

**R**eading for fun may feel like a frivolous extra that you just can't squeeze in . . . [but] schedule in time, no matter how brief, to read every day.

and get the CDs from the library) and “crack open” that book while cooking

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**CR:** As educators, we all have very full lives. Reading for fun may feel like a frivolous extra that you just can't squeeze in. What I've found works for me is to schedule in time, no matter how brief, to read every day. My time is just before bed. It helps me unwind and has become an

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## Conversations, Connections, and Culturally Responsive Teaching: Young Adult Literature in the English Methods Class

*Elsie L. Olan, University of Central Florida, Orlando; joined CEL 2009*

*Kia Jane Richmond, Northern Michigan University, Marquette; joined NCTE 1999, CEL 2015*

### Introduction

After attending the 2015 CEL Conference in Minneapolis, we began a conversation about how our preservice teachers were grappling with two similar difficulties in their student teaching or internship placements:

1. Constantly questioning the power they have as novice teachers/student interns
2. Struggling with making meaningful connections between the texts they are teaching and their students' lives and cultures

Despite the fact that we teach English education at two very different geographically and socioculturally situated universities—one a mid-sized rural Midwestern university and the other a large urban Southern university—we discovered through extended dialogue that we both aim to make our methods courses safe spaces in which preservice teachers can consider and (de)construct their own identities as readers while preparing to teach literature in secondary schools across

the United States and beyond. We realized that to create lifelong readers in those schools, we should begin with our preservice teachers' identities as readers, knowledge of intertextuality, and considerations of reading as a social practice before asking them to become English teachers who connect their students to texts and to the world around them. And to do this, we use young adult literature and culturally responsive teaching.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of adolescent fiction in popular culture (e.g., *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, *The Hunger Games*, etc.), preservice teachers at both our universities report being asked to teach mostly canonical texts, a fact that echoes studies by Applebee (1993) and more recently by Stallworth & Gibbons (2012) in *English Leadership Quarterly*. Young adult literature (YAL) provides preservice teachers with the opportunity to connect with their prior experiences as adolescents as well as with their identities as readers. Moreover, YAL

allows our preservice teachers to engage in critical analysis of their own lives and helps them recognize and critique “discourses of power” (Delpit, 1992). Likewise, as Kaywell (2001) argues, we should engage preservice teachers in “the reading and discussion of young adult literature so that these books will continue to find their way into classrooms to enrich students' reading lives” (p. 326). We both use YAL in our methods courses to help preservice teachers develop arguments not only about which young adult texts to include in their lesson plans but also why they would incorporate those specific texts and how those texts might mirror or complicate ideas from canonical pieces.

What we have discovered, through in-depth dialogue and collaborative research, is that our preservice teachers can develop more confidence and make more meaningful culturally responsive connections with texts and with their secondary students if we use young adult literature in our methods courses.

## Questioning Power, Forming Identities, and Developing Confidence

In spite of our different teaching contexts, our research shows that preservice teachers consistently question the power they have as novice teachers. Despite having taken many courses in their content area and pedagogy, preservice teachers don't feel knowledgeable or powerful; instead they worry that every decision they make will be under scrutiny by administrators, parents, and others. And in many ways they are right. Current accountability practices in education (observations, evaluations, etc.) position teachers to be watched and judged, especially student teachers. As Bushnell (2003) notes, teachers—whose work is “externally monitored”—don't have the “decision-making autonomy, collegial community, and trust characteristic of [other] professionals” (p. 253). To help preservice teachers gain confidence, we ask them to construct and teach lesson plans that include diverse YA literature.

Preservice teachers at the Southern university are required to take only one YAL course in which, because they deal with secondary curriculum and students, we use adolescent literature to focus on identity development and deconstruction. For example, preservice teachers read *Brooklyn Burning* by Steve Brezenoff, a novel about a street kid in Brooklyn accused of burning down a warehouse. This text allows preservice teachers to identify easily with urban and ethnically diverse issues, which helps them develop cultural sensitivity toward their students and position themselves within complex sociocultural and educational settings.

Another example of this concept can be seen through a mini-value lesson that Southern university preservice teachers construct about two international YA fiction/nonfiction books that they believe students/teachers will enjoy and use. With this assignment, preservice teachers make

meaningful connections between texts and secondary students' lives, supporting their choices with textual evidence and drawing interpretations of what the covers of the books might look like, which leads them to look back at culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2002). This is specially noted when preservice teachers are reading texts such as *The Book of Unknown Americans* (2015) by Cristina Henríquez, focused on a fifteen-year-old Latina protagonist who struggles to understand her cultural identity and positioning within a new American setting. This assignment provokes shifts in perspectives, from local to global, personal to community, textual to intertextual.

