

From Fiction to Fact to Potential Action:  
Generating Prosocial Attitudes and Behaviors Using Young Adult Literature

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the impact reading Young Adult Literature (YAL) has on students' empathetic responses as well as their capacity to take action regarding a social justice issue chosen by the student. Drawing on data from a 10th grade honors classroom at a Title 1 school in the Southwest, this ethnographic case study investigates how students use YAL to formulate knowledge construction, empathetic responses, action plans and personal healing. Data for this research includes ethnographic fieldnotes, semi-structured participant interviews, daily journals and a focus group interview. Throughout this study, the teacher and researcher worked together to develop a flexible curriculum that implemented YAL and social activist ideas, such as investigation into action plans and discussion surrounding ways to make change. Results demonstrate that students who had some prior experience with an issue, coupled with identification with a helper character from the novel were more inclined to attempt to take tangible, victim-focused action, whereas students with no prior experience with an issue or those who identified overtly with the victim in the novel were likely to create action plans that spread awareness for others who were unaware of the complexities of the issue. Additionally, the students who had little exposure to the social justice issue they chose demonstrated a level of productive discomfort and a shift in the way they perceived the complexities of the issue. The importance of YAL in the students' social and emotional growth, coupled with an opportunity to create civically minded citizens signals the growing importance of this type of literature in a socially minded world.

## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my beautiful daughters Ellie and Lorisa who were all too happy to watch more TV when I needed time to work. I am always amazed at your wit and strength, and I am excited to see what you will do to follow your own dreams. Thank you for being supportive when I felt like I was failing and thank you for being such amazing children. It my wish for you to follow your own dreams no matter how hard the path may seem. You are both strong, intelligent women, who have many incredibly important things to offer the world, and I am so excited to see what you end up doing in the future!

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Watching my 11-year-old daughter devour her assigned reading books for 5<sup>th</sup> grade ELA warmed my heart. I watched her breeze through books like *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen and *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson and felt a warm glow at sharing a part of my own childhood memories with her. Nothing could prepare me for the visceral reaction she had while reading both *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio and *Out of my Mind* by Sharon Draper. With *Wonder*, I remember her sitting on the couch deeply engrossed in her novel. I noticed that she began turning the pages more quickly, but I assumed it was because she wanted to get to the next tidbit of information. Suddenly, she RIPPED a page out of the book, gave a strangled scream, and slammed the novel on the coffee table. She got up and paced agitatedly around our coffee table. What in the world? In our book-loving family, this was not normal nor acceptable behavior. I snatched the injured book off the table and turned, ready to read her the riot act, when I saw tears glistening in her eyes. I asked her what was wrong, and she burst into tears. Apparently, a mother of one of the characters had sent the school principal a nasty email that insinuated the protagonist was special needs in some way and that the administrator's request from boys to befriend the protagonist caused a bullying situation. My daughter felt and reacted more strongly to that scene in a book than I had ever seen her behave while reading before that. In *Out of My Mind*, upon finishing the novel, she emerged from her room tentatively, as if she were just re-entering our world, and quietly drifted toward me in the living room. I asked if she'd finished the book that she had refused to put down the entire ride home from school. She buried her head in my shoulder, wrapped her arms

around my neck, and sobbed . . . for 20 straight minutes. There was no consoling her. Once again, the protagonist, who was limited by paralysis, had been left behind for an academic competition. The injustice of these acts was literally more than she could bear.

This physical reaction to an emotional event in a book is a reality for many people. What if we provided an opportunity, an outlet, for our high school students to harness this emotional reaction through taking positive action to act on the sadness, injustice, or disgust that they feel? How might an academic venue offer an opportunity for educators to create civically minded citizens who are more ready to make the world around them a better place?

Harnessing this energy would be a positive way to address the current call by scholars and professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English for curriculum that helps students become more engaged and civically literate (Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015; National Association of Teachers of English, 2011; Mirra, Filipiak, & Garcia, 2015). Unfortunately, reading literature with no critical discussion or action may merely result in frustrated feelings and pages torn out of books instead of movement toward solutions and engagement.

This dissertation examines best practice in discovering how to facilitate students in learning to dissect texts to discover social injustices in today's world and instilling a sense of agency in them to address those problems.

### **Statement of Problem**

While there is an intuitive assumption that literature, and specifically young adult literature (YAL), can positively impact readers, insufficient research connects this type of

reading to action or prosocial behavior. This dissertation examines the reading and thinking moves and identity construction of adolescents in classrooms where they are exposed to young adult novels with a critical lens toward social justice and action.

### **Significance of Study**

As school districts continue to implement standardized curriculum, the increased emphasis on nonfiction has become more commonplace in ELA classes while young adult (YA) fiction is increasingly pushed to the margins (J. Hayn, Kaplan, & Nolen, 2016). While this dissertation does not specifically compare nonfiction to fiction, it demonstrates that YA fiction not only may be used to meet current standards but also leads to social action due to emotional engagement. For many teachers, however, the need to meet a set of prescribed goals presented by a standardized curriculum may seem incompatible with additional goals for creating socially aware, civically engaged citizens. These two ideas are compatible, depending upon one's approach.

Contemporary interpretations of global curriculum call for the development of civically engaged citizens (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Herczog, 2011; Sherrod, 2006). Los Angeles County's guide to implementing a civic education aligned with common core state standards eloquently expressed a need for this alignment: "[t]he political, economic, and social well-being of our nation is entirely dependent upon the preparation and education of our young people" (Herczog, 2011, p. 2). There is clearly a need to consider how we help our students think about their larger role in society.

To explore how students might more effectively become productive citizens, I designed a study that uses YA fiction as an entry point into initiating an action research

project. This study explored how a curriculum that couples YA fiction and civic engagement inspires students to take action in their community. As the research's results were intended to produce specific outcomes for the students and teachers, the methodological framework followed the ideals of pragmatism (Dillon, O'Brien, & Heilman, 2013; Unrau & Alvermann, 2013).

### **Research Questions**

1. How does reading YAL within a social activism framework shape students' understanding of social justice issues as well as their capacity to act upon that understanding?
  - a. How does prior experience shape the reader's perception of the issue or their experience?
  - b. How does reading the novel affect their understanding of a social justice issue?
  - c. How does character identification correlate with an action plan?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual frameworks of sociocultural perspectives on literacy and critical sociocultural literacy guided my work. While sociocultural theory has often been applied to the idea of literacy, no single definition is currently in use (Perry, 2012). Scholarship from this area generally focuses on the idea that learning is not something that occurs in a vacuum, and instead is dependent upon social and cultural contexts. Often cited as an important antecedent to sociocultural theory, Vygotsky's work is part of the foundation for the many versions of contemporary theory. Goncu & Gauvain (2012) wrote, "Vygotsky conceptualized children's development as a process of participation into and

appropriation of cultural meanings that are historically determined and socially situated” (p. 132). This individual development, therefore, is one that is constantly shifting depending upon the student’s environment. Students’ identities vary depending upon whether they are in school or out of school, or even from classroom to classroom.

The classroom is a unique place in that each room has an opportunity to create its own environment. In fact, as any experienced teacher knows, the environment within a classroom can change from hour to hour, depending upon the individuals present at any given time. The instructor can control this dynamic in some small ways, but students’ sociocultural identities create a critical component of the moves a successful educator will consider. When teachers consider the implications of learning to communicate within this ever-changing environment, they must consider the social process of learning that occurs (McIntyre, 2010).

One component of this process lies in the identities that students take on in the classroom. Gee (2001b) suggested four perspectives on identity that are interchangeable, including Natural identity (N-identity), a state developed from forces in nature; Institution-identity (I-Identity), a position authorized by authorities within institutions; Discourse-Identity (D-Identity), an individual trait recognized in the discourse/dialogue of/with “rational individuals”; and Affinity-Identity (A-Identity), experiences shared in the practice of “affinity groups” (p. 102). These four perspectives shift in terms of what is foregrounded, and they often reinforce one another. For example, a student may be born with a particular IQ, which may be considered N-identity (although the validity of assigning a number to a level of intelligence has been proven to be problematic). If that student were considered highly intelligent and were tested at an institution of learning, he

or she might be assigned the identity of a gifted child. Additionally, teachers and peers may treat that student as being highly intelligent, which generates a D-identity that reinforces the student's previously held identity. Finally, that student may participate with other students also considered gifted and exhibit behaviors consistent with that type of group, fully marking that student as a member of that particular affinity group. While these identities all correlate with one another, there may be conflicting identities that this student maintains in different contexts or in different groups. For example, the student may also play soccer, where their physical prowess is far more important. The D-Identity of being a gifted student in school may not come into play, and the students' soccer peers may never discuss the individual's intelligence, thus shifting that student's identity in that context.

This identity is relevant within the classroom context as well. If students and teachers continue to play only traditional roles of "employees" and "manager," the opportunity for students to develop a sense of agency as a component of their identities is less likely. In fact, as Lewis, Enciso, & Moje (2007) believed, "it is important for sociocultural researchers to better understand the way that performances of social identity are cloaked in the fabric of power and ideology and economics" (p. 8). These scholars define power in a Foucauldian sense . . . "as a field of relations that circulate in social networks rather than originating from some point of domination" (p. 4). With the understanding that identity is fluid and can change or be changed by shifting the context or environment (Gee, 2001b; W. Glenn, 2016; E Moje, Lewis, & Enciso, 2007), educators and researchers might look at how the fabric of power could be changed within the classroom. By creating a sociocultural environment that explores literacy practices in



ways that see students as potential knowledge producers, the ability to create students who exhibit prosocial behaviors may be more likely.

### **Interpretive Framework**

In terms of using a sociocultural framework, pragmatism works well as an interpretive framework. Pragmatism translates into an engagement with inquiry that results in useful outcomes rather than in the discovery of knowledge that promotes the researcher's ideology or epistemology (Creswell, 2013; Unrau & Alvermann, 2013). Pragmatists do not see the world as an "absolute unity" and, as such, utilize approaches that generate answers for the situation that exists in that social, historical, and political moment. As Dillon, O'Brien, & Heilman (2013) posited, many studies that meet the "gold standard" don't necessarily generate the information participants find useful, so accepting different approaches to research may be more practical in education research. Juuti and Lavonen discussed the idea that pragmatism creates research that is *for* education rather than *about* education, and "through the lens of pragmatism, knowledge and 'research results' are simply that which is used and thoughtfully understood to be useful to real people in real contexts" (Dillon et al., 2013, p. 1108). This framework encourages keeping an open mind to the information the researcher might have as opposed to using it simply to reinforce any particular ideology, which allows the full potential of sociocultural theory to be explored through the research.

### **Researcher Perspective**

As a teacher with 19 years of classroom experience, I am a strong advocate for valuing the students' voice. In my experience, students who feel as if they have some

form of agency and power in the classroom are significantly more successful than those who do not. I feel as if this potential for generating agency and power might occur in many different forms, but one area that personally impacted me as an educator was the district-wide curriculum I was required to implement. Although my curriculum was not scripted at the level of daily lesson plans, I did not have a great deal of autonomy in terms of the texts that I was able to use with my own students. Having to explain to my students why we read a particular text year after year when I could barely grasp the reason behind its inclusion on the required reading list was painful.

Two events changed this experience that I did not discover until far too late in my career. The first event occurred after taking Poetry as Witness, a course that turned a critical eye on the power structures behind the poetry we read. I took that critical lens to my own secondary students, and suddenly the texts that I had dreaded dragging them through came alive in ways that hadn't happened in years. The students still weren't completing the reading on their own, but they were participating in the discussion as we pulled concepts into contemporary society, and this was definitely a step forward.

The second situation occurred when I was given a class with no standardized test or prescribed curriculum attached to it, and desperate for a connecting theme, I asked the students to become activists through their writing and action. The results of this class were incredible and powerful, and the students demonstrated their power and agency through the projects they chose to do both inside my classroom as well as in the community.

These two events' intersection coupled with my own experience with a restricted district curriculum informed my research and my practice, and this dissertation represents that positionality.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I draw on key literature, existing data, and research that act as a foundation for this inquiry into the role of Young Adult Literature (YAL) in shaping students' understandings of themselves as socially involved citizens. This project's emphasis on supporting high school students as they develop a sense of agency through the examination of YAL and subsequent social activism locates this work within the ongoing work that explores the power of young adult literature for adolescents. As this research emphasizes the adolescent's role, I will discuss the way these individuals and their identities have been perceived. Additionally, I will explore research in YAL that proposes the potential possibilities for use as a tool to develop democratic citizens.

#### **The Adolescent**

To understand these theoretical contexts, one must explore the current debate around the understandings of adolescence. The term adolescent itself is a relatively new one that only began to be used in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There has been a great deal of conflict over the years in terms of whether or not "storm and stress" adolescence is a necessary and universal experience (Arnett, 1999; Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). There is evidence that adolescents do, in fact, go through various stages of development that suggest some sort of transition or voyage (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). The impact this voyage may have on the adolescents' behaviors varies, however, and some researchers believe the idea of stages is essentially a social construct (Lesko, 2001; Stevens et al., 2007). It is generally agreed that the adolescent path is riddled with complexities and that there is no single way to teach these children (Alvermann, 2009; Christenbury, Bomer, &

Smagorinsky, 2009). As such, there is a call to search for the adolescent's voice in educational research (Alvermann, 2009; Christenbury et al., 2009; Intrator & Kunzman, 2009).

Many adults who find themselves removed from exposure to this group of individuals often discredit this group's skills and abilities. Even within education, the idea of the adolescent is often viewed through a deficit lens (Alvermann, 2009; Best, 2007; E Moje et al., 2007). Many adults see adolescents either as in a state of "becoming" or dealing with so many hormones that they cannot function appropriately in society. As Christenbury et al. (2009) posited, adolescents are not, however, in crisis. In fact, adolescents have strengths that many people in older generations do not typically possess, such as the ability to blur lines between variant individuals. This ability to "live in two worlds at once," as Buechner stated, is no picnic but may lend itself to a powerful form of agency (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). This inherent belief in an adolescent's power drove this research project.

### **The Missing Voice**

I developed this project in part to ensure that the adolescent voice is heard as a way of defining their agency. As part of the pragmatic framework, we researchers must include the participants in their own inquiry (Dillon et al., 2013); however, many research projects focus almost exclusively on the researchers' perspective and analysis as opposed to the participants' voices. Ideally, the research ought to be *for* education rather than *about* education (Dillon et al., 2013). For this to be a reality, the student voice is an important component of the work done in the research-oriented classroom (Best, 2007; K. Burke & Greene, 2015; Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). James (2007) called out the

paradoxical emphasis of research on children coupled with a distinct lack of children's voice. Burke & Green (2015), Dillon et al. (2013), Ivey & Johnston (2013), and Intrator & Kunzman (2009) reiterated this lack of student voice representation. Through the use of young adult literature and student choice, as researchers, we may be able to avoid inadvertently speaking *for* children (James, 2007) or simply using their words to justify or support our own preconceived notions (K. Burke & Greene, 2015).

### **Young Adult Literature**

Literature that is written for these adolescents may be a stepping stone to this goal. YAL holds significant potential for engaging students in powerful ways that may help them to shift their identities and agency in ways that may lead them to stronger levels of civic engagement regardless of their prior experiences or understandings of social justice issues. This literature has been defined in multiple ways over the years. One common YAL characteristic is that the protagonist is often an adolescent who deals with adult-sized problems without the any adults' assistance (Blasingame, 2014, in person). Nilsen et al. (2013) defined YAL as "anything that readers between the approximate ages of 12 and 18 choose to read either for leisure reading or to fill school assignments" (p. 3), while Bushman & Bushman (1993) defined YAL as "literature written for or about young adults" (p. 2). For the purposes of this study, I define YAL as literature written for readers between 12 and 20 years old that deals with adult issues presented for adolescents. Because this study provided only a limited sense of choice for the students, I chose not to include choice as a primary focus of my definition. Presumably, however, young adults have chosen the relevant novels for reading based

upon their presence on lists organizations such as the Young Adult Library Association (YALSA) put out.

**CCSS vs. YAL.** While YAL's impact is generally respected for its ability to engage students, YAL's use may appear to some as being in direct conflict with the intentions behind the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts. The recently adopted CCSS standards call for an increase of greater than 50% nonfiction in grades nine through 12 and push for greater text complexity as defined by several quantitative measures such as Flesch-Kincaid and The Lexile Framework (corestandards.org) Appendix A. While the National Governor's Association has changed the definition or explanation regarding the text valuation over the years, the exemplar texts that they provide as recommendations include only two young adult novels, *The Book Thief* and *Speak* (Goering & Connors, 2014), relegating YAL to a "second-class citizen" status in English Language arts classes (Goering & Connors, 2014). While YAL has become increasingly popular in mainstream culture, it has often been rejected in classrooms over the years (Angelotti, 1984; J. Hayn et al., 2016). As Applebee (2003) and later Stotsky (2010) have discovered, not only has the focus on canonical texts remained strong, the books themselves have remained virtually stagnant. If ELA instruction's purpose is to teach a discrete set of skills attached to specific pieces, then it would make sense to teach decades of children the same texts. If, however, as NCTE, ILA, and even the CCSS itself calls upon educators to prepare their students for the future, the texts themselves may need to change along with our changing society. YAL's silenced voice in nationally recognized documents such as the CCSS make these changes even more difficult, however.

Another factor contributing to the lack of YAL in the classroom has been teachers themselves (Angelotti, 1984; J. Hayn, Kaplan, & Nolen, 2011; J. Hayn et al., 2016), as teachers often do not feel the books are literary enough or offer enough academic growth potential. Thompson (2014), however, conducted a study where educators discussed and analyzed YAL. The findings show that teachers reported high potential for in-depth analysis that moves beyond relatability. As Langer (2013) posited, this use of an engaging literature can tap into differing cognitive functions necessary for intellectual development. This researcher believes that YAL particularly might be best suited to develop a social justice mindset that leads to social action in addition to achieving multiple standards put forth by the National Governors Association, and as such, it is important that we continue to educate the powers that be about the potential for these novels.

**Why change our instruction?** As part of the pragmatism framework, it is important that the product of a research project have a useful outcome, and one such outcome would be engaging students in their learning in a way that encourages continual growth. Much of our current instruction tends to focus solely on standards-based strategies and skills, although critically engaging students through literature they may connect with through discussion-based learning may encourage more self-discovery and future growth (Applebee & Langer, 2011; J. Hayn et al., 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Lesesne, 2007). There is often a disconnect between what students want to learn and what schools are teaching (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001), which is demonstrated through students' lack of engagement in the classroom (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). This is also displayed in the disparity between what they are capable of doing



inside the classroom as compared to what they do outside of the classroom, as evidenced by literacy-rich out-of-school activities (Beers, 2007).

If educators do not acknowledge student wishes, we will be doing a disservice to the very people we are meant to reach. To honor and value student voice while simultaneously affording these individuals access to the discourses necessary for success within the society, educators ought to consider how they value knowledge production through the privileging of texts they choose (Goering & Connors, 2014) in addition to the implication that there is a single “right” answer (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Hayn (2016) called upon classroom teachers to develop curriculum based “firmly on the concept that YAL has much to offer in improving and enhancing literacy skills” (p. 14). This idea was furthered by Ivey & Johnston (2013) when they wrote “. . . engaged reading offers the possibility of expanding the capacity for social imagination in the reader’s own life, potentially changing readers’ social behavior” (p. 257). Ignoring the realization that students have the opportunity to engage with YAL in significant ways that may have more of an impact on their continued growth would be irresponsible for the conscientious educator.

**YAL and critical literacy.** This study required students to critically read novels in order to identify social justice issues and the potential intersecting identities of the characters with their own lives. YAL is particularly well-suited to this type of critical thinking for several reasons. The identification of the students with the characters and situations portrayed within the story allow them to make connections in addition to forming questions about their own lives (Alsup, 2015; Alsup & Miller, 2014; W. Glenn, Ginsberg, Gaffey, Lund, & Meagher, 2012; J. Hayn et al., 2016). Additionally, as

student use these novels as an entry point to discuss the politics of daily life and the power structures of language and, ultimately, move toward action and social justice, they must think critically about the literature they are reading and the position of both the characters within the stories in relation to their understanding of life (Freire, 2005; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

**YAL's potential to change identity/agency.** This study attempted to discover how students might be moved to take action after reading YAL. A component of this process lay in how students identified with the character's story in addition to how their own identity shifts (Alsup, 2003, 2015). How instructors approach using YAL in their classroom is an important aspect of this shift. Bean (2003) discusses the success of removing the teacher from the center of the classroom coupled with teaching the students to evaluate YAL critically. The teacher, although not performing the traditional role of the knowledge producer, does not leave the students entirely on their own. The discourse and relationships that occur between the students and teachers and between the readers is critical to generate identity shifts that lead to empathy and ultimately to social action.

Ivey & Johnston (2013) wrote:

Relationally Oriented Reading Instruction...view engaged reading primarily as a site for the development of a dialogic, relational, narrative self—the development of a human being. It assumes that language events like reading and the conversations in which they are embedded become the raw materials for the construction of self, including, for example, the capacity for social imagination and the construction of other (p. 256).

This is critical to the idea that students may be moved enough to take action toward social justice.

Examples of students' identities being impacted through novel reading can be found in various studies. In 2013, Ivey & Johnston published the results of their study examining students' perceptions of the outcomes and processes of engaged reading in classrooms prioritizing engagement. The researchers conducted this study as a way to push back against the unheeded calls to make "engaged reading an essential component of adolescent literacy curricula" (p. 255). The study allowed the students from four 8<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms to read YAL of their choosing on their own and write on their own. The findings show that the students developed a sense of agency in several ways. They demonstrated social agency through ownership and sharing the novels they chose, moral agency by feeling capable of making a moral difference in the world, and life narrative agency in the decision to live differently and make positive life decisions in addition to self-regulation. Impressively, 55 of the 71 students reported expanding their world knowledge. This study demonstrates that the meaning constructed through reading is not merely about the text, but also about the self in relation to the text.

This transformational nature of reading was repeated in Malo-Juvera's (2014) study of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom who read *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999). In this study, the efficacy of reducing students' attitudes toward rape myth acceptance was evaluated. All students took a pretest ascertaining their rape myth acceptance levels. The students were randomly divided into control groups and treatment groups, and after reading the novel and using reader-response dialogic pedagogy, post-tests revealed that the novel significantly reduced the students' rape myth acceptance. This study demonstrates YAL's power in guiding students toward the real and important components of being a member of society.

This impact on identity can also occur in a relatively short period of time as demonstrated by Scherff's (2012) study of identity while using *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* by Neri & Duburke (2010). In this study, Scherff presented the students with four perspectives of identity as defined by Gee (2001a), and the students used these understandings of identity as a way to understand the Yummy's character. The study itself took place over two book club meetings in an after school setting in which she asked questions using reader response theory in addition to incorporating critical literacy. The students saw the character as having a hybrid identity, which allowed them to interrupt the cultural narratives they typically held concerning people who commit crimes. In addition to helping students interrupt the cultural narratives typically held concerning people who commit crimes, they were able to use these discussions as a mirror to question their own belief system.

These studies demonstrate the transformational nature of literature and, more specifically, YAL in powerful ways.

### **Fiction to Action**

An additional piece that drove much of my thinking in creating this study was not specifically focused on YAL but instead focuses on narrative fiction in general. I have included as much of the concepts behind the work as applicable to a YAL study that hopes to inspire action in students. Alsup's (2015) *Case for Teaching Literature in the Secondary School* made the case that narrative fiction can do more than simply be consumed; it can become a "catalyst for personal change" (p. 20). Alsup discussed the idea that reading literature through transactional events can shift the reader's identity.

She also discussed the idea that reading fiction has been linked to an ability to

generate empathy, and there are assumptions that this empathy may lead to a more prosocial behavior; however, “there has been little empirical evidence supporting the intuitive assumption that readers are better people”(Alsup, 2015, p. 36). Although the research is limited, several meta-analyses have been conducted over time that have had varied results in terms of the connection between empathetic feelings and prosocial action, but Alsup admitted that the link is tenuous at best without more work done in this field. She described a study she and several of her students conducted to test this potential link between reading literature and generating empathy. In this study, the students were given a pre- and post-test using a basic empathy scale in addition to conducting a qualitative case study. Their goal was to understand literature’s effect on the students. While there were not statistically significant increases or decreases through the quantitative measure, there were six students who demonstrated “big moves” and exhibited more empathy than they had prior to reading. Those students had responded to assigned writing prompts in class through their own narratives. Ultimately, those students who both *read* and *wrote* stories were more likely to report increased empathy. According to Alsup, this empathy is a necessary step to be moved to action. The knowledge that reading and some other form of activity may generate higher levels of empathy demonstrates that powerful literature coupled with powerful pedagogy may be what is needed to generate social change, as both Alsup (2015) and Ames (2013) suggested.

**YAL to foster social responsibility.** While it is a powerful event when one’s students feel emotionally connected to a novel, a pragmatic educator’s ultimate goal is to

teach students to be well-rounded and thoughtful about people both within and outside their communities. Several scholars have explored YAL's potential to generate this association with social responsibility. As Wolk (2009) posited, when an educator decides to approach their curriculum with an eye toward generating a sense of social responsibility, "the process becomes part of the content" (p. 666). That being said, the novels that are chosen play an important role in the potential for social action. Glasgow (2001) felt that it is necessary to create "democratic and critical spaces" where students question typical power structures if they are to become socially aware citizens (p.54). To do this, she used books that caused her college students to "question the ways that systems (race, privilege, gender) are implicated in specific actions, events or situations" (p. 55). As Wolk (2009) presented the idea that the inquiry becomes a part of the content, Glasgow also generated this symbiotic relationship between process and content. She asked her students to identify a form of oppression that captured their interest, and they were then paired with an appropriate selection of novels that dealt in some way with that issue. The resulting project, which gave them several entry points to discuss various issues, concluded with a powerful realization by one of the students, who writes, "This novel [*Spite Fences*] struck at the very core of my being and prompted me to take a closer look at serious problems" (Glasgow, 2001, p. 59).

Glenn, et al. (2012) reiterated this type of potential for individual, local, and global awareness when they encouraged us to "harness this literary energy by encouraging students to pay explicit attention to the interplay between a text, their own lives, and the larger communities they inhabit" (p. 25). They called for critical reading of texts, which may develop a sustained understanding and awareness of the need for action

within the community. Additionally, Stover & Bach (2011) saw YAL as a catalyst for community service and activism. As a part of their recommendation to generate this move to activism, they suggested that students have a choice in the issue they study, they use novels that invite interdisciplinary cooperation, and they utilize resources from other organizations that are dedicated to activism (i.e., University of Kansas' Community Tool Box). While these studies discuss a wide variety of ideas to generate social justice using young adult texts, several pieces focus on specific novels and how one might lead students to an action-oriented mindset.

Interestingly, dystopian literature's role as a mirror of society's ills make it particularly fruitful for this type of work. In general utopian and dystopian "literature encourages people to view their society with a critical eye, sensitizing or predisposing them to political action" according to Hintz & Ostry (Ames, 2013, p. 16). Several scholars have suggested that this use of dystopia is, in fact, a powerful "catalyst to incite real action" (Ames, 2013, p. 17). This is shown in the work of teachers like Briana Burke.

Burke (2013) used a thematic approach in her classroom and focused her work on environmental justice. While using the *Hunger Games* (Collins, 2010), she pointed out the difference in food availability and production in addition to who was making a profit from this food production to her students. She drew the connection between the fictional society Collins portrayed to the reality of our global society by examining power structures and political roles between the two. Through this process, they discussed the lack of knowledge the elite truly had and, ultimately, the sense of privilege those people in the Capitol demonstrated by their exorbitant excesses. While discussing the

entitlement the novel's characters show, she was also able to get the students to critically examine the attitude of privilege and sense of entitlement that many individuals with wealth hold in our own society. She eventually pulled from Dalai Lama's tribute to Ghandi where he stated that "To experience genuine compassion is to develop a feeling of closeness to others combined with a sense of responsibility for their welfare" (B. Burke, 2013, p. 62). Ultimately, within the novel, Katniss Everdeen was in a position of privilege through her status in the games, and the truly radical action that Katniss Everdeen participated in was showing compassion. Burke's ultimate goal was to encourage her own students to find and show this compassion as a way of coming together and rising up against oppressive forces.

Simmons (2012) also used *The Hunger Games* to inspire students to look critically at their society. She included a focus on hunger, both globally and in America, and various forms of slavery. She provided an overview of the similarities between our reality and the novel's fictional world and finished each section with examples of how students might take on some sort of social action. Simmons made an important point in her article by pointing out that often, when discussing serious issues in the classroom, students felt overwhelmed and incapable of doing anything. By coupling these discussions with social action, the students were allowed to feel a sense of hope as opposed to hopelessness.

**"How to" use YAL in the classroom.** If, as Alsup (2003) claimed, "many teachers tend to see reading and responding to literature as a pathway to becoming more human," the logical next step to educating students who are capable of becoming



empowered citizens within society will be to take these experiences into the field of social action.

While I have discovered studies that show how dystopian literature might be used for this course of action, several other scholars pointed to a wide variety of YAL texts that might justify social action (e.g., Ames, 2013; Glasgow, 2015; W. Glenn et al., 2012; Stover & Bach, 2011). There is a general agreement that three moves must be made for YAL to be as powerful as its potential.

The students themselves must have some sort of choice, either in terms of the novels they read (W. Glenn, 2016; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ivey & Johnston, 2013) or the issues they choose to address (Stover & Bach, 2011). Additionally, that reading must be followed up with some sort of dialogue that helps students to discuss identity in its various iterations in addition to the reflection upon the pieces (Alsup, 2003, 2015; Ames, 2013; Applebee et al., 2003; Gee, 2015; W. Glenn et al., 2012). Finally, although less researched, there seems to be some correlation between a tangible act and dialogue that lends itself to a more significant impact, either through action or longevity (Alsup, 2015). This knowledge and these experiences led me to this research project, supported by my belief that education is intended to address the whole student in ways that move beyond the skills and strategies associated with reading and writing in isolation.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is constantly evolving in terms of its applied use (Creswell, 2013).

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) most recently defined qualitative research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. (p. 3)

Creswell (2013) amended this definition by emphasizing the research process and discussing the “closer attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry” and its situation within the researchers’ “political, social and cultural contexts” (p. 45). As the definition and understanding of qualitative research continues to evolve, there appears to be a greater emphasis on using these multifaceted understandings to bring about change in the world.

In this research, I used qualitative methodology as a lens to enter the world of a secondary English classroom to examine the experience students have in using young adult literature (YAL) as an entry point into social-justice-oriented research. Case study methodology was the most conducive approach to this in-depth discovery. Creswell (2013) defined case study methodology as a “qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life contemporary bounded system . . . over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 97). This in-depth exploration allowed me to discover nuanced information that may not be apparent through a single data collection source, such as observation. Snape, Spencer,

and Ritchie (2003) emphasized that the case study must occur in a specific context that is critical to understanding the area of research, while Yin (2014) encouraged researchers to use the case study as an “opportunity to shed empirical light about some theoretical concepts or principles,” which results in a form of analytic generalization. I approached my study with the intent of gaining an empirical view of how using YAL in secondary education, coupled with social activism, impacts students within the classroom. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) stated, “everyday teaching and learning are complex social happenings, and understanding them as such is the grand purpose of qualitative case studies” (p. 9). Understanding how students react to literature within an English classroom is important work that must be done and redone with our ever-changing society if it is our intention to respond to our students’ needs in education.

### **Research Purpose, Context, and Participants**

This study examined students’ experiences in a classroom where they were asked to read YAL through the lens of a previously chosen social justice issue followed by the task of addressing the issue in some way. Specifically, the research explored (a) the power of the novel as a source of knowledge, (b) factors that impact their reading experience, (c) the interactions students had with the texts in terms of students’ identification with the characters or issues, and (d) their approach to taking action regarding social justice issues. The following research questions guided the study’s focus while allowing for unanticipated developments that may have occurred throughout the study:

The research question and sub-questions that drove the study included:

1. How does reading YAL within a social activism framework shape students' understanding of social justice issues as well as their capacity to act upon that understanding?
  - a. How does prior experience shape the reader's perception of the issue or their experience?
  - b. How does reading the novel affect their understanding of a social justice issue?
  - c. How does character identification correlate with an action plan?

This project's overarching goal was to identify how YAL influenced students' relationship with social justice issues.

**Site Selection.** Selecting the site was purposive in that the school and classroom chosen represented specific demographics and interests (Creswell, 2013; Snape et al., 2003). Because the research project focused on exploring social justice issues, the potential value for this project was more pronounced in a school where the students were more likely to be exposed to social injustices, therefore giving researchers and teachers an opportunity to learn from the students (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009).

The 9-12 grade high school, which I will call Desert High School, was a richly diverse student body. In the 2016-2017 school year, they had 2600 students and a racial and economic presence that matched the state's average. They were 43.5% Hispanic, 39.5% white, 8.6%, African American, 4.5% Native American, and 3.1% Asian. Seventy percent of their students qualified for free/reduced lunch. These demographics made it an appropriate place to conduct this research.

**The Class.** The classroom itself was an east-west facing rectangle with doors on both ends. The desks were originally arranged in rows, but Ms. Land shifted the desks to groups after the first week of reading in order to facilitate better communication between the students (Van den Berg, Segers, & Cillessen, 2011). There was a wall of cabinets along the south side of the classroom, and several small tables were placed strategically around the edge of the classroom for papers to be passed back or to be used as charging stations for the students' assigned Chromebooks. More often, however, the students could be found charging their personal devices, which seemed to be understood as a natural course of action.

The class I observed was a third-hour honors sophomore English course, which was chosen as it was the only course where the teacher had autonomy with the curriculum that also fit within my open time to conduct observations. The classroom itself closely matched the demographics of the school. There were 25 students in the class, including nine Latina females, two Latino Males, six White females, six White males, one African American female, and one Tongan male. They seemed like a fairly relaxed group of students, although most of the students got to work fairly quickly each class period once they were set onto a task. For example, in almost every class period that I observed, a group of students milled around the class within that short period of time after the bell had rung, but before Ms. Land was quite ready to begin, she was able to give them the silent stare from the front corner of the room, which worked within about 60 seconds each time. I quickly learned the names of the most vocal and energetic students and identified those whose primary role seemed to be the class clown. The constant badgering of one another emanated a sense of comfort from the students, and for

the most part, the students seemed to be highly familiar with one another and well aware of one another's idiosyncrasies.

**Participant Selection.** Students who participated in this study were selected based on purposive selection (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) as opposed to a random sample. I observed the entire class as one case (Yin, 2014), and I selected students who met the following criteria in order to conduct interviews:

1. The student had signed consent forms.
2. The student completed the novel.
3. The students were from different literature circles, with one exception.
4. The students varied in terms of gender and ethnicity.

I interviewed individuals from different literature circles to observe a wide range of experiences and issues, which may provide for some small amount of generalizability (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). There was one exception in which I chose a student from a literature circle to expand the gender and ethnicity of the interviewees, but one of his literature circle members took the lead on the action plan they chose to do together. I was interested to find out what inspired her to follow the action plan they chose. I also conducted a focus group interview at the end of the curriculum to get both a later interview with the students and allow them to have a conversation with one another in order to provide a different dynamic than the one-on-one interviews.

**Josephine.** Josephine was an outspoken white girl in Ms. Land's classroom. She has blonde hair, appeared to have an average sense of style, and carried herself with an air of confidence that came from knowing she was successful in this course. Within this curriculum, Josephine chose to read *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell, winner of no

less than six awards. The story was ultimately a love story, but the protagonist of the novel was a young lady in poverty whose stepfather was cruel and whose mother didn't have the fortitude or ability to remove them from the situation. While Josephine identified quite strongly with the novel in the beginning, her ability to empathize and connect with the protagonist shifted as the realities presented in the novel began to come up against her personal world view. The cognitive dissonance that Josephine experienced through reading this perspective on poverty created a sense of paralysis for her that did not allow her to complete her action plan or take any significant steps toward identifying a concrete plan of attack that would help to solve the social justice issue of poverty.

**Max.** Max was a quietly confident white boy who played on the junior varsity football team for the high school. He had short reddish-blond hair with a splash or freckles across his face and tended to look down at his desk when he was talking to me, but he appeared to be comfortable with his role in the classroom, and his social status seemed relatively high compared to his peers based on the way they fluttered around his desk before class began. Within this curriculum, Max chose to read *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely, winner of 24 awards and nominations. This story was a clear-cut example of art imitating life and was born out of a need to explore the difficult reality of what it meant to grow up black in today's militarized police society. The authors were touring together when George Zimmerman was found not guilty in the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin, and this fiction novel, based on fact, is their recreation of these types of stories and the necessary discussion that must happen. Max strongly identified with the white character, Quinn, who just couldn't believe that his best friend's

cousin would commit this brutality, and his initial hope was that it would all just go away.

**Cat.** Cat was a quiet, serious-seeming Latina young woman who was less engaged with her group but seemed to hold her own. Her brown curly hair and skinny jeans seemed very fashionable, but she doesn't seem to be as interested in what other people think of her style, like other girls in the class. The group she ended up in tended to be the class clowns, and she was one of two members who seemed more focused on the task at hand as opposed to distracting the teacher or her peers. Within this curriculum, Cat chose to read *Chinese Handcuffs* by Chris Crutcher, a book often banned because of its intense subject matter. This novel was a discussion of substance abuse, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and child abuse. Cat identified with Jennifer, who was a star basketball player who remained silent about her problems and feelings.

**Victoria.** Victoria was a strongly religious, white Christian who initially expressed concern about using an activity her church inspired to fulfill a school assignment. She worried that it might not be a true enough expression of her faith if she was also getting credit for her work. She chose to read *The Good Braider* by Terry Farish, which was named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults. This novel told the story of a refugee from South Sudan, including the reason for her leaving as well as the struggles she faced upon arrival in America. Victoria identified with the characters who assist Viola, the protagonist, throughout the novel.

**Valentina.** Valentina was an exuberant, outgoing young Latina woman who was chatty almost to a fault. While her entire group was very much excitable and committed to the project, she carried them throughout their discussions. Valentina actually did not



choose the novel initially because she was absent on the day the students filled out their surveys, yet she agreed to be put into any group. It was interesting to discover that her sister is lesbian. The novel she read for this curriculum was *Openly Straight* by Bill Koninsberg, recipient of 17 awards and nominations from various organizations. This book followed the story of a gay boy who was tired of being the sole voice for all gays in his hometown, so he leaves for an all-male boarding school across the country where he has to redefine his sense of himself. Valentina also identifies with the teacher in the novel who is there to offer sage advice and introspective ideas to the main characters.

**Jade.** Jade was a quiet, unassuming Latina student who became a reluctant leader of her group. Including Jade, all but one member of the group directly identified with the story's plot line as each one of them was a first-born American within their family, and three of the students had begun school not speaking English. Jade told the story of how her mother moved here when she was 15 with her 12 siblings, and they all lived in a trailer together. Jade read *The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez, winner of 10 awards. This novel was the beginning of a series that focused on the life experiences of the protagonist as they did migrant work while living in America as illegal immigrants. Jade did not identify with the main character but instead with Roberto, who was the oldest and had to take care of all of his younger siblings, including the protagonists, and also had to serve as the example of how to survive in this unfamiliar world.

**Liza.** Liza was a self-driven young African-American woman who was very concerned about her grades and saw herself as smarter than her peers and, therefore, less likely to interact with them. Her group chose to read *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini, which was given the American Library Association's Best Book for Young

Adults Award. This novel was the story of Craig, who had a mental breakdown and checked himself into the hospital where he found a way to continue living. Liza identified quite heavily with Craig because she herself suffered from depression, and she spent a great deal of time discussing how she had experienced exactly the feelings and emotions depicted in Vizzini's telling.

**Ms. Land.** Ms. Land is a white woman in her early 30's who plays drums for an all-girl punk band on the weekends. This is her third year teaching, and she is incredibly organized and reflective about her practice. During our summer meetings, she expressed excitement about focusing on Project Based Learning this semester, and as such, was excited about using YAL in the classroom to generate social justice oriented action plans. Ms. Land was willing to give the students a great deal of choice in their social justice issue, their text choice, and the form of their final action plan, which was important to the research. She was excited to implement a curriculum with the goal of generating civic activism within her classroom (Garcia et al., 2015). She taught sophomore honors courses, regular sophomores and an English Language Learner (ELL) course in this semester. Since she had a fairly scripted curriculum for her regular sophomore classes, she was only able to utilize the curriculum from this study in her honors courses, but she did implement the curriculum in all three of her courses. As this type of curriculum focus is relatively new for many teachers, the number of years she has been in the classroom did not hinder the curricular focus and may, in fact, have supported the curriculum's flexible nature.

## **Researcher Positionality**

Recognizing my 19 years of teaching experience in the secondary classroom, in addition to my identity as a white, middle-aged, straight female, I understand the need to identify my positionality. As Dyson & Genishi (2005) discussed, Ms. Land and I needed to develop an understanding of our working roles throughout this unit. My experience in my own classroom, my experience working with three student teachers in my own classroom, and my more recent experience of teaching preservice teachers in ENG 480: Writing Methods and ENG 471: Young Adult Literature at the university level could have created potential barriers between the relationship the teacher and I were able to develop. As Ms. Land had relatively few years of teaching (three) and was also open to new ideas, there were no barriers within our relationship. She and I worked in a very reciprocal fashion throughout the process, with both of us contributing materials that would support the students throughout various components of their curriculum.

Additionally, I am highly interested in introducing activism in the classroom. The social-justice-oriented curriculum utilized required students to question the power structure often in place within an educational institution, which may have been seen as a negative consequence of this work for the institution (Freire, 2005; Trites, 2000). This did not turn out to be a concern with this particular teacher or the district.

Dyson & Genishi (2005) recommend that the researcher address all components of his or her identity. My positionality as white female attempting to discuss action research with students who may be marginalized had the potential to create a tension. Additionally, if the teacher is a white, straight female, this presents a singular view of who maintains power within the classroom, which may be negatively viewed or

disempowering for some students in the class. In terms of the interview responses, gender seemed to play a more relevant role than ethnicity for most of the students. Most of the female participants were much more forthcoming with their thought process throughout the interviews and expounded upon their ideas quite freely and readily. Three of the participants (one female and two males) were more reticent throughout the interview process, although they did not resist being interviewed. They were less likely to expand upon their thoughts and did not respond to follow-up emails after the focus group interview. During the one-on-one interviews, they did provide examples to support their statements, but only after questioning. During the focus group interview, they did not refer to the examples they provided during the one-on-one interview, and they were less likely to voluntarily share.

My own interest in this particular type of work in the classroom arose out of my desire to help my own students see the importance of research and writing in addition to supporting their journey to becoming civic-minded citizens who felt that they could positively influence their community. Utilizing YAL to inspire this work arose from my own restricted experiences in the classroom where I was required to teach a rigid curriculum that did not allow for implementing contemporary novels if they had not gone through a rigorous adoption process by the entire district, which consisted of 36,000 students. As a result, I recognize that I had particular preconceived ideas about how this curriculum might work and what might have happened. I spent a great deal of time exploring the data and began with open-coding all of the data as opposed to focusing on my research questions to eliminate any preconceived bias that I might have carried with me into the analysis. To avoid confirmation bias, I avoided choosing only those research

participants who participated with the curriculum in obvious ways, which was addressed for the most part through my attempts to gather information from the most diverse group possible. I did have one participant who fell outside the original parameters of the selection process because of an overabundance of Latina females in the pool of eligible interviewees, although her outreach to the school board warranted further research. As such, I added an additional participant to the interview and focus group process.

### **Curriculum Development**

While there was a tentative curriculum in place for this research, there was flexibility to allow the teacher to maintain control over the pacing of the class. The students were given a survey containing a list of social justice issues (e.g., racial equality, gender equality, immigration, LGBTQ, poverty, abuse, mental health, Muslim discrimination, refugees, and environment). The students were then asked to rank these issues in order of importance to them. The survey can be found in Appendix A. Once the students prioritized the issues, they were grouped into those areas. In the interest of making sure that Ms. Land maintained manageable groups to conduct literature circles (Daniels, 2006), the students were placed into groups not larger than six students, which may have meant that they did not focus on their top priority, although each student was able to focus on a social justice issue they were interested in researching and working on. In a next iteration of this project, Ms. Land and I discussed allowing more than one group to focus on a particular book if there were high interest in that book.

Once they selected their issue and were put into groups, they were assigned a young adult novel that they read as a group. They were given a set number of pages (Appendix B) to read each day for four weeks in addition to a variety of activities

throughout the weeks that supported their understanding of the social justice issue or their work on the action plan. Within the literature circles, the students were assigned roles as a means of fostering discussion within the groups, in addition to having a certain level of individual accountability because they were working without explicit teacher instruction to do the reading. The students were given a packet containing various literature circles roles, which they completed throughout the process, which was found online by searching for literature circle roles. The students did not enjoy the roles they were asked to complete and stated that the worksheets felt like busy work. In listening to the recordings of the literature circles, the students' discussions did not occur naturally, so as a researcher, they did not offer insight into the ways that the novel was affecting the students. Ms. Land did discuss modifying the approach to literature circles somewhat to try to foster more natural discussion, while still providing guidelines for students to follow in their initial meetings as a group.

The students were often given worksheets and activities through OneNote accounts, which Ms. Land had access to from her computer. Each student in the school had been assigned a ChromeBook, and the students were quite familiar with accessing materials their teachers uploaded to their files. Ms. Land was able to upload templates for action plans, reading guides, and journal prompts on her oneNote, for example, and each student found the relevant information on a designated tab in their ELA folder once they logged into their personal device. One aspect of their daily assignment included responding to journal prompts each day throughout their reading, which Ms. Land and I developed together in the first week of the curriculum. They were given the following five questions to respond to that they recycled each week:

Monday: What character did you most identify with?

Tuesday: What emotions did you have during your reading yesterday? Why?

Wednesday: What part of the novel did you feel was most significant? Why?

Thursday: How is this book portraying a social injustice?

Friday: What would you do to solve this issue if you had all the power in the world?

These journal questions allowed the participants' reading experiences to be accessed throughout the process, although there was not 100 percent participation from each interviewee, either in terms of answering both sections of the question or in terms of not having entries for each day of the week throughout the entire process. The journals did provide insight into the changing nature of the participants' thought processes, however.

The summative assessments that Ms. Land asked the students to complete included a presentation to the class about their social justice issue and completion of an action plan. They were asked to complete a presentation that was informational and based upon their research as a group, and they had an option to work independently for the action plan or to work together. While many of the groups did choose to work together on their action plan, several individuals throughout the class chose to work on their own for the action plan. Each of the participants I interviewed, however, chose to work with at least one other person, so I am not sure why the other individuals chose to work alone. Based on some of my participants' responses, it is possible that those students may have wanted to do it "right" or do it on their own based on previous negative experience with group work. While Ms. Land provided specific guidelines that the students were expected to follow for the group presentation, she was flexible in terms

of the action plans the students conducted or presented in order to allow as much autonomy and potential buy-in as possible.

**Text Selection.** The texts that were chosen for the reading groups were based upon the issues that were chosen by the individual students. Most books were selected by the researcher and another teacher from a pilot study after reviewing sites including Goodreads, YALSA, NPR, and Amazon. Within the pilot study, all groups of students professed excitement and interest in these novels, so Ms. Land assumed they were likely to be well received and opted to keep the same book options. Additionally, accessing the books was easier as the pilot study teacher still had several of the novels from the previous year that he had purchased or that students had donated to him after the project. One exception to this was the trading out of *Monster* by Walter Dean Meyers for *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely. The teacher agreed that the most contemporary version of an issue would likely be the best option. For a specific list of all texts, see Appendix C.

**Action Plan.** The students created an action plan that laid out how they might address the issue they chose to focus on. Part of this assignment included research on the context of the issue, research on an expert who discussed the issue, and ideas and/or steps toward solving the issues or supporting people who deal with the issue. According to Graham (2008; 2007), making writing public is one students may get more buy-in to a product, and creating an action plan with the goal of making it public is one way students might find more buy-in to their action research.

The action plan's scope was not restricted or limited because the plan did not have to be executed under sanction of the school or this study, and the goal was to see what



type of thinking students would have surrounding their issues. As a researcher, I was primarily interested in their thought processes behind the action research as opposed to the form that the final product took. As an educator who has conducted this type of participatory action research in my own classroom, I have seen multiple approaches toward this type of work, and one component that may impact the success of the project, and autonomy is the students' motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The students, however, struggled with organizing their thoughts on the action plan, so Ms. Land provided them with a template (Appendix D) they could follow so they would know what issues to address in developing their action plan. She also directed students to the website, <http://ctb.ku.edu/en>, that focuses on community engagement, which gave students more information on how they might tackle their work.

### **Data Collection**

To collect data, it was important that I exhibit the following attributes per Yin (2014): (a) ask good questions; (b) be a good “listener”; (c) stay adaptive; (d) have a firm grasp of the issues being studied; (e) avoid biases by being sensitive to contrary evidence; and (f) conduct research ethically. The information I collected was not predictable, so it was critical that I was flexible with my research questions. This flexibility allowed me to be aware of the interviewee's body positioning, receptivity, and verbal answers to develop further questions. It was also important that I maintain focus on the issues throughout my own research. My own personal struggle within the interviews was wanting to encourage students in their action plan in addition to asking them questions that might challenge their stated perceptions, which may have caused them to change their responses to meet my perceived expectations. I found myself wanting to offer

sympathy to the students' academic or personal struggles with the reading, social justice issue, or assignment, as well, and that cut into the amount of information I was able to get from the participants in some cases because of a shortage of time.

Researchers are often familiar with what has been done before and are therefore more inclined to ignore contrary evidence (Yin, 2014). I am particularly inclined to want to support the idea of using YAL as a bridge to activism research, although I realized that there are many questions about the way students interact with YAL that helped me to remain objective. It was also critical that I conduct my research ethically in a way that honors and respects the teacher's position in the classroom in addition to the students' perceptions of the curriculum.

**Time frame of data collection.** Data collection took place during the first semester of the 2016-2017 school year, beginning immediately after Labor day. Prior to the official start of data collection, I met with the teacher over the summer break to discuss the implementation of the curriculum and how she might fit it into her classroom plans. These meetings included making sure that the teacher understood what parts of the curriculum were important (using YAL, discussing social justice, and asking the students to create some type of action plan) in addition to supporting the teacher with incorporating these components into the curriculum as defined by the school. While the initial data collection was supposed to finish at the end of October, Ms. Land continued the project until the semester exams in December because the students were so engaged in the project and it was taking longer than expected to complete. The final focus interview took place the week before final exams.

**Types of data collected.** As per Yin (2014), I prepared a case study protocol. In an attempt to create a “converging line of inquiry” through data triangulation (Yin, 2014, p. 120), multiple sources of evidence were collected.

**Fieldnotes.** This study began with a holistic classroom observation. My goal was to collect data from “people and institutions in *their* everyday situations” (Yin, 2014, p. 88). I observed the classroom setup in addition to the sociocultural classroom environment the students and teacher created by exploring how students interacted with their books as well as how they interacted with one another in their literature circles. Using OneNote, I created pages for different observational days to track class activities and describe how students were engaged with their reading. This allowed me to include any points of interest about the novel or the action plans overheard from students in the classroom. This allowed me to get a general sense of how most of the students felt about the novel and the curriculum outside of the one-on-one interviews I conducted with the participants.

I also took notes on how Ms. Land interacted with the curriculum and her students. Understanding how Ms. Land framed her instruction regarding the action plan and reading was important to understanding the types of approaches students took to their action plans.

**Interviews and focus groups.** Audio recordings took place throughout the implementation of this project. The recordings took place during the interviews and focus groups as a way of capturing everything that is said, allowing me to be an active listener who could create a more conversational environment (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I used my iPhone 6s to make audio recordings during the interviews, which worked well.

The sound quality was high, and the ease of transferring the files to my computer was useful.

I conducted seven semistructured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) with each participant individually after they had finished their novel. Informed by a previous pilot study, I developed interview questions to gather a wide range of information from the students so that I could be sure to get insight into the way the participants felt about the novel and the curriculum. I also wanted to be sure that the questions were open-ended so that I would have an opportunity to discover their truth without being limited by my own potential biases.

In order to get an in-depth understanding of the individual participants' experiences, I asked them several questions that ranged in topic. I asked them questions about their prior experience with their chosen social justice issue, their experiences and sense of identification while reading the novel, their experiences with the literature circles and, finally, their plan to take action. As these interviews covered a range of topics, I attempted to give the participants as much time as possible to discuss their experiences, and the average length of time was approximately 30 minutes. See Appendix E for interview questions.

I had 40 minutes to conduct the focus group interview, which was conducted on the final regular class day of the semester just prior to beginning the final exam schedule. Had we had more time, or a second day to conduct the focus group interview, I would have done so, as some of their discussion had to be cut short due to the bell ringing. The questions I developed for the focus group were intended to generate conversation between participants as opposed to a question/answer session with me. As such, there

were only four questions asked in the focus group, and they were primarily focused on the action plan, since I had discussed the novel in a more in-depth fashion with each individual prior to the focus group. Additionally, by the time the focus group met, they had completed their action plans and presented them to the class, and I wanted to get a better sense of what their feelings were regarding the curriculum and the growth they may or may not have experienced. To get the most in-depth responses to the questions, the interview was semistructured and conversational (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). See Appendix E for focus group interview questions.

**Journals.** As Dyson (2005) stated, “the researcher’s purpose is not merely to organize data but to try to identify and gain analytic insight into the dimensions and dynamics of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 81). Because much of the thinking that occurred happened while the students were reading their novels and creating their action plans, I asked the teacher to provide the students with a few minutes each day to record their thoughts on five questions that they recycled four times while they were reading. I collected the resulting journal that the students were asked to complete online or by hand. I collected journals from only the participants who were interviewed.

### **Data Analysis**

As a part of understanding how these various pieces of information “converge” (Yin, 2014), I followed the guidelines Rubin & Rubin (2012) put forth in analyzing the responsive interviews by (1) Transcribing and summarizing each interview; (2) Defining, finding, and marking the text using codes; (3) Sorting the codes into data files; (4) Sorting and resorting the material between data files; and (5) Integrating descriptions from different interviews to generate a picture (p. 190).

Using NVivo, I began with initial coding of my first interview (Saldaña, 2013) to identify what types of ideas or concepts were being mentioned throughout that interview. This resulted in well over 25 nodes, or codes from the first interview. Utilizing the lens of sociocultural and identity theory I looked for patterns (Yin, 2014) and moments of interest through all the one-on-one interviews, focus group interview, observations, and journals, although there were multiple outliers that did not fit within the concepts generated in the first interview I initially coded. As a result, when I was done coding all interviews and journals, I had 49 different nodes. I went back through the nodes to identify ideas that might be combined, and I sorted the ideas into various categories. From these categories, I developed four major themes including: the novel was a source for knowledge, prior experience impacted reading, productive discomfort occurred, identification with character impacted action. The following table is an example of the ways that a set of codes were collapsed into a theme.

Table 1  
Example of collapsing codes

Original Codes	Collapsed Code	Theme
Changed the way I think Didn't know Different perspective on issue Impact on understanding of issue Increased awareness Seeing more from book Shifting internal dialogue	Deeper insight because of book	The novel was a source for knowledge

After identifying major topics that participants were discussing, I looked for examples throughout each interview to see how the different students were discussing the

texts, their experiences, and the resulting action plan. In developing the findings, I compared experiences across individuals to identify similarities and differences within their responses to the text and the action plan.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

To discover how educators may support students' growth through reading Young Adult Literature (YAL) on their journey toward becoming social activists, this study addressed the following questions:

1. How does reading YAL within a social activism framework shape students' understanding of social justice issues and their capacity to act upon that understanding?
  - a. How does prior experience shape the readers' perceptions of the issue or their experience?
  - b. How does reading the novel affect their understanding of a social justice issue?
  - c. How does character identification correlate with an action plan?

#### **The Power of a Novel as a Source for Knowledge**

This study supports the intuitive idea that students may gain more understanding of the complexities and implications of an issue from reading narrative fiction (Alsup, 2015) than from reading traditional research-oriented articles. In this research, six of the seven students interviewed stated that the novel they read had more of an impact on their understanding of the issue they chose to explore than their supplementary research or even their own prior experience with the issue. One of the two students who did not identify the novel as being significant to her understanding of the issue felt that the novel was simply another retelling of her own family's experience. The other student who did



not identify the novel as being the most informative aspect of the curriculum experienced depression herself and instead saw the novel as an accurate and powerful reflection of her own experience, which I discuss in the novel inspires healing section.

**Victoria and refugees.** Victoria was the first example of a student who felt that she learned more from the novel than from her own experiences. Victoria read *The Good Braider*, which focused on refugees. According to her one-on-one interview responses, Victoria's church adopted several refugee families through the Welcome to America project. The Welcome to America project supports refugees by providing necessary items to ease their transition into a new home. Victoria's church also focused on other aspects of supporting refugees. For example, Victoria told the interviewer the story of her aunt going to a refugee family's house:

She goes there to teach English a little bit, and to take care of the kids. When she talks about them, they act like every normal kid. I think she likes telling stories about what happens when she goes there sometimes. She's sometimes learning some words in their language a little bit, from what they say to her. They're learning English, obviously.

Victoria's language in discussing this aspect was interesting because she pointed out that these kids "act like every normal kid." Her use of the word "normal" indicates that she may have felt removed from these children on some level and viewed them as somewhat different. It also may indicate that she was somewhat surprised by the relative "sameness" between her knowledge and understanding of the way children behaved compared to this family who had gone through significant struggle. Her apparent need to normalize these refugees may be due to her inability to understand the situation refugees experienced, which may explain why she felt that she gained more insight and awareness from the novel. Here, she described her church's role in refugee settlement and the

Middle East, in addition to the expanded knowledge she achieved from reading this novel:

Well, I've already known quite a bit about refugees before, 'cause my church works with some Syrian refugees. Our church is taking care of families here who are refugees. My church also works a lot in the Middle East. I hear a lot about it, but I think that this book gave me more of an idea of how . . . severe it is, more specifically what their lives are more like in the war-torn country, and what their lives are like when they flee to America; how they literally have nothing, and they are wanting to live and thrive in a country that is complicated, so complicated.

While she stated that she heard “a lot” about it, the novel deepened her understanding of the complexities of their experiences. It is interesting to note that the newfound information is not relegated to the experiences within the war-torn country alone, but also the experiences these individuals had upon their arrival in America. This might be the most critical realization for someone who is clearly supportive of refugees and considers herself an ally to this group.

The understanding that an individual’s difficult situation is not immediately remedied upon stepping into our country’s borders is important to the continued success of a solid immigrant population. This bears out when one explores who has committed recent terrorist attacks within our country’s borders. According to Friedman (*The Atlantic*, 2017), most of the terrorist attacks within our country have stemmed from first-generation American citizens whose parents were immigrants. Former Department of Homeland Security and Immigration Services Director Leon Rodriguez suggested that this may stem from the discrimination and cruelty many people may experience once they arrive upon American shores (Burnett, 2017).

Victoria continued to say that the novel itself, “. . . did affirm what I already knew, but it had some things that I didn't even think about before, deeper into what I

already knew . . .” In this particular instance, the novel did not necessarily expose her to entirely new ideas but allowed her to process the issue from a more nuanced stance.

When asked about whether her research on refugee issues or her personal experience influenced her understanding of the issue, her response was that, “[o]bviously, the novel helped me become more aware. It became more personal . . .” It is this personal touch that allows students to generate an even higher level of empathy. In this case, the student was already a highly empathetic individual, as evidenced by her participation with her church group, in addition to her self-proclaimed sense of empathy. The realization that a novel addressing an issue is more significant in her understanding and ability to empathize with an entire group of people, by extension, is powerful. This knowledge is something that can support our teachers in preparing students to be more engaged within their community.

**Josephine and refugees.** Josephine was perhaps the most striking example of someone who learned the most from the novel as opposed to prior experience or research. Josephine read *Eleanor and Park*. One of the first things she stated when she sat down for her interview after being asked if the novel changed the way she viewed the issue of poverty was “[t]his sounds awful, but I see them more as like people . . .” The “them” in question were people in poverty. Josephine demonstrated an unconscious “othering” that was obviously occurring before she read the novel, but it is important to note that she is still doing a significant amount of “othering” even after reading the novel. She referred to the personhood of Eleanor (the main character) multiple times throughout the one-on-one interview. Josephine saw Eleanor as the main character in the story, which was the reason that she saw her as a person. Josephine’s identification of Eleanor’s importance as

a main character is interesting in multiple ways. What is Josephine's internal conception of a main character? How and why does Eleanor's poverty-stricken existence surprise Josephine? This surprise is exhibited when Josephine said, "I just saw her a person because she was the main character in the story". It seemed that Josephine had not imagined that someone who struggled with poverty was someone who could play a story's starring role. This indicates that she has no firsthand or possibly even secondhand experience with anyone who has experienced true poverty. She does express belief that she knows what poverty is, however. She goes on to explain that she is not a complete stranger to the concept of poverty:

I've always known what poverty is. I've known usually what it entails. I know that it's usually a bad home life, usually can lead to a bad school life, and usually the people who are affected by it, especially the teenagers, are different and they feel different and they're outcasts and stuff, but I didn't know it could be that bad. At this school, there's poverty here, but it's nothing bad. It's nothing like a whole group of kids ganging up on someone. I've never seen that, so I didn't think poverty could do that to a school.

There are issues worth addressing. She thinks poverty must inherently indicate a bad home life and/or a bad school life. These are naïve, potentially harmful, uninformed assumptions on her part. Again, like Victoria and her limited understanding of refugees, Josephine demonstrates that she was not fully aware of the significant struggles people in poverty have, particularly in environments that Josephine was familiar with, such as school. This is not information that she would have gleaned from a report on poverty or a newspaper article detailing the difficult situations the poor or homeless experience. Later in the interview, Josephine reiterated the idea that the novel was important in her deeper understanding of those who suffer from poverty, although she also acknowledged that it was one portion of her understanding of the issue at large. She said, "[r]eading the book,

like I said, changed the way I thought about individuals. I've always been aware of the issue because I drive by the people on the road and stuff, so I don't know. It was everything contributing a little bit to . . .” If her previous conceptions of what it meant to be poverty stricken were derived from drive-by observations, it makes sense that she would be surprised at Eleanor’s struggles or the idea that someone who might attend a school like her own could be struggling with this social justice issue. It is interesting to note that her comments drifted off in this moment. She never did come back to this idea. I believe she was struggling to align her experience reading the novel with her previous understanding of this issue, hopefully leading to a productive form of discomfort, which I discuss in the section titled productive discomfort.

While I don’t believe Josephine learned specific facts or details about poverty from the novel, the important information that she gained was the realization that someone who she very much identified with in the beginning of the novel could be suffering from an issue from which she is so far removed, thereby humanizing poverty for her. This sense of “learning” that she had was more relevant to her growing understanding of the individuals who suffer from an issue.

### **How Does Prior Experience Impact the Reading Experience?**

With the understanding that reading and literacy take place within an ideological framework (Street, 1984), it is to be expected that students will have different experiences with the novels they read based upon their classroom environment, their peer groups, and their own prior experiences. This section explores the experiences that individuals have with books based upon their own prior experiences. In this particular curriculum, the students were assigned a lens with which to approach the novel, so the

students were specifically asked about their prior experiences with the social justice issue that they were focused upon as a way of ascertaining the novel's impact on their understanding of the issue.

**Valentina and LGBTQ.** Based upon Valentina's prior experience with LGBTQ, her experience was quite surprising. Valentina read *Openly Straight*. Her group read the novel more quickly than the original timeline asked them to, and I asked the group to talk with me in the hallway about their experiences with the novel. The three girls were all very excited about the book and expressed their joy at its novelty. Valentina made an almost offhand comment that was the most surprising to me, stating that her sister was a member of the LGBTQ community, and while she and her sister talked about being gay, Valentina never really thought about it or understood what her sister may have been going through. Later, in our one-on-one interview, I asked Valentina which component of the curriculum influenced her action plan the most—the novel, the research, or her prior experience, and she stated:

It would definitely have to be the book. The book. Because I saw a perspective of a gay person and what they were thinking, and then it made me realize that if they're thinking this, then why are [other] people thinking this? That we should all be more helpful to one another, and that we should also be more understanding and not to differentiate [others] just because of their sexuality.

This idea gets at the concepts Bishop (1990) posed in that Valentina was able to use this novel as a window to see into LGBTQ people's experiences, and perhaps more importantly, other people in society who do not share her acceptance of the LGBTQ community.

### **How Does a Lack of Prior Experience Impact the Reading Experience?**

While many of the students had some level of experience with the social justice issues they were reading about, there were several students who had no prior experience with the issue. These students' experiences were still quite powerful. The curriculum's ideological framework allowed students to pull more from the novel than they might have without this lens.

**Max and racism.** Max was a student who had no prior experience at all with the issue. Max is a freckle-faced, white football player who read *All American Boys*. When I asked him in our one-on-one interview which component of the curriculum made him most aware of racial issues, he stated “[p]robably reading the book.” His use of the word probably here is interesting. This may indicate that he isn't quite sure what he thinks on this front because of the way he sees his role in understanding the issues. When I asked him why the book brought him more awareness as opposed to doing research, his response was quite telling. He said, “Because it wasn't really just one issue, it wasn't just Rashad, I saw the background it was just way bigger than that, and that people were holding it in and they just wanted to make a stand.”

This statement gets to the power of narrative. It is rare that a reader is exposed to an in-depth exploration of multiple sides of a story, particularly surrounding racism or police brutality. In fact, one might make this argument with many news articles and pieces we see today. So often, we seem to see the issues addressed by *All American Boys* as being binary in nature, and this novel explores the nuanced realities of racial discrimination and racial violence. Max also talked about how other people in the novel

beyond the main character, Rashad, wanted to take a stand and also felt discriminated against. This statement might indicate that Max is becoming aware of the ripple effects that occur when violence is committed against one person, both in terms of the effects on the individuals themselves as well as the subsequent societal reaction.

Max continued by discussing how people were “holding it in,” and he explained what he meant by that. Max said, “[t]hey were so angry—they were getting more and more angry at what was going on with the racial profiling and they were holding in their anger and then they just . . . it was like a time bomb it just exploded, did something finally.” That “something” was a student walkout/march. They also wrote graffiti on the wall protesting what had happened to Rashad. This allowed the students in the novel to realize that they were not alone. It is telling that Max kept coming back to this march. He mentioned it as being the most emotional aspect of the novel in his one-on-one interview as well as in his journal. He wrote about how powerful the march was for the community and specifically wrote that “people were taking a stand”. This book seemed to bring awareness to the issue for him, not so much in the fact that racial violence or police brutality exists, but in the more nuanced aspects of how or why this might happen and the nuanced reactions to the actual event. The realization that people in the novel were holding back until they exploded may also impact his perception of future or past events our country experiences, such as those in Ferguson.

**Cat and abuse.** Cat was another student who had no prior experience with the issue she read and researched.. Cat read *Chinese Handcuffs*, which focused on myriad types of abuse. When I asked her which component of the curriculum was the most impactful on her understanding of the issue, she responded by saying, “I think it was a



combination of research and the book, but mostly just the book. When I read something I'm really interested it's like I'm seeing the book in my mind, that's how I understand stuff.” The explanation that she was visualizing the events may explain why these students report learning more from the novel as opposed to either research or even prior experience. For many of the students, the experience they did have with the issue they were focusing on was secondhand information from someone else’s stories. If that person was not a particularly vivid story teller or told things in bits and pieces, it may be difficult for the listener to truly envision the events. This high level of story-telling by Chris Crutcher, in this instance, allowed Cat to develop a stronger ability to connect with the ideas and concepts.

Cat also felt a higher level of empathy. In our one-on-one interview, she expressed her complete removal from people who drank or did drugs in her personal life. In reading the novel, however, she explained, “I think I felt more understanding about his brother, because he was doing drugs because he was depressed. I feel more like . . . what's the word, I forgot it . . . but I feel more sad for him and sorry for him...” We see in this explanation that she understood at least one aspect of the novel, or at least why it is that someone might turn to drugs. She did go on to state that “...the sexual and physical abuse, I still think it’s wrong, totally wrong,” which may demonstrate that the discomfort she experienced was too great for her to be able to rationalize or understand the sexual and physical abuse demonstrated by other characters that occurred within the novel.

In her interview, Cat revealed that prior to reading the novel, she struggled to understand why people would not just leave an abusive situation or at least tell someone. This is a fairly common reaction from many people who may not have any understanding

of the complex relationships in abusive situations. Through reading the story, however, Cat showed a better understanding of the decisions individuals made within these situations. She stated:

I think reading it and seeing how someone's life how . . . if . . . I never understood why people never told when you're getting abused, but then reading about it and seeing how much that she could change if she did and so I think that's what mostly change some people's situations, it's not always easy to just come out there and just tell them.

This realization that abuse is a complex set of relationships that often prevent victims from walking is important if Cat is to become an activist for anyone else. If there is a belief that people should be able to simply help themselves out of a situation, others are less likely to support their escape, but if people realize that there is a great deal of difficulty in extracting one's self from a situation as depicted in Crutcher's novel, they may be more assistive. Again, as demonstrated by Max as well, these novels can support readers in understanding the complexities of social issues as experienced by individuals.

### **How does Significant Prior Experience Impact the Reading Experience?**

Students who have significant, firsthand, prior experience may see the novels as a mirror (Bishop, 1990). This sense of a mirror may not result in students reporting growth or learning from the novel. In this study, there were two students who indicated that they learned more from their prior experience than the novels, and while they expressed interest in the novels, they had different responses to the reading than other students.

**Jade and immigration.** Jade was one student who did not report learning more from the novel. Jade read *The Circuit* which focused on immigration. In her interview, she explained her reasons:

Well like I said, I already know a lot of it. It's like since I was born I already knew like all this stuff. So, it wasn't really much of a difference of anything because I already knew about it. I already had all the research, my family's always talked about it. I've done my research before because we've had a lot of problems with it. So, it wasn't any different. It was just a more like a perspective of different people.

Jade's family was an immigrant family, and her mother joined Jade's uncles in America when she was 14, while her father arrived alone in America when he was 15. As Jade discussed, her family had been open about their struggles, so she was familiar with the difficulties of immigrating to America. It is interesting to note that she clarified the different perspective component of the story. This understanding that the situation was, in fact, applicable to different people may have led to her nuanced approach to her action plan. It seems as though, for Jade, the common experience many immigrants have was emphasized through the novel, and the curriculum was more important than the novel in this particular case.

**Liza and mental illness.** Liza, another student with significant prior experience who did not report learning more from the novel, read *It's Kind of a Funny Story* which focused on mental illness. She was the only student who directly experienced the issue firsthand, and she gave extensive descriptions of how the book mirrored her own experience with depression. When asked which component of the curriculum (prior experience, research or the novel) was most important in her knowledge of the issue, she replied that it was "my own prior experience."

Both Jade and Liza's experiences are important because it does show that a novel does not replace prior experience, but the mirroring that the books seemed to provide for these two students was important in shifting the way they took action and/or the way they

supported themselves.

### **Implication of these Prior Experiences**

The experiences that students bring to their reading is important relative to how reading YAL impacts a student's understanding of a social justice issue. On the one hand, this finding shows that the vicarious firsthand experience of an individual who struggles with a situation impacts students' understanding and realizations of situations that they may already be well aware of. Although the individual reader may have experience with the issue, seeing how other families experience the same issue, or how other people cope with the issue can expand the individual's understanding of the issue. For these students who had a very limited understanding of the issue, seeing the issues through the lens of a narrative really allowed the students to develop a sense of understanding and awareness that research or data was not able to explain. For example, it may be easy to understand that a certain percentage of women experience abuse in domestic situations or that one in five people in America experience poverty, but that doesn't allow the researcher to understand everything that is a cause or effect as a result of this issue. This more nuanced understanding was evidenced through Max, Josephine, and Cat.

### **Productive Discomfort Through Reading**

While students experienced a new perspective of the issue through the novel, this new perspective did not always result in a victim-focused action plan. Students whose world view was challenged seemed unable to fully embrace their initial empathetic reaction to the novel or were unable to identify a tangible plan of action that moved beyond spreading awareness. Within this study, one student experienced a significant

level of discomfort, which ultimately hampered her ability to create a solution-oriented action plan.

**Josephine and poverty.** Josephine read *Eleanor and Park* and focused specifically on poverty throughout the novel. While reading the novel, she initially identified with the protagonist, Eleanor. In our one-on-one interview, Josephine told me that she also dressed oddly as a middle-schooler and that she could relate to Eleanor's experience as a new student who just didn't quite fit in. She stated, "I did identify with Eleanor because in seventh and eighth grade I had just moved here. I didn't know anyone and I have an interesting fashion sense, to say the least." Josephine also related the following story to me during our interviews:

I remember in seventh grade on the first day I was so nervous for lunch that my plan was actually sit by the garbage can so no one would sit with me and I remember I walked so fast after my last class so to get to lunch so I could sit at an empty table, so that if people sat there that was your choice but they wouldn't be upset with me because I'd be there first . . . . .

Identifying with the main character is important here because it does not continue once the issue of poverty becomes more critical to the plot line. This immediate, heartfelt identification with the character may be just what caused Josephine to truly experience cognitive discomfort. Her thoughts on the poor appear to be more of a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" sort of approach. The following excerpt from our interview explains some of her attitudes and ideas concerning people who deal with poverty:

So I think I can do things to help, but I can't stop . . . No one can stop poverty. That's what I think. Me and my parents don't like to give money to the people because we never know if they're being honest. We've done that before and it just goes bad, but you can give water bottles, food, and stuff. I feel like, especially with people on the side of the road, I'm confused because there's homeless shelters and stuff, so I don't know what to do about that type of thing. There's

little things you can do though. If I had a business or something I'd offer them jobs, but I don't have a business.

Two important events happened within this statement. First is the idea that no one can stop poverty. This approach toward an issue, while understandable from her perspective, seems to limit her ability to consider poverty's more nuanced aspects. The idea that, in our society, some people must be in poverty may prevent people who have power to alleviate poverty from asserting their powers to prevent said poverty. There may be a subconscious element to this concept that believes in a bell curve approach, where some people must be in poverty for others to maintain their comfortable existence. Josephine seems to believe that poverty may be too big of a problem to eradicate, and as it is one that doesn't directly impact her, there is less impetus to attempt to make a change. The second event really demonstrates her attitude toward homelessness and poverty: the idea that homeless people can't be trusted. I don't know what she meant exactly when she said that they'd given money before and it just went bad, but she had come to this idea that giving money directly to people is not the answer. It is also interesting to note that she "othered" homeless people by lumping them all into the same untrustworthy category. While she had previously stated that she "sees them more as like people," it was evident through this statement that she was experiencing dissonance.

While she recognized that people who were poor did behave like "actual people" while reading and immediately after reading the book, when she considered homeless people as a component of her social justice issue, she was unable to extrapolate those initial feelings and apply them to the individuals she sees on the street. She acknowledged that there was a difference in how she viewed this: "It's kind of weird

because it changed the way I think and feel about specific individuals who struggle with poverty but in general, the overview of poverty, I kind of have the same idea of it. I just look at the individuals kind of different.” This surprise and dissonance for her may have come from the character’s prominent role as the protagonist coupled with her development as a high school student. In her one-on-one interview, Josephine stated, “I just saw her as a person because she was the main character in the story and it was like, ‘Oh, that probably stinks.’”

Additionally, during that interview, Josephine claimed that “[a]t this school, there’s poverty here, but nothing bad.” This is an interesting choice of words. Had she said “that bad,” this might have indicated the discrepancy between Eleanor’s situation compared to the people she was aware of at school, but Josephine did not qualify her statement. She simply said the poverty experienced at the school wasn’t bad. While the school was located in a middle-income area and was not considered a Title 1 school, it was not an extremely wealthy school. In speaking with other students in the class regarding their pieces, there was real poverty at the school as evidenced by statements where students were living with more than 10 people in a house with three rooms. This might have qualified as bad to someone like Josephine, although I did not question her further on this statement. We did see, however, that Josephine may not have a nuanced understanding of poverty within her community.

When considering an action plan, Josephine’s feelings and lack of awareness about poverty and her perception of the government’s role in our lives, combined with her newfound empathy for Eleanor, created conflict. Josephine’s original plan was to essentially pay people on the street money for completing work that volunteers would

typically do. When I asked her to clarify what types of jobs she meant and how it would work she said:

Just easy things like cleaning up the community and stuff, but, if you provided, you could get homeless shelters and whatever, you could get them involved so they could let people know, and then you could get the company to fund it. I think that's going to be the hardest thing, because I don't know. It would be good for a company's name but I don't know if they'd actually want to give that much money.

Her original intent was to own her own company that would fund this work. When I asked her how she would make this work financially, her response was, “I don't want to get money from taxes. I don't want that.” This adamant refusal to try to get money from the government was telling about her attitude toward poverty within our society as well. She reiterated this belief several times while we discussed how she might achieve her goal of creating productive yet attainable employment for these people. She didn't want companies to receive any benefits from the government, nor did she want the individuals themselves to receive any materials from the government.

This part of the country, and particularly her area of the state, has an extremely fiscal and social conservative viewpoint, and has been dominated by politically conservative leadership for decades. In a conversation with Ms. Land, Josephine described how, “her political views don't allow her to try to fix poverty, but she wants to shift the perception of poverty,” which seem to be aligned with the local and state conservatism. Her experience with this book created productive discomfort due to her political stance and the issues that the book portrayed quite realistically. Through her reading, she came to care about these characters, yet her political beliefs didn't provide any room for her to address the issues experienced by people who deal with poverty, such



as mental health, disabilities, and PTSD. This attitude is not uncommon within our society. Her beliefs that individuals should work hard and, therefore, succeed is a core tenet of the American Dream. When people are confronted with the idea that perhaps poverty is out of their personal control, many will justify their personal belief so that they may continue to believe that somehow, someday, the individual deserves to be poverty-stricken. It is this cognitive dissonance that influenced Josephine's final version of an action plan. Her plan to help homeless people without using government assistance was something that she realized was untenable. Ultimately, she came to the conclusion that the only people who were able to be helped might be young adults or children. This thought process was evidenced by the following statement from the focus group interview:

After that . . . I was going through and I was researching to do it to start the program, and I kept coming across statistics. It said that more children were struggling with poverty than adults, so I kind of changed my mind. I'd rather focus on children, and usually when adults are stuck in poverty, they just don't want to change their lifestyle. So it's easier to get to children. Then I was going to write a research paper and then put it places, but I just changed it to writing a book, and I'm still working on it.

I did not question her rationale for writing a book or how she thought that would be a victim-focused action plan that could solve poverty because of limited time, although analyzing her discourse is telling. The statement that adults “just don’t want to change their lifestyle” is again explicative of the internal discomfort she was experiencing. Her word choice indicates the rationalization and justification she was making to maintain her view of homeless people or those in poverty. According to the Arizona Department of Economic Security’s 2007 report, however, 24.2% of the homeless population deal with mental illness and 23% of the homeless population consisted of veterans, for example.

Additionally, 22% of homeless people who had taken advantage of shelter facilities were victims of domestic violence. These were not adults who “just don’t want to change their lifestyle.”

Josephine complained about the limited time they had to complete this curriculum. When questioned about the effectiveness of the curriculum and whether or not they agreed that the teacher should continue with this curriculum, she said, “I do agree. I wish I didn't, but I think she should do it again. I just think there's people who tried really hard to go all out, and they didn't get it done, like me.” This statement brought up some interesting questions. I wonder how she defined “going all out.” Would it have been generating a victim-focused plan to solve poverty issues, or would it have been more along the lines of finishing her book? I also wonder why she chose to focus on the book. Technically, it was the novel that changed her perception of the issue, so maybe she wanted to share and spread that understanding with others. Or perhaps creating her book would have allowed her to process her own thoughts on the issue in a productive manner. Perhaps her action plan was more self-reflective in the end.

Another facet that kept coming up throughout Josephine’s one-on-one interview was her anger at the protagonist’s mother. Josephine couldn’t understand why Eleanor’s mother wouldn’t just leave this horrible situation or why she wouldn’t do something to solve the situation. Josephine never got angry at the abusive father in the story or the situation that may have created the poverty that she was experiencing. Was this a part of her discomfort? While Josephine certainly had a point that Eleanor’s mother’s primary role may have been to protect her, Josephine failed to notice that Eleanor’s mother may have needed protecting herself. One wonders if this is due to an infallible vision of

mothers, or is it simply a lack of experience and understanding surrounding the complexities of poverty? Does a lack of experience and understanding with this issue prevent Josephine from identifying the nuances of how poverty affects families? Ultimately, Josephine experienced a high level of discomfort and was stymied in her approach to an action plan, although as she moved forward, this discomfort may manifest itself in productive ways.

This finding is important because it demonstrates that individuals' experiences with social issues may significantly impact their ability to follow through on an idea that they might have. While Josephine developed a significant empathetic response to people who suffered from poverty in that she saw them as people now, when it came time to consider the action she might take, we see that she was stymied by her previous worldview of those who suffered from poverty as ultimately choosing that lifestyle for themselves. She did end up stating that children were different and did not have control over their own lives, which is most likely a significant shift in her previous attitude toward all people in poverty, but she still had to justify her behaviors. Josephine experienced a form of, what I hope, is productive discomfort. For example, Josephine's level of discomfort was significant, but through our continued correspondence, her desire to help children who suffer from poverty was hugely evident. It is my hope that she will continue to feel this level of empathy as she moves forward and may ultimately be able to shift her sense of empathy to people of her own age as she continues to age herself.

### **How does Prior Experience Impact a Student's Capacity to Take Action?**

While the students had a wide range of experiences with the various issues, none of them had taken action regarding this issue prior to this social activist curriculum.

While the novels impacted the students in a wide variety of ways, and resulted in varying degrees of understanding, it is important to understand how the context of an individual impacts a curriculum like this. Throughout this study, individual students had significantly different reactions and experiences with the development of an action plan, and there appeared to be correlation between their experiences with the issue.

**Lack of prior experience with issue.** Students who had little or no personal experience with the social justice issue they studied focused on spreading awareness in their assignment as opposed to generating a victim-focused or solution-oriented action plan. Three of the participants stated that they had no prior life experiences with individuals who were dealing with the issues mentioned, and two did not feel their issues affected their school. The three issues, in particular, were poverty, racism, and abuse. These participants did not deny that the problems existed within their community or their society, but they each stated that they didn't really see those problems in their own lives. As such, none were quite sure what sort of action plan to develop, and their ideas ranged from either hugely grandiose and untenable to those with a minimal impact on the relevant community.

**Cat and drug abuse.** Cat, who read *Chinese Handcuffs*, told the focus group that she focused on awareness within her action plan as demonstrated by her developing a

web page, an Instagram page, and a Twitter account. When I asked her what the address was or to send the website link to me, she said they couldn't find it during class when they were giving their presentation, and she did not send me the link subsequently, so I am unsure of what direction the online sites took. It is important to note that, although *Chinese Handcuffs* focused on multiples types of abuse (domestic, drug, and sexual), Cat ended up focusing on drug abuse when discussing her action plan. This corresponded to her level of empathy she demonstrated during her interview process, as she had decided while reading that she could understand why the protagonist would turn to drugs, but the other types of abuse were "just wrong." It made sense that Cat would choose to focus on fixing something that she could at least begin to understand.

During our one-on-one interview, which took place during their planning process, she said that she felt as if there were older students at her school who might need some sort of way to avoid turning to drugs. When I asked her what she wanted to do with that, she said:

I was gonna survey and stuff and see who was more prone to this, like seniors, older people or younger people or if their parents drink and stuff and I was trying to see like, maybe make certain clubs cause sometimes people, they don't have clubs or they don't do sports and they're more prone to do other stuff that they shouldn't.

These challenges are important because she is not trying to solve the problem after the fact, but think about what might make someone turn to drugs in the first place. While she didn't have a personal set of experiences to pull from, she asked important questions that may have been more critical for her age group, anyway, as opposed to considering medical or programmatic ways to get people off drugs.

When I asked her what she would do with that survey information, her response was, “Maybe like . . . I don't know, that's the thing, I'm still confused about that and what people would want so I'm still working on that.” This response demonstrates that she was unsure of what direction to take with the action plan she was intending to follow, and that seemed to stem from a lack of awareness of what these people might actually need because she herself saw it as a path you should not go down. Again, this demonstrated a lack of prior experience with the issue at hand, although she stated at one point in the interview that she had friends who “have friends that do [drugs] and I just don't like surrounding myself with people like that.” This lack of nuanced understanding may be developed through further reading with the issue and may also benefit from more time to conduct research into the initial causes of addiction. While her ultimate action plan seemed to have little to no impact outside of her own circle, because she was unable to share her online sites with me, her experience may have resulted in an understanding and an ability to explore these issues with a more open mind down the road.

***Max and racism.*** A second participant who struggled to identify what needed to be done based upon the lack of exposure he had with the issue was Max, who read *All American Boys*, based upon racism. He and his group ended up focusing on raising awareness as their primary goal as well. They placed hand-written posters on bulletin boards around the school that said things like “Give the red card to racism” and “End racism.” They also created an online source that was intended to spread awareness of the issue. He indicated in his one-on-one interview that he and his group had created an Instagram, Twitter handle, and Facebook page, although he was unable to share the sites with me when we spoke. While Max stated that he was upset by the issues shared within

the novel and did not disavow the reality of the issues at large, he stated that he had never witnessed that happening within his own community or in his own experience. It is interesting to consider that his complete lack of experience with the issue has led him to consider spreading awareness of the issue as a tangible action plan.

For him, raising awareness was a major step forward in his understanding the issue. Part of this awareness had less to do with the existence of racism and more to do with the impact that racism had on the victims themselves. He stated, “well I thought that racists weren't that bad, but after I read the book I could see how affective it can be on somebody.” When questioned further on his definition of affective, he stated, “It can affect your lives like they won't want to go to school anymore or go to like outside world; they just want to stay home.” It is interesting that he, as a white young man, stated that he thought “racists weren't that bad.” There was obviously some level of recognition that the type of behavior that racists exhibit is negative, but his minimizing their impact on other people demonstrated a lack of awareness. It is also of interest to note that he connected not wanting to go to school and becoming isolated as the primary effect of racism, when the main character in the story ended up in the hospital. Max seemed to struggle to connect with the more severe consequences of racism as evidenced by young men like Trayvon Martin and is instead identifying with a more normalized and subtle form of racism that he could relate to. This may indicate the beginnings of a productive discomfort if he was able to move from his personal perspective on this issue to recognizing and even accepting the true violence and realities of many victims of racism.

***Josephine and poverty.*** A third participant who struggled to identify what needed to be done because of a lack of exposure with the issue was Josephine, who read *Eleanor*

*& Park*. Josephine, as discussed before, began with the intention of solving the problem, but her solution was unsustainable, even in theory. She wanted to hire every homeless person so they would no longer be poor, although she identified flaws in that plan even as she presented it to me during her one-on-one interview. She eventually moved to the idea of writing a book, which she discussed during the focus group interview. While writing a book seems to be a halcyon idea, the realization that it was through a book that her epiphany about the homeless being “people” originated, it made sense that she would want to do the same for others. This may indicate that, even though she stated at the end of her focus group that she didn’t particularly like the book because it was “like a cheesy love story,” the book was the best route to impact her thought process.

Each of these individuals demonstrated a significant empathetic response, although it did not necessarily move into tangible prosocial behavior that could have a significant effect on anyone else. This furthered Alsup’s (2015) argument about teaching literature in the secondary schools, although evidence of civic engagement as called for by multiple scholars (e.g., Ames, 2013; K. Burke & Greene, 2015; Garcia et al., 2015; Herczog, 2011; Wolk, 2009) did not seem to manifest itself in external ways in these students. It may be argued, however, that the growth demonstrated is the beginning of a productive discomfort, and these students may demonstrate longitudinal changes that may manifest themselves over time.

**Some Prior Experience with Issue.** Students who had some level of prior knowledge felt an increased need for advocacy and were inspired to act after reading the novel. While the students in the previous section did demonstrate some form of action, much of it was not victim-focused and instead coalesced around individual growth and



realization. The following participants took a more visceral action and made moves that would impact other people in more visible ways.

***Valentina and LGBTQ.*** The first participant, Valentina, read *Openly Straight*, which focused on a gay boy who experimented in a new environment with keeping his sexuality private. Valentina's older sister is a lesbian, so the participant has some experience with the issue in a secondary way. Valentina demonstrated a growing realization that her previous acceptance of the LGBTQ community was not as widespread as she had previously believed. When asked how she would make a change, in her journal she wrote:

I would spread awareness and I would also do campaign showing that people like this are just the same as us. I would do everything in my power to spread awareness even if it meant getting into trouble for something that I believe in. I feel if people did understand what it means to be just the way someone else is they would realize that holding someone back due to their preference is wrong.

In this quote, Valentina implies that she realized that not everyone had the same world view as she did. She discussed how she believed it was just a lack of understanding. As part of her goal, she wanted to emphasize a sense of sameness. In analyzing these ideas, there was a sense of "othering" even within this statement. Additionally, she, herself, did not identify with the protagonist of the novel. It is also important to note that she was willing to get into trouble for spreading this awareness. This willingness to expose herself to potential harm may have indicated a more significant commitment to address issues of acceptance often encountered within the LGBTQ community.

While one might believe that her family connection was what would drive her to feel this passionately about doing something, and that may certainly be the case, it is of

note that the curriculum was what truly inspired Valentina to see a need to take action. In her one-on-one interview, she stated:

Oh. Well, I'm going to be totally honest with you. Right now, I honestly, back then I used to believe that the LGBT . . . It was talked about definitely, but it wasn't to the point where I would want to take action, but, the book and the research got me definitely seeing that something needs to be happened.

While she developed a realization that something must be done, she needed a way to channel her energy. I met with that literature circle as a group since they had finished reading long before the other groups were done, and we discussed what direction they might go for their action plan. Each member of that literature circle identified at least one person they knew personally who could probably use a support system at the school based upon their newfound understanding of LGBTQ experiences. I asked them what options LGBTQ students had to gather together at their school, and none of them had any idea. While I was trying to remain as neutral as possible, I wanted to support their enthusiasm, and I told them about the Gay and Lesbian Alliance and Straight Supporters club we had had at my own high school. The students were excited about the prospect of a club and immediately started discussing how they might start their own club. Upon looking at the school's website, they discovered that they did have a Gay Straight Alliance listed as an option. Over the next week, they discovered that the club was no longer active because there was no sponsor. While they weren't totally sure they would be able to field a club themselves, they stated that they would try to restart the club. Valentina took the lead in finding out who the previous sponsor had been and finding out what needed to be done to restart the club. When they discovered that they would have to wait until the following school year, the group seemed to deflate a little bit; however, in

subsequent email conversations with Valentina, she stated that they just needed some “encouragement” to make it happen. In our most recent email conversation, as of this writing, Valentina stated that they had found “many sponsors willing to [do] GSA.” In the meantime, she and one other member of her literature circle were planning to attend the Phoenix Pride festival in April.

Valentina and her group chose to take more tangible actions, although the end results of the action may not actually come to fruition. Through this combination of the novel, the curriculum that assigned some sort of action, and adult support, Valentina and her group were able to take specific action that allowed them to discover what steps they needed to take to make change at the school-wide level, and they started down the path towards those actions. This connects with the suggestions Glenn et al. (2012) made about how literature might move students to action.

***Victoria, refugees, and her faith.*** Another participant who took tangible, victim-focused action was Victoria, who read *The Good Braider* by Terry Farish. This novel was about refugees, and Victoria wanted to focus on finding a way to support Syrian refugees. She did have some prior experience with this issue through her church. Victoria was interesting in that she really struggled to come up with an action plan, although her obstacles were not with understanding or a lack of exposure to the issue. Her initial desire was to sponsor a refugee family, although she felt as if she would be cheating somehow, by continuing a project that she was already doing as a faithful member of her Christian community. She struggled both with the implication that she wasn’t coming up with something on her own, but even more so with the idea that doing

something through school would somehow minimize her level of faith and commitment to doing good through her church.

Once she came to the conclusion that she might be able to blend her school responsibilities with her faith-based responsibilities, thus combining the two major responsibilities in her life, she looked into adopting a refugee family through the school. According to a discussion overheard between her and the teacher, Ms. Land, she had discovered through her research that an organization must sponsor a refugee family as opposed to individuals. She also told Ms. Land that she briefly considered going to the school to ask them to sponsor a family but decided against it fairly quickly. In her one-on-one interview, she told me that she ultimately asked her church what she might do and through that connection, she decided to host a pots-and-pans drive for refugee families who were already here. She had to go through the school in order to get permission to host the drive, and she was unable to complete the drive within the time frame of the semester, although she planned to conduct the drive in January when they returned from winter break. Ms. Land did tell me, however, that in January, the school still had not scheduled the event, and Victoria's mother sent an email expressing concern about the lack of movement. This family interjection indicated that the project had moved beyond the classroom walls. As of this writing, I am unsure whether or not the school had conducted the drive.

This is also a tangible, victim-focused one action plan. To become tangible, Victoria had to have some prior awareness and guidance from people around her who were familiar with this particular group of people's needs. While the novel itself did generate a stronger sense of empathy, it did not give her the information she needed to

take action. This is where her affinity group (Gee, 2001a) became a critical component of her work. Without this support, she may not have been able to develop a victim-focused plan of action that could be brought to fruition.

**Jade and ELL.** The third participant who took tangible action was Jade, who read *The Circuit* and *Breaking Through* by Francisco Jimenez. These novels depicted the migrant journey of Jimenez's life, and Jade strongly identified with the storyline. She was one of two who said that she did not necessarily learn much from the novel itself because it was such a similar example of her own story. Even with her prior experience, she did not have a specific idea in mind for her action plan to begin with. Her identification of a plan was interesting. In her early journal responses, she said that she would like to do some sort of fundraising so there would be fewer poor people. By the second week, however, she discussed the desire to "help kids with education" in her journal entry. In our one-on-one interview, I asked her how she might help these kids and she said:

Well, I want to see them have more help. I'm not really sure what exactly I want [the school] to do, but I know I want [English Language Learners] to have more help in their classes that the teachers don't speak English. Maybe have like worksheets, like you know how they give worksheets and it's all in English? Maybe they can have one in Spanish, so at least they get what's happening in the classroom and have better understanding.

The evolution of her action plan is important to observe. She moved from a very wide ranging idea that was potentially untenable to a plan that was very specific and localized to her immediate community. A part of this evolution dealt with her own experiences with ELL students at her school. In our one-on-one interview, she discussed the ways that she had been asked to translate for her peers:

Last year there was this girl in my science class, she had to take the AIMS (Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards) and usually, like the whole entire year, I helped her with all her worksheets and everything, and then in the AIMS I couldn't help her because she didn't get anything what was happening because she couldn't read it.

Jade also discussed how she struggled with the material herself, which may have increased the pressure she felt in supporting her peer. In analyzing her early journal entries where she had a far different concept for an action plan, in addition to my own observations of her and her group's identification with Francisco's language-learning experience, it appeared as though the novel may have allowed her to reflect more upon her own school experience. This, coupled with her translating experience, led Jade to her action plan. She ended up interviewing the ELL department head to find out what teachers and students needed and, from that conversation, constructed a letter to the school board in which she asked for more support for students beyond their single English course. While the punitive measures of bilingual education in Arizona don't necessarily allow for Jade's requests to be met, the school board did respond to Jade and her literature circle. The first paragraph addressed the areas of research that Jade and her group had done before writing the letter, such as searching for information on the website, speaking with the primary Structured English Immersion director, as well as looking at information outside of the district, and pointed to the robust ELL program that the district maintained. The second paragraph explained the state-driven restrictions by the Arizona Department of Education and mentioned the requirements the state imposed. The third paragraph referred specifically to the language in Jade and her peer group's original letter and suggested that they organize a meeting between the director of English Language Acquisition, themselves, and their principal to identify possible resources for

these students. This letter was dated in mid-December, which arrived days before final exams. As a result, Jade and her peers did not follow up with the school board as of the focus group interview nor within the first week of the next semester according to an email on January 16, although Jade expressed an interest in doing so.

While one might consider this an action that had minimal external effect, there are several things to consider with this particular action. The first, and most important component of this letter was that the students took the initiative to address the school board. This was an extremely large district, and the school board is a powerful entity that could be intimidating to students. Additionally, they decided to address the school board without any direct suggestion from an adult involved with the curriculum. The students decided to interview the head of the SEI program on their own, as well. The second important component of this action plan was the rapid response they received from the school board. While the board took no distinct action to mitigate the issue that Jade and her group raised, the fact that they took it seriously enough to draft an official letter to the group and that they offered to meet with the group and their principal to discuss solutions demonstrated that they were hearing Jade and her group's concerns, which was a powerful first step.

Jade was at an advantage in many ways because she had a very nuanced understanding of the struggles that immigrant students go through, both from her own childhood perspective, as well through her acts as an interpreter in later years. This prior experience allowed her to decide upon an action plan that was not only specific, but also focused on individuals who are immigrants.

## **How Does Character Identification Impact Students' Action Plans?**

The type of character that a reader identifies with may indicate the reader's desire or ability to complete a tangible, victim-focused action plan vs. one that is based on spreading awareness. While some of the participants identified with the protagonist of the novels, several others identified with secondary or even tertiary characters who seemed to be often positioned as helpers in some way.

### **Helper Identification**

*Jade and Roberto (The Circuit).* Jade was the first participant who identified with a helper character of sorts. When asked in her journal who she related to, she said, "Roberto because he is the oldest and he is expected to do everything like his dad, and his little brother wants to do what he does." While Roberto is not specifically an external helper, because he goes through the struggles just as significantly as Francisco does in the text, there is a sense of power to his character. He is the oldest, and he learns how to successfully navigate the systems that he and his siblings must figure out. He also has to step up and take over when his father becomes injured and is no longer able to be the primary breadwinner in the family.

Jade said she identified strongly with Roberto because of the similarities to her own situation, an idea which furthered the mirror idea expressed by Sim-Bishop (1990). Jade's life, in many ways, mirrored that of Roberto's. While she had not had to step up and take over the care of her entire family in a financial or physical way, she was the oldest and the first person within her migrant family to navigate the systems of American society. As such, her parents and siblings expected her to be the one to figure out school,



etc. As she stated during her one-on-one interview, “[e]verything's totally new for me so then I'm like their example for like everything.” She acknowledged that everything she did for education was all based on her, which must have come with some sort of pressure, although her presence in an honors sophomore English class indicated that she was doing well in this regard. This level of responsibility seemed to have also carried over into her action plan, as she was the member of the group who took the lead in writing the letter to the school board and interviewing the chair of the ELL department.

*Victoria and helper roles (The Good Braider).* Victoria was the second participant who identified with a helper character, quite strongly. Throughout the reading process, while completing her journal, she named various characters throughout the book who she identified with, although she never named the protagonist. In the first week of the journal, she wrote that she identified with “Miss America Abby (as the native trying to help a foreigner and Refugee).” In the second week, she wrote that she identified with “[t]he boy who called Viola sister.” While this boy was also a refugee in the original settlement Viola reached, he was able to use his experience in the camp to support Viola as she transitioned into living there. Victoria wrote the following final journal entry about identifying with a character: “[t]he character I relate to most is Andrew in the way he doesn't understand African culture but wants to listen anyway. How he wants to help Viola despite her circumstances.” This last entry was the most consistent with the way she spoke about her interpretation of the novel and her part in the novel. She stated several times that she couldn't identify with Viola because she had absolutely no experience with “anything like that.” In fact, she was rather self-deprecating when comparing her life with Viola's when she stated, “if something like, America all of a

sudden started a war, and I was trapped in a hole or something like that, my privileged self, who gets everything I need, and is capable of getting anything I want, I think I would be a little bit whiney whenever that happens. I might start having self-pity.” After this statement, she went on to say that she would try to find ways to help people, which may have been her way of exhibiting strength, even as she recognized that she may not be as strong as Viola appeared in the novel.

What was additionally interesting about Victoria’s set of character identifications was that the characters themselves were vastly different in terms of life experiences and character development. The only commonality they shared was they “helped” Viola in some way, shape, or form. Victoria was able to look beyond the superficial characteristics of who the individuals were within the book and see the role they played in shaping Viola’s experiences, and that was what she ultimately identified with. The explanation for this may lie in Gee’s (2001a) institution identity concept. Victoria had identified herself as someone of privilege whose responsibility was to help those less fortunate than herself. This identity certainly came from her church, although the curriculum allowed her to carry forward that identity into the classroom. This institution identity may also explain Victoria’s initial struggle with joining her out-of-school role with her in-school role.

***Valentina and adult identification (Openly Straight).*** Valentina was the third participant who identified with a helper character. When asked which character she identified with, she showed consistency between her journal entries as well as her one-on-one interview. In her journal, she seemed to connect more with the character’s personality: “[t]he character that I most identify with is Mr. Scarborough. I believe that

he and I are somewhat alike. Our views are somewhat similar and I believe that if we were to meet in real life we would share similar points. Also, we would have an interesting conversation.” In this case, she didn’t necessarily point to him as a “helper” figure, although it is interesting that she chose an adult to identify with throughout the novel. The idea that she would want to have a conversation with him over another character her own age is equally interesting and may indicate a perceived sense of advanced maturity. Later in her one-on-one interview, however, she explains differently how she identified with the teacher. She said:

I most identified with the teacher, Mr. S. I can't say his name. But Mr. S. It's because, like I said before, I feel like, he's kind of like me, like in a way. I'd be there and I'd be giving off my advice, and I'd also be not only, I wouldn't say questioning, but I would also give them a way of looking at things in different ways. I would also help, so that's why.

In this response, it is clear that she identified herself as someone who might help. Again, she demonstrated a certain level of maturity by pointing out that she would give “them a way of looking at things in different ways.” The typical adolescent often struggles to connect immediate behaviors with long-term consequences, which may also limit the ability to see things from various points of view. One wonders, does this level of maturity come from her own ability to apply different perspectives to situations, or is it a side effect of reading the novel from a distances position?

### **Protagonist Identification**

Not all students identified with people in the novel who were helper characters, and the resulting action plans they developed tended to focus more on raising awareness in general as opposed to supporting the victims themselves. For example, Cat, who read *Chinese Handcuffs*, identified with Jennifer, who was one of the victims of the abuse in

the novel, although Cat identified with Jennifer's reticent behavior and unwillingness to share her thoughts and feelings with anyone as opposed to any sort of abuse. Cat stated that her action plan was a website that she and her team developed, although she did not share that information with me, so I am unsure of what sort of impact the website had. Josephine, who read *Eleanor & Park*, initially identified with Eleanor, who struggled with poverty in the novel. While Josephine's original action plan was to hire all the homeless, she ended up deciding to write a book to spread awareness. Through this project, it seems she felt the change she herself experienced is something that others ought to know about. I am curious as to whether she thought that form of action was enough to change the situation or if she was impacted so powerfully herself that she decided that doing the same thing for other people would be enough of an action plan.

### **Significant Protagonist Identification**

Liza, who read *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, was the third participant who identified with the storyline's protagonist. She had the most significant identification with the main character, and she was a bit of an anomaly in that she had personal experience with the issue as well. In Liza's one-on-one interview, when asked which character she identified with, she stated "[t]he whole time, probably, Craig." In her journal, she clarified:

The only actual character introduced in this section is Craig. I can relate to his habits of depression. Such as his lack of wanting to eat. At a low time in my life I had trouble eating. Not intentionally, but the smell of food would make me gag. When I did eat it would become dry and disgusting in my mouth. Also its really hard to think about anything else or speak when you want to not be here . . . I have luckily gone through my "Shift" (getting better).

We see through this quote that Liza had a very strong and personal connection to the protagonist. When asked about her action plan during her one-on-one interview, she told me:

“What we're doing is our poster's going to have different heads on it. If you saw our poster, it's like the shape of people's heads, and each of one of them there's like a couple of common mental disorders, and stuff like that. It's just like the design of the head is stuff that you relate to like different mental disorders. Then the body are like facts, and around it, in the same colors that the title's going to be, is different things that people say, and stuff like that.

This depiction of the head comes from the cover of the novel itself, which had the profile of a head with a map drawn on the head. Their use of the novel's cover art to inspire their project may have showed a strong connection between the issue the novel specifically presented. Liza admitted that the project was not what she originally intended to do, but their procrastination prevented them from completing the project they wanted to do. She did not tell me what her original plan was, however. She continued discussing their poster and explained its purpose:

One of the most common things I hear, that like, "Oh, well, mental health doesn't affect me," and stuff like that. The facts are mainly about how many people around you have mental illnesses. It's mainly centered on the United States, like how many people in the United States have this mental disorder, and stuff like that, and how many people suffer. Then around the head is common things that people say, like if you have anorexia and stuff like that, and so it's like, "Why can't you just eat?" or something like that. Schizophrenia, it's like, "Oh, stay away from me," or like with OCD it's like "Oh my gosh, you already did this three times. Stop doing it," and stuff like that. Just like at the bottom it says, "Mental illness is not a choice," and then like, "Watch what you say," and stuff like that. In the corner we're going to have like a couple organizations, because one organization I used a lot is, like NIMH, which is like National Institute of Mental Health”

This finding is interesting relative to the other participants in that she identified with the victim but also had significant prior experience with the issue. While other

people who had some experience with the issue were empowered to take action that supported the victim by identifying specific helpful actions that could be taken, Liza is the one person who had prior experience with the issue yet chose to raise awareness as her form of action. That being said, this may have been due to the invisible nature of mental illness as mentioned in her quote above. It may have been that the most significant form of help for her as a previous victim of mental illness was that other people understand the ways that mental illness impacts individuals as well as what not to say to people suffering with mental illness.

Others' lack of understanding was present in my observations as well. I observed her literature circle discussing how Craig wasn't eating and ultimately sharing their own experiences with depression. While two of the girls were sharing very personal and real connections with that aspect of the novel, the other two girls in the group, and even the two girls themselves, essentially breezed past the self-revelation shared by the one group member who had suffered from depression. Even though the individuals were sharing their own experiences with struggling to eat because of a debilitating depression, the other students either didn't recognize it as being a mental issue or were perhaps unprepared to respond to it, so they dropped the topic relatively quickly. It may be these reactions that prompted Liza to push the group to focus on raising awareness of the issue as her primary form of action. So, while my initial interpretation of this plan was it was not victim-focused or tangible, perhaps for her and others like her, it was.

### **Oscillating Character Identification**

One exception to the participants' character identification potentially foreshadowed the type of action he might take. Max, who read *All American Boys*, which

was about racism, oscillated between two characters in terms of identification throughout the reading experience. Max's journal did not discuss why he identified with the characters he stated, but he did change throughout the course of reading the novel. In the first and fourth week, he wrote that he identified with Rashad, who was the victim of racially motivated violence in the novel. In the middle two weeks, he wrote that he most strongly identified with Quinn, Rashad's white friend who struggled to rationalize the violent acts he saw a policeman carry out against Rashad with the fact that this police officer, Paul, is his best friend's uncle. Within our one-on-one interview, he decided in the end that he identified with "Quinn because at first his friend –Guzman, was his friend but during the situation he realized that what Paul did was wrong and that he's going to stand up for Rashad." This may have come from the awareness taking place in the book, as demonstrated with Max's wrap up during the focus group. "At first Quinn didn't see what was wrong, then as it got later in the book, Quinn understands really that Paul did something horrible and racially profiled Rashad." It may be that Max did not want to identify with Quinn as an unaware character but is willing to identify with him when he exhibits socially acceptable, anti-racist actions. This may explain his action plan approach to spreading awareness.

While Max did identify with both the victim and the pseudo-helper briefly, he did not take on an action plan that directly supported victims. His group's action plan also revolved around spreading awareness. During the focus group interview he said, "we made four posters that we put up around the school for a week. We also made a Facebook page, an Instagram page, and I don't know for sure if we made a Twitter page." Unfortunately, they were unable to find the Facebook page during his class presentation,

and I also searched for it and was unable to find it. He implied later that he may have felt that it wasn't quite enough. He told the focus group, "But, I don't really feel like we can do anything else with it. We can't go volunteer or something because it's not really some, like, immigration where we can go and volunteer somewhere. But, other than that, we wanted to do billboard, but that's just too big." This discussion indicated that he wanted to do something on a grander scale but wasn't sure what or how to approach this problem. This may stem from the fact that when asked if racism occurred at Desert High School, he said, "no." Based upon an action plan from a different class period Ms. Land shared with me which focused on the ways six minority students had experienced discrimination, I think his view may have been a bit naïve, albeit based upon his personal experiences in his life. It was interesting to see how Max identified with two different characters, although in their own ways, they were both somewhat helpless within the novel. Rashad was the direct victim of racial profiling and police brutality, and Quinn felt helpless to do anything with his knowledge of the police officer's behavior. This mirrors Max's own inability to do something "big" for his action plan.

What seemed to show up consistently in the relationship between identity and taking action was a sense of connection between the type of identity one had with a group and the type of action they chose to take. For example, those students who created victim-focused plans demonstrated an Affinity identity (Gee, 2001) with individuals who held on to some sort of power. This Affinity identity in addition to the curricular Institution identity as a social activist positioned the students as individuals in power which supported some students in their quest to take action. Just as there are teen outliers, however, there were outliers within these teens and their ability to fully adopt the



Institution identity. This adoption of a social activist identity may have been hampered by their Affinity identity as bystanders or victims in various cases, or as in the case of Max, somewhere in between. As such, we cannot assume that simply presenting the opportunity and curriculum to a class will result in students taking on an entirely new identity to take action regarding an issue.

### **How can the Novel and Curriculum Inspire Healing?**

One student had significant firsthand experience with the novel and found the text healing but did not produce an action plan that specifically supported individuals who struggle with mental illness. Liza's journal entries indicated support systems that would directly impact individuals who struggle with mental illness, but her final results did not demonstrate an extensive plan that detailed her original goals. Upon analyzing the pattern of her journal entries, it was apparent that Liza began the first part of the process with the action plan started in the classroom. Her first week's journal entry regarding how she might like to address the issue read:

I would really want to raise awareness of the issue and stress that mental illnesses are a REAL THING. It's unfortunate that lots of people don't even take the problems seriously. They claim the sufferer is acting to draw attention. What the heck? Another thing that I would do is fund research to aid and help those that struggle. And start up LOTS AND LOTS of support groups to save those who think they are alone.

Her focus in the beginning of the entry was based upon spreading awareness. She also moved from raising awareness for people who don't understand mental illness into a focus on support groups that would be geared specifically toward helping individuals who struggle with this issue.

As she progressed into the next week's journal entry, she started to explore a grander idea that was unfeasible within the constraints of the classroom or for her place in time as a high school sophomore. She wrote, "I would talk to those that are being treated in mental hospitals. Perhaps to understand what would make them happy. As well as fund lots of research facilities to find chemical solutions to the brain imbalance that causes the mental illness." This discussion began to focus less on helping people who do not have awareness of mental issues and more on the individuals with mental issues themselves. This stance was more of a researcher stance, both in her personal discussion about finding out what makes individuals happy themselves as well as in terms of medical laboratory approach. This shift in approach was interesting as she progresses through the novel. In this particular entry, she did not seem to identify as much with the novel's protagonist as she did previously because the identity she presented in this entry was more of a "helper" identity. As a high school student, these solutions were potentially unattainable, but the concepts that she addressed were critical for long-term solutions toward mental illness, and she demonstrated a high level of understanding toward these individuals.

The third week's journal entry focused on how she might address the issue. She continued to distance herself even further from mental illness. Liza wrote, "I would fund the research to find something that will cure all mental illness. Or perhaps find an alternative to curing mental illnesses without using addictive drugs. It just aches my heart to think that so many people are suffering and think they are all alone." While this statement indicated a level of financial resources that she did not have it also indicated that she was writing this from a position of strength. While she identified quite strongly

with Craig, the protagonist, she did not, however, portray herself as someone who is suffering herself through this idealized form of taking action. The word choice she used when she said “they are all alone” demonstrated a sense of separation from the issue. In considering Gee’s (2014) big D discourse, it seemed as though her fluidity between identification with the protagonist and then positioning herself as one who was in fact able to help solve the issue of mental illness indicated that she was attempting to move between groups, which may indicate a type of healing that she had experienced through reading the novel.

This was particularly important in her case because Liza had experienced a very personal and relatively recent situation the summer prior to entering high school that sent her into a depression. She spent some time in her one-on-one interview discussing her former boyfriend and explaining to me that he was manipulative. She then went on to explain how her experience was relevant to the novel when she said:

I got kind of depressed because he did something bad to me, and then I just didn't know how to feel because I really, really cared about him. I really, really loved him. Then, I'm trying to think. Back to, you know, my mouth would get dry and then it was like that for a couple days. Then, I would try to eat. I would eat small things and then it's just like, "Oh, I figured it out. I just need to drink water when I eat." Then that didn't work. Then it was just like, at some point, the smell of food would just like make me sick. I lost a lot of weight from beginning of the summer to like freshmen year. I lost like 10 pounds. 10, 15 pounds.

This was a somewhat shocking revelation, and I asked her if she felt the book was difficult to get through or if she was thinking “yes, I get this?” She responded by saying,

“Yeah. I was like, yes, finally. This isn't just me. This isn't just something I felt, it was something that other people felt, as well.” When Chris Crutcher speaks about his reasons for writing gritty books, he tells stories about his therapy patients who need to know that they are not alone in their suffering. Liza’s response reminded me of that rationale , and I asked her if she felt better having read the novel. She responded with, “Yeah, it made me feel better.”

While her group’s action plan ended up being a much smaller project than she’d envisioned, the growth that she experienced for herself, as well as the in-depth understanding of the different levels of progress necessary to make change, may have indicated an ability to move toward identifying with new affinity groups (Gee, 2001a) who are focused on solutions and help as opposed to identifying with the individuals who struggle with the issue. This seemed to be an important aspect of growth and healing throughout the process.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined students' sense of social activism and their capacity for action during and after a unit centered on using young adult novels focused on various social justice issues. Although the teacher implemented this YAL-based, social activist curriculum for the study throughout all her sophomore honors English courses, I focused on one class period to gain an in-depth understanding of multiple students. My goal was to discover how students might use YAL as inspiration or motivation to generate an action plan to solve a social justice issue. While some of the students did find motivation as a result of reading the novel, many other facets contributed to the students' experiences with YAL. While some of the students challenged the district's power structures or the school community's social structure, other students' growth was more internal in terms of their perception of others.

Although the case study design limited the generalizability of the findings, this work makes important contributions to the fields of student voice in the study of adolescent literacy, social and emotional literacy, critical literacy, and social-activist-oriented education. In this chapter, I conclude by highlighting four implications that educators may take from this study: 1.) teachers can stop privileging research based nonfiction over narrative or fiction as a teaching tool; 2.) student choice may lead to more civic engagement; 3.) teachers should facilitate civic engagement through research and examples; and 4.) varying student outcomes do not indicate failure.

## **Discussion**

**Student voice in the study of adolescent literacy.** Throughout this research, the most important component of the work done was to discover the students' voice. In order to develop a pragmatic focus, where researchers are doing work *for* education rather than *about* education as discussed by Dillon et al. (2013), it was critical that the student voice was heard throughout the process. In allowing the students an opportunity to choose issues that they valued and asking them to read texts that were intended for audiences like themselves, this project began the process of allowing the students to have voice within their classroom curriculum (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). Additionally, by conducting one-on-one interviews with the students as well as supporting whatever choices they made in terms of their action plans, the students themselves chose not only the curriculum, but also the direction of the research as opposed to asking the students' discoveries to fit into our own preconceived notions (K. Burke & Greene, 2015).

**Socio-cultural Growth.** Langer (2013) presented the idea that engaging literature might tap into differing cognitive functions necessary for intellectual development. While Ivey & Johnston (2013) wrote “. . . engaged reading offers the possibility of expanding the capacity for social imagination in the reader's own life, potentially changing readers' social behavior” (p. 257), I would argue that these concepts were born out in this research, as demonstrated, for example, by Josephine, who came to identify those who suffer from poverty “as people” and experienced a certain level of intellectual and social growth. This sense of humanizing of individuals throughout the texts occurred multiple times with several different people, as discussed in the findings. Multiple scholars (e.g., Applebee & Langer, 2011; Hayn, Layton, Nolen, & Olvey, 2016;

Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Lesesne, 2007) emphasize the potential for engaging students in critical thought through dialogic learning practices, as is seen with this work. Too often within our classrooms, we focus on achieving a checklist of discrete skills that might be marked off the CCSS list without engaging the students in something they are interested in reading or discussing. This curriculum showed the potential for students to develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally through reading engaging literature, which documents like the CCSS largely ignore. This politicizing of literature by privileging certain authors and novels in the classroom (Goering & Connors, 2014) may have a deleterious effect on a teacher's sense of "what good teaching is" in addition to having a negative impact on students and their engagement in the classroom.

**Critical Literacy.** While students did find the novels engaging, there was a need to encourage the students to approach these novels with a critical eye to support the connections they might make between the text and their own lives. For example, Max talked about how he didn't think racists were "that bad" until he approached his text with a critical eye toward examples of racism, which allowed him to consider the position of the characters within the stories as well as his understanding of how it played out within his own life. This exposed Max to the power structures surrounding him, which, in turn, will allow him to be more prepared to challenge those politics of daily life. As Friere (1974, 2005) discussed, "the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradiction in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it" (Shaul, 2005, p. 32). This sense of individuals gradually perceiving the realities around them in terms of racism, drug abuse, and poverty were demonstrated through these participants. It is important to remember that

this growth occurs gradually because dealing with the issues critically did not necessarily manifest itself within this semester-long project.

A second component of this work that was important as discussed by Freire was the need to strip away the typical power structure of the teacher as the center of the classroom, generating the knowledge. Bean (2003) addressed this as well, and this curriculum demonstrated that the students were able to interpret the text and generate the knowledge they felt was important throughout the process. The teacher did not guide them in what to think and did not propose that they had only one answer or interpretation of each piece, and the individuals themselves chose to emphasize what they felt was important. Had the teacher put herself at the center of the classroom, the variation of projects may not have been understood in quite the same way, which may have negatively impacted the students' ability to identify with the characters on their own terms.

**Social responsibility.** Wolk (2009) wrote that in a social-activist-oriented curriculum, “the process becomes part of the content” (p. 666). In order to generate the type of empathetic thinking necessary for social action (Alsup, 2013, 2015; Ames, 2013), the process was as important as what the students did. This curriculum followed the guidelines suggested by researchers including Glenn et al. (2012); Stover & Bach (2011); and Glasgow (2001) in that students had choice in their issue; they paid explicit attention to the interplay between the issue, the text, and their own lives through critical reading; and they utilized resources from activist-based organizations. This lengthy and interwoven process allowed the students to move beyond reading the novel as a separate piece and then completing some isolated activity, but instead, the novel became



embedded as a blended component of a larger unit designed to generate social responsibility.

There is little research conducted that looks at how students use novels to move to prosocial behavior (Alsup, 2015). Through this study, the students demonstrated an increased sense of social responsibility and empathy after reading the novel. If they had not, however, been required to think of an action plan centered around the ideas presented and discussed in class and do something to further that action, the students admitted that they would not have done so. Their enthusiastic statement that Ms. Land should do this unit again, however, indicated that, as opposed to feeling put out or pushed too far, they appreciated the push to take their curriculum outside the classroom walls.

### **Implications**

**YAL may be more effective than research based nonfiction for raising awareness.** While it may seem intuitive that students would be more likely to learn from nonfiction or traditional research articles, this study did not support this idea. While students may be able to glean facts from relevant news articles, they are not as likely to be receptive to the information found within the articles if they are not engaged with the concepts (Ivey & Johnston, 2015; Moley, Bandré, & George, 2011). In this study, none of the students reported learning the most from the research portion of the curriculum. If the students did not already have significant prior experience with the topic of study, they reported that they learned the most from reading the young adult novel.

By privileging nonfiction pieces in the classroom and through federally supported standards such as the CCSS, there was an assumption made that the only material worth reading and learning was in fact nonfiction or lied in the realm of the canonical pieces

also included in recommended literature (Goering & Connors, 2014; Stotsky, Goering, & Jolliffe, 2010). This is problematic in that voices of young people, and especially culturally and linguistically diverse students, are silenced. As Mirra et al. (2015) wrote, critical literacy is not simply a set of academic skills to be developed, but in fact “a competency that connects us to other people and to society as the source of all communication and social action” (p. 51). To develop students who are actively engaged with society, their whole person must be considered in curriculum development, and this is where an emphasis on post-core instruction (Elizabeth Moje, Giroux, & Muehling, 2017) comes into play.

As we consider moving beyond the limited set of state standards to teach the “whole” student, it is critical that we consider how students learn best by taking up the call to conduct research and try to gain the insider perspective of the student (Christenbury et al., 2009). YAL may seem like we are allowing students to delve into fantasy land, but as this study demonstrated, when students approached a young adult novel with a social justice lens in mind, in addition to being asked to identify with characters, they expressed an ability to gain a deeper understanding of an issue they had previously been unaware of. If, as the CCSS exhorts us to do, educators want students to become critical thinkers and gain an in-depth understanding of an issue, this may be more effectively done by involving emotions. An emotional connection to learning has been demonstrated to connect with students’ cognitive functions more readily (Goncu & Gauvain, 2012; Ivey, 2014; Ivey & Johnston, 2013), and this study bears out that idea. As such, if an educator is taking the student experience into account, using YAL as an entry point to critical thinking about a social justice issue may be the most effective plan.

**Choice is critical to student engagement and success.** While choice has often been touted as a positive way to engage students (Alsup, 2013; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001), it has become difficult to include choice effectively within a curriculum based upon a common set of standards. If educators can reconceptualize how teachers can implement choice and consider taking a variety of approaches to teaching a similar set of skills, the students will ultimately benefit. In this social-activist-oriented curriculum, the students were given opportunities to choose a social justice issue that they were interested in solving and subsequently given a novel that focused on that issue. As a result of this choice, the students maintained interest in the project for longer than they may have if they had not been allowed to choose what they wanted to focus on. For example, a group of students read *The Good Braider*, and during classroom observations, several of the group members stated that they did not enjoy the book itself. Had this book been assigned to them as part of a curriculum that they also were not interested in learning about, they may have shut down any active engagement with the project. As it was, they continued to work on ideas to address refugee issues, and they mentioned that they were particularly interested in the topic because of Trump's election. They demonstrated a personal interest in the issue, and that interest continued to motivate them to participate, even while their interest in the novel flagged.

The second layer of choice involved in this curriculum was their approach to the solution they implemented as part of the curriculum. The students who were already knowledgeable about the issue chose to take action in a way that was more victim-focused than other students, whereas the students who were less informed tended to spread awareness. If the students had all been required to complete the same exact steps

for their action plan, the teacher may have had students who were still struggling with the newfound perceptions of the issue having difficulties in creating plans that reached beyond spreading awareness. Additionally, the teacher may not have had students who were inspired to write to the school board, start a school club, or run a pots-and-pans drive feel enabled to take action.

This level of choice also allowed students to develop a sense of identity around their subject, their novel, and their action plan. The students operated through various levels in terms of their Discourse identity (Jade and her school board letter), Institutional identity (Victoria and her church group), Natural Identity (Max and his nonracist yet not anti-racist attitude), and Affinity identity (Valentina and her LGBTQ advocacy) (Gee, 2001). As a component of education, we are asking students to expand their sense of awareness, and tangentially their sense of identity onto a broader perspective of the world, and, if we are asking students to become civically minded citizens, (K. Burke & Greene, 2015; Herczog, 2011; Mirra et al., 2015), we must support their transition between various identities.

**Students need support to act as civically engaged citizens.** “I feel like I can; I just don't know how.” Jade uttered these words during her one-on-one interview when she was asked if she felt like she could make a change. This comment is instructive to educators interested in doing this type of work with their students when they consider that Jade had been inspired and motivated to take action to support English Language Learning (ELL) students but wasn't quite sure where to begin. To behave as civically engaged citizens, students needed adult support. This was both in terms of discovering directions they might move in, such as what individuals might need for some people, as

well as understanding where to begin a process of action. In this case, Jade reached out to the school's ELL department chair to discover what was needed because that particular adult "saw the kids" and situation all the time. As such, it made sense to Jade that this teacher would have an idea of what needed to be done. I am unsure whether the ELL teacher encouraged Jade to write to the school board or not, but I know that the group had discussed writing to legislators early on in the unit, and this idea of writing to those in power may have carried over after the interview with the ELL teacher.

In a second example, Valentina and her group were motivated to take action through becoming allies for members of the LGBTQ community, yet they struggled to identify a way to provide that support. Through our conversations, I guided the students toward the idea of an organization that might take the form of a club. As a former high school teacher, it is my assumption that clubs are clearly intended for students and ought to be guided by student needs. This example, however, showed me that the school's power structures don't necessarily allow students to realize that they have ownership in at least some of the aspects of the school operations, such as organizations and clubs. The idea that the LGBTQ community might need support through some sort of club was not something that occurred to them immediately, although the moment it was suggested, they became excited about the prospect of working together and moving forward.

Through the focus group, all of the students indicated that, even beyond getting specific help with their individual action plans, they needed the curriculum to be spurred into action. The students were asked "If Ms. Land had not assigned you to do an action plan, she just did the book, would any of you have been moved to action? How do you think

you would've thought about this?" The responses were fairly consistent throughout the group:

Josephine: "I wouldn't have done anything."

Victoria: "But I don't think I would've gone so far, and it's this that actually made me realize how big this issue is."

Valentina: "I'm not going to lie. I literally wouldn't have done anything. Because when I read the book it honestly gave me a very good insight on what was happening in the LGBT community. Before the book, I had automatically assumed that right now, what's taking place, everything was just fine regarding it. But, it's not."

Liza: "... if I didn't have to do an action piece, I probably wouldn't have done anything. Maybe researched stuff for my own self, but not try to give back to other people, just for my curiosity."

Jade: "... I think I probably wouldn't have done anything, but I would want to. I just didn't have the push to actually do it. I know it was a huge problem, and I've lived it, and heard it all my life, and I wanted to do something. But I just didn't have that push. Ms. Land, with the whole project, she pushed us to do it, and actually do something."

Cat: "... I wouldn't have done anything either. I probably would've just thought it was another good book and just kept it there."

These responses indicate that, across the board, regardless of prior engagement or experience with the issue, the students needed adult experience to make the moves that they may have wanted to make anyway. This is not intended to negate the students' power or agency, but instead to call into question the approaches educators typically take toward the students' role within the curriculum. With the understanding that people like Victoria were doing this work with organizations like Welcome to America and people like Jade had significant knowledge and understanding of immigrant issues in education yet still felt as if they needed a push from the curriculum to take action, as educators, we must heed Wolk's (2009) call to make this sort of social and civic approach explicit in the classroom.

**A successful curriculum may result in differing outcomes for individual students.** In the era of standardized testing, a measure of success is often defined through a misguided sense of equality, as opposed to equity, where every student is expected to achieve or exhibit the same sets of skills. This, in part, explains the rise of the CCSS and its emphasis on a common curriculum, in addition to the emphasis on measurement of teachers and schools through programs such as edTPA. The idea that a single curriculum will fit all students, however, has been questioned, and the growing population of charter schools that are attempting to differentiate their instruction is also testimony to the individualism required within education. Perhaps the approach to making sure each student succeeds may lie in reconsidering the definition of success.

One measure of success might be student engagement. Within the focus group interview, the students were asked if Ms. Land should do the project again. As shown before, the students had very similar responses to this question:

Valentina: “Definitely yes. In the future . . . I feel like the stuff really gave me a push forward because, like I said before, I wouldn't have done anything. But, it was a really good idea that she did this, and props.”

Liza: “I feel like yes, she should do it again. But I feel like some people were not trying to do enough to get out there, and maybe have a little bit more motivation to do more than just make one poster, or do more into actually changing things.”

Max: “Yeah, like everybody else, I feel like she should do it in the future also because it gets people to express their feelings and their opinions on the world and their problems.”

Anthony: “Because everyone needs to be heard from other people, from their perspectives, on how they feel about whatever they're trying to express.”

Josephine: “I do agree. I wish I didn't, but I think she should do it again. I just think there's people who tried really hard to go all out, and they didn't get it done, like me. And then there's people who didn't . . . maybe more definition on how much time we have, or less definition when grading the project, because it's hard

to make a change in a timeline. Change takes a long time, so I think people should go all out and be encouraged to go all out, and I think the due date was one of the biggest issues of the project.”

Victoria: “I also think that Josephine's correct. I also thought of another thing. If we had worked more in groups and a more bigger, motivated group, instead of just working either one on one or maybe with a partner, it might have been more able to get out there more and be able to actually get something done. Because then you have more people working for it, and you have more talents in that group to be able to maybe speak to some authorities about this issue and find some way to build up a . . . solve . . .”

These responses demonstrate that, even though they found the project difficult and in some ways did not achieve the level of success they wanted, each student did appreciate the work they did. The curriculum was intended to be purpose driven, and these responses indicate that the unit achieved that goal on some level.

This curriculum also allowed student choice in their focus issue (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008), choice in the text that they read (Moley et al., 2011), autonomy while reading their novel (Wolk, 2009), and ultimately the choice to develop a product in the manner they saw fit. As a result, the final product that each student or group of students put forth was vastly different, and external judgment may not demonstrate the ways that students grew based upon an evaluation of the final product. For example, the student who created an Instagram page that was hidden and the student who wanted to write a novel but had not done it yet, compared to the student who wrote to the school board demanding better education for ELL students and the student who took the steps necessary to conduct a pots-and-pans drive ended up with vastly different results. Upon interviewing the students and discovering the very different places from which they started, each person’s social and emotional growth was fairly significant. In fact, it may



have been more significant in the students who produced no tangible products at the end of the curriculum. If the teacher had used the same yardstick with which to measure her students, however, those students who grew internally would be deemed failures. If educators want to move beyond the CCSS as a way of educating the whole student, it is important that we heed the words of Moje et al. (2017) and help students achieve literacy skills that will allow them to “live satisfying lives and work together to rebuild a troubled world” (p. 4). Affording students the opportunities to have some choice and autonomy in both what they study as well as how they study it will provide students with the motivation and opportunities to channel their empathy into action, which is more important than ever within today’s society (Alsup, 2015; Glasgow, 2001; W. Glenn et al., 2012; Wolk, 2009).

### **Limitations**

This YAL-based, social-activist-oriented curriculum was quite successful in many ways, but there were limitations within the project that would better serve future iterations of this work. One issue that the students discussed in the focus group interview was the lack of time to complete the projects. Even though the curriculum was extended from the initial time frame, the students still felt as if they were not able to fully develop their action plans within the time that they did have. The shortage of time the students indicated does not necessarily mean, however, that the students would have wanted to spend more time on this particular project. Some of the students simply felt frustrated that they couldn’t get it done, and some of the students expressed a desire to read a different book or focus on a different issue, which may indicate that extended amounts of

time may not be the best solution. Connected to this idea was the students' inability to move into action plans more quickly, allowing them an opportunity to make more progress with generating a solution to their issue

Additionally, the students did not have complete choice within their topics. Since this research built upon a pilot study, the current research teacher utilized the finalized topic selection sheet with book titles, so the students may not have identified topics they were truly interested in. For example, bullying was mentioned by one or two students in the pilot study, yet it was not selected as a topic to focus on since there weren't enough individuals to form a group. This iteration of the research project may have chosen bullying in larger numbers, and as such, the topics may not be a true indication of the students' current interests.

### **What comes next?**

What these students were asked to do reached beyond the typical scope of a sophomore English course, even with the expectation that honors students will have increased demands. This curriculum may be better served by combining it with another course that the students are taking that might align with the social justice orientation, such as a social studies or civics course. Another potential solution to some of these limitations might include taking more of a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach. According to Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza & Matthews (2013), YPAR is defined as a "type of inquiry that centers on youth expertise" (p. 3). A component of this pedagogy involves a critical approach to power structures, in addition to an understanding of how to conduct research (Bautista et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2015). Through a YPAR focus, students would be taught the basic tenets of how to conduct

research, such as interviewing a department chair or creating a survey of students who are dealing with a social issue, and ultimately would move this understanding into some form of action motivated by their work in addition to their funds of knowledge (Garcia, 2012; Ginwright, 2007).

This study's curriculum demonstrated an increased sense of understanding of issues, but the students who were able to seize upon a manageable, victim-focused action plan were those who had some prior experience, and therefore were using an inherent knowledge of the issue to generate an action plan. If students were able to approach this work from tenets that were closer to a YPAR stance, they would likely see more productive efforts from the action plans they developed, in addition to a greater sense of buy-in from the students who just weren't sure what to do with this issue. Additionally, several of the students felt that they didn't have enough time to carry out their action plan. If there were more of a collaborative effort, as is often found through YPAR-focused instruction, this may allow students to capitalize on their strengths differently within the classroom, therefore allowing for a stronger approach to the curriculum.

### **Call for Further research**

Implementing a pragmatism lens (Dillon et al., 2013) this curriculum was successful for the teacher, and the students demonstrated a positive reaction to both the novels and the curriculum, although there are many questions that were raised within this dissertation. In terms of the action plan development, more work needs to be done to ascertain what leads individuals to specific action plans. If there had been more of a YPAR focus through the curriculum, would students have moved into more tangible, victim-focused plans regardless of their prior experience? If the students continue to

focus on raising awareness, is this because of their own growth through reading the novel, or is it simply a lack of true connection with the issue? Was raising awareness a form of action, and was it based upon their own learning process?

Additionally, this study does not look at the moves the teacher made at all, although her commitment to the curriculum and her students were of great significance in the success of this research. What moves did she have to make in order for this curriculum to be successful? How would that change for a different teacher?

Additionally, what would have happened if this research was conducted in a regular sophomore English course? Would the students have identified with the novel and issue in the same way? In what ways can a high school teacher develop this curriculum so that students have an opportunity to complete their action plan in ways that are satisfying to them?

Finally, what are the long-term impacts for the students who demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of the social issue, or even experienced a sense of cognitive dissonance, which hopefully lead to productive discomfort? It would be of importance to evaluate whether the power of the narrative might generate a long-term shift in understanding of a social issue or if the individual's sense of right and wrong settled back into a place of familiarity.

If we, as ELA educators, are truly here to support students as they make their way through adolescence, on their journey to becoming productive citizens of our society, it is critical that we address not only the checklist of skills deemed important by many knowledgeable scholars, but to also address what might be argued is the heart of our content, the humanity of society—humanity that can be found through YAL. By

encouraging students to learn different versions of their own realities or by challenging them to consider the complexities of issues they had previously seen as binary ones, we might allow students to prepare themselves for the heady work of becoming a citizen. While reading novels can awaken a student's soul, without a pathway to productivity, students may simply experience an uneasy sense of discomfort. If we do not encourage students to turn their newfound knowledge and experiences into something that can move toward making the world a better place, we are doing a disservice to our students, regardless of how well they might do on our checklists of skills.

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APPENDIX A

SOCIAL JUSTICE/TOPIC INTEREST SURVEY

## Topic and Book of Interest Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

Please rank the following topics from 1-10 according to your interest level in the topic and/or the book you will be reading. One (1) being your first choice and ten (10) being your last choice. Then circle the books you have previously read.

\_\_\_\_\_ Racial equality–All American Boys by Jason Reynolds

\_\_\_\_\_ Gender equality–The Boston Girl by Anita Diamante

\_\_\_\_\_ Immigration–The Circuit by Francisco Jimenez

\_\_\_\_\_ LBTBQ–Openly Straight by Bill Koninsberg

\_\_\_\_\_ Poverty–Eleanor & Park by Rainbow Rowell

\_\_\_\_\_ Abuse–Chinese Handcuffs by Chris Crutcher

\_\_\_\_\_ Mental health–It’s Kind of a Funny Story by Ned Vizzini

\_\_\_\_\_ Muslim discrimination–Does My Head Look big in This by Randa Abdel-Fattah

\_\_\_\_\_ Refugees–The Good Braider by Tery Farish

\_\_\_\_\_ Environmental–Kingsley by Carolyn O’Neal

If there is another issue you are interested in that is not on this list, please indicate below:

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APPENDIX B  
DAILY READING BREAKDOWN



**Environmental**—*Kingsley* by Carolyn O’Neal

<b>Day</b>	<b>Chapters</b>
<b>1</b>	1-2
<b>2</b>	3-4
<b>3</b>	5-6
<b>4</b>	7-8
<b>5</b>	9-10
<b>6</b>	11-12
<b>7</b>	13-14
<b>8</b>	15-16
<b>9</b>	17-18
<b>10</b>	19-20
<b>11</b>	21-22
<b>12</b>	23-24
<b>13</b>	25-26

**Abuse**—*Chinese Handcuffs* by Chris Crutcher

<b>Day</b>	<b>Chapters</b>
<b>1</b>	Prologue-1
<b>2</b>	2
<b>3</b>	3
<b>4</b>	4
<b>5</b>	5
<b>6</b>	6
<b>7</b>	7
<b>8</b>	8
<b>9</b>	9
<b>10</b>	10
<b>11</b>	11-12
<b>12</b>	13-14
<b>13</b>	15- Epilogue

**Racial equality**—Monster by Walter Dean Myers

Day	Pages
1	1-22
2	23-45
3	46-68
4	69-90
5	91-112
6	113-125
7	126-147
8	148-170
9	171-193
10	194-215
11	216-237
12	238-259
13	260-281

**Immigration**—*The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez

Day	Chapters
1	Under the Wire
2	<i>Soledad</i>
3	Inside Out
4	Miracle in Tent City
5	<i>El Angel de Oro</i>
6	Christmas Gift
7	Death Forgiven
8	Cotton Sack
9	The Circuit
10	Learning the Game
11	To Have and to Hold
12	Moving Still
13	<b>Research</b>

**Gender equality**–*The Boston Girl* by  
Anita Diamante

<b>Day</b>	<b>Pages</b>
<b>1</b>	3-21
<b>2</b>	23-52
<b>3</b>	53-77
<b>4</b>	79-99
<b>5</b>	100-126
<b>6</b>	127-155
<b>7</b>	160-188
<b>8</b>	189-209
<b>9</b>	211-235
<b>10</b>	237-260
<b>11</b>	261-281
<b>12</b>	283-297
<b>13</b>	301-320

**Muslim discrimination**–*Does My Head  
Look Big in This* by Randa Abdel-Fattah

<b>Day</b>	<b>Chapters</b>
<b>1</b>	1-3
<b>2</b>	4-7
<b>3</b>	8-10
<b>4</b>	11-14
<b>5</b>	15-17
<b>6</b>	18-21
<b>7</b>	22-24
<b>8</b>	25-28
<b>9</b>	29-31
<b>10</b>	32-35
<b>11</b>	36-38
<b>12</b>	39-42
<b>13</b>	43-45

**LGTBQ—Openly Straight** by Bill  
Koninsberg

<b>Day</b>	<b>Chapters</b>
<b>1</b>	1-3
<b>2</b>	4-6
<b>3</b>	7-9
<b>4</b>	10-12
<b>5</b>	13-15
<b>6</b>	16-18
<b>7</b>	19-21
<b>8</b>	22-24
<b>9</b>	25-27
<b>10</b>	28-30
<b>11</b>	31-33
<b>12</b>	34-36
<b>13</b>	37-38

**Mental health—It's Kind of a Funny**  
*Story* by Ned Vizzini

<b>Day</b>	<b>Chapters</b>
<b>1</b>	1-4
<b>2</b>	5-8
<b>3</b>	9-12
<b>4</b>	13-16
<b>5</b>	17-20
<b>6</b>	21-24
<b>7</b>	25-28
<b>8</b>	29-32
<b>9</b>	33-36
<b>10</b>	37-40
<b>11</b>	41-44
<b>12</b>	45-47
<b>13</b>	48-50

**Poverty—*Eleanor & Park*** by Rainbow Rowell

<b>Da y</b>	<b>Chapte rs</b>
<b>1</b>	1-5
<b>2</b>	6-9
<b>3</b>	10-14
<b>4</b>	15-18
<b>5</b>	19-23
<b>6</b>	24-27
<b>7</b>	28-32
<b>8</b>	33-36
<b>9</b>	37-41
<b>10</b>	42-44
<b>11</b>	45-49
<b>12</b>	50-53
<b>13</b>	54-58

APPENDIX C  
BOOK TITLES AND SUMMARIES

*Does My Head Look Big in This* by Randa Abdel-Fattah was set in Australia. It was told from the point of view of Amal, a 16-year-old Muslim girl, who decided to wear her hijab full-time to a private school. This decision pulled her through multiple experiences, and the author explained the insecurity Amal experienced even in making her decision clearly and in a way that one who has experienced indecision can relate to.

*All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely is the story of Rashad and Quinn. Rashad is the victim of racially motivated police brutality and Quinn is the bystander trying to discern his feelings towards the brutality he witnessed with the narrative he is told about the police officer who committed the acts. The story explores the nuanced facets of police brutality and racism in a way that blurs the line between the binary idea of good and evil. This piece feels like fact come to life, and the authors able to artfully depict the difficulties in a vicious act such as this one.

*Kingsley* by Carolyn O'Neal was the story of a boy who is living in a futuristic society, where environmental and societal destruction have resulted in a dearth of males. The two main characters in the novel attempt to discover the cause of this attack on the Y chromosome. In the second half of the novel, the story takes place 40 years in the future, where the narrator has been cloned and is now speaking as an infant. The emphasis is on the human caused environmental destruction of the world.

*The Boston Girl* by Anita Diamante was the story of Addie Baum, who bucked the gender roles placed upon her by her society and provided a “fascinating look at a generation of women finding their places in a changing world” (Amazon.com). While the novel was set in the early twentieth century, there were parallels between the power shifts women were attempting to make then and now.

*It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini was the sometimes laughable, sometimes tragic novel about a Craig Gilner, who experienced a mental breakdown over the stress and pressure he experienced in attending his prestigious high school. The novel clearly depicted one version of someone's struggle on maintaining a mental balance in a way that might allow students to develop a better understanding of this disease.

*Openly Straight* by Bill Koninsberg was the story of Rafe who was tired of being the token gay boy in his highly liberal hometown of Boulder, Colorado. He decided to move across the country to an all-male boarding school and omitted the information that he is gay in any of his interactions with his new classmates and roommates. While the freedom is initially exhilarating, Rafe realized that hiding his sexuality presented more difficulties than he anticipated. This novel did not focus on a single issue but allowed students to identify multiple issues surrounding the LGBTQ community.

*Chinese Handcuffs* by Chris Crutcher was a gritty novel detailing how multiple issues are difficult to get through for some. This novel dealt with drug abuse, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, and suicide in addition to gang violence. This novel was difficult to read and will require a mature audience although the material was inspired by Crutcher's experiences as a family therapist and may be useful for some individuals.

*Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell was an award-winning novel that is centered around a love story that adroitly addressed the issue of poverty. This novel allowed students to vicariously experience the added stress poverty takes on individuals without the issue becoming overwhelming in the story.

*The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* by Francisco Jimenez was the story of Panchito and his life growing up as a migrant, traveling from crop to crop over a number of years. This heart-warming story offered an insightful glimpse into the life of a migrant family and the back-breaking work they must do to survive



APPENDIX D  
PROJECT PROPOSAL TEMPLATE

I.	SUMMARY.....	2
II.	INTRODUCTION.....	3
III.	NEEDS/PROBLEMS.....	4
IV.	GOALS/OBJECTIVES.....	4
V.	PROCEDURES/SCOPE OF WORK.....	4
VI.	TIMETABLE.....	5
VII.	BUDGET.....	5
VIII.	KEY PERSONNEL.....	5
IX.	EVALUATION.....	6
X.	ENDORSEMENTS.....	6
XI.	NEXT STEPS.....	6
XII.	APPENDIX.....	7

APPENDIX E  
STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What novel did you read, and what was the social issue you focused on?
- 2) Do you think this novel changed the way you think or feel about the issue?
- 3) What part of the novel was the most emotional for you?
- 4) Which character did you most identify with and why?
- 5) How did reading the novel in your literature circles affect the way you saw the issue? What sorts of things did you and your group talk about? Did you always agree? Did you ever want to argue with what someone else said?
- 6) Did the issue and the novel affirm the thoughts you had about the issue or challenge them? Does your family feel the same way you do about the issue? How about your friends? Did people in your group see things differently as you or the same?
- 7) What made you most aware of these issues you discussed?
- 8) Do you feel like you can make a change? If yes-how? If no—why not?
- 9) What are you planning to do for your action plan?
- 10) How do you think your plan was influenced by the novel? By your peers? By your prior experiences?
- 11) Can you give a quick book talk? Should everyone read this book? Why?

APPENDIX F  
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- 1.) How is the action plan going? Who is making progress and who is not?
- 2.) How did the books change the way you thought about your issue?
- 3.) If Ms. Land had not assigned you to do an action plan and she just read the book, would any of you have been moved to action? How do you think you would have thought about this?
- 4.) What are your thoughts in general about this curriculum? Do you think it is something Ms. Land should do again?

APPENDIX G

IRB Exemption

EXEMPTION GRANTED

James Blasingame  
 English  
 480/965-6074  
 James.Blasingame@asu.edu

Dear James Blasingame:

On 9/12/2016 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	From Fiction to Action: Young Adult Literature and Prosocial Behavior
Investigator:	James Blasingame
IRB ID:	STUDY00004774
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental Consent Letter, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Student Attitude Survey, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• Student Assent form, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Basic Empathy Scale, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• Verbal recruitment script, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li> <li>• Teacher Consent Form, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Approval email to conduct research from district, Category: Off-site authorizations (school permission, other IRB approvals, Tribal permission etc);</li> <li>• Student Interview Questions, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• Dissertation IRB protocol, Category: IRB Protocol;</li> </ul>



The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (1) Educational settings on 9/12/2016.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Alice Hays  
Alice Hays