural difference	“I am not ‘poor’ or oppressed by people trying to change my culture.”
	No reason provided	“No, I don’t know.”	
Connection with characters in <i>True Diary</i>	Common experience	“Yes because no one likes getting bullied. I was bullied at a young age as well.”	
	Reading immersion	“I like to connect to the characters in any book I read, I want to know what it would feel like to be in their shoes and to experience what they go through.”	
	Similar actions	“Yes some things the characters do I may have done the same or said the same or acted.”	
	Resonating	“Yes, they were funny at the ending. They bother each other a lot and I always want to have a best friend like that.”	
Somewhat of a connection with characters in <i>True Diary</i>	Overlapping and contrasting experiences	“Situation wise I don’t, because I am fortunate enough to have things that the character doesn’t have. But, I do relate in the way he views things.”	
	Relatable experience	“Somewhat, most of the time people look at me weird when they find out I’m part Indian.”	
	Lack of immersion	“Somewhat, I just wasn’t immersed in the book.”	
	No reason provided	“Somewhat, I feel like more students connected to the characters more than me.”	
	Dislike books	“No, books have never been for me and the fact that I’ve never really connected to the stories might be why.”	

	Connection with characters in canonical novels	Resonating	"I connected with the character Cole in the novel 'Touching Spirit Bear'... his parents are divorced and he takes his anger out on other people, I guess it helps me empathize with the characters."
		Common experience	"Some of the characters that have gone through stuff I have also went through."
		Similar actions	"There is one person I could connect to and that is Ponyboy, and for that reason is how works in his surroundings like me... He also struggles against violence like I would, even with familial love."
Reading for English class	Enjoy reading for English class	Enjoy class discussion	"I absolutely LOVE reading books with my English class because 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."
		Gain understanding	"Yes because understanding the characters in the book makes it so much easier to understand and learn uncertain plots."
		Good teacher	"Yes, some teachers make reading fun."
		Enjoy reading	"For the most part I quite enjoy reading."
		Captivating	"I enjoy it if it captivating and interesting and leaves you surprised at the end of every page."
		Better than other schoolwork	"Yes because I don't like writing."
		New experience	"Yes I think reading in English is fun, because you could learn different genres/themes/story in the book and that kinda I would like to see especially if it's a book I haven't read."
	Dislike reading for English class	Dislike reading	"No, reading is not for me."
		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."
	Sometimes enjoy reading for English class	Indifferent	"I don't mind it. It's something to do."
		Depends on the book	"It depends on the story. Some are extremely boring and some are pretty interesting."
		Unsure	"Well so and so, I enjoy the story and observations pointed out in the story but sometimes I just stop liking the books for some reason."
	Reading in free time	Enjoy reading in free time	Individual interest
Fun			"I love reading whenever I can because when I read I feel like I've been transported to a world of peace and imagination."
Autonomy			"I like to read when I'm not told to like when my mom tells me to read I'm not really interested in doing but without my mom telling me I will actually read."
In the mood			"Sometimes when I feel like it I guess."
Dislike reading in free time		Little focus	"Not really I can never stay focus on the book I'm reading."

	Dislike reading	"No, I am not a fan of reading. I find that in my free time I never read."
	Other activities	"No I like to go outside or play video games."
	No time	"I don't think I can find time because of work and schoolwork."
	Boring	"I find reading for fun boring."
Sometimes enjoy reading in free time	Depends on the book	"Depends on the mood of the book or the day."
	Alleviate boredom	"I'm really bored I might pick up a book that I have in my closet but most of the time not really."

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