Preservice teacher Kae<sup>1</sup> remarked that her lesson “allows for a lot of creativity, and creative thinking” for her students. She argues,

I believe the set-up of the lesson allowed students to make their own choices, and therefore reflect on whether they could have made different choices, all the while allowing me to step back as the teacher and not tell the students how they should feel or think. . . . If I were to continue this lesson, I would go on to have the students begin reading, and illustrate a set of quotes for every few chapters . . . then have a “sequence” of illustrations they could reflect on after reading. They would then have a chance after they finish the book to look back at their illustrations and visualize how their perception of the characters evolved over time.

Discussing the book covers allows Kae to present her findings and share how to implement this type of activity into her own classes. Such assignments create a reflective and reflexive space where preservice teachers consider learning experiences that invite students to be more agentic and reflective.

After providing methods students with a synopsis of *Summer de las Mariposas* by Guadalupe Garcia McCall, another preservice teacher,

Amy,<sup>2</sup> began her lesson plan with a quick-write, asking students to create a list of other stories that contain magical realism or to construct their own contemporary story. The quick-write was followed by an explanation of characteristics of magical realism. Reflecting on the lesson, Amy recalls,

This lesson serves as a way for students to experience a method of fiction they may be unaware of or [that] may be mentioned on the state test. The text involved also exposes students to diverse literature and topics that preservice teachers may be unaware of. *Summer of the Mariposas* also has a connection with a classic piece of literature [*The Odyssey*], allowing our students to preview classic texts in an engaging way. The writing pieces of the assignment helped all of us (preservice teachers and students) locate great pieces of evidence and incorporate it into our writing, something that is crucial for college and career readiness. Finally, the creative piece assists preservice teachers and students with transforming a piece of writing into an alternative piece of work that still conveys the same material.

Despite the fact that they are required to be well-read and informed about “a range of world literatures, historical traditions, genres, and experiences of different genders, ethnicities, and social classes,” preservice teachers at the Midwestern university are not required to take a separate course in YAL (NCTE/NCATE, 2012, p.1). We have therefore integrated young adult literature into the English methods course. Preservice teachers read and critique texts such as *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*; *The Impossible Knife of Memory*; and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

With *The Absolutely True Diary* (Alexie, 2000), preservice teachers reflect on prior experiences they have had with Native American students and friends, making connections between the novel and their own lives as residents of the northern Great Lakes. Tapping into preservice

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teachers' experiences during methods classes helps us to acknowledge their cultural backgrounds and correct any misconceptions in a low-risk environment.

By exploring young adult literature through a lens of critical theory as recommended by Goering and Connors (2014), "preservice teachers can develop a sense of appreciation for the role YAL plays in exposing ideology and reinforcing (or subverting) power relationships" (pp. 19–20). When reading Alexie's novel, preservice teachers shared fears related to teaching effectively while avoiding censorship issues. Most worried about students' abilities to discuss the book's racial and ethical issues; however, the main topic of discussion was addressing parents' concerns with controversial content. Only 30 percent of recent preservice teachers were allowed to teach YAL while student teaching.

One intern, Laurie<sup>3</sup> was asked to select a novel to teach after a unit on *Fahrenheit 451*. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was her choice, a text onsite but not previously taught. Concerns from the school administrator (who was supportive but worried about potential parent complaints) were alleviated after we provided research that the book is being taught in six schools within a hundred-mile radius. Disappointingly, the administration did not immediately trust Laurie's expertise in recommending a text, even though Laurie's cooperating teacher already had the books in her room.

Drawing on her knowledge of English methods, Laurie had students journal about experiences with domestic violence, drug abuse, racism, poverty, sexuality, or murder; subsequently, discussions ensued about the issues and how individuals and families like those in Alexie's book and in their own community can be affected. Students also engaged in a conversation of "what being 'White' meant and how that is defined daily."

***I explained to the students that this novel was not bad in the sense that they were thinking; it's bad in the sense that it's still happening!***

Laurie reported,

Most of my students were mature enough to handle the racism, sexuality, and language, but in the case of the few who were not, I used my new-found knowledge that I gained from my methods course. I explained to the students that this novel was not bad in the sense that they were thinking; it's bad in the sense that it's still happening! That caused most of the students to get on board with the novel and interpret it for what it really is.

Laurie's experience is not isolated. Our preservice and novice teachers frequently enter into situations in which they do not feel confident in text choices. Laurie, because of discussions of Alexie's novel in our methods class, recognized strategies she could use to teach it. Moreover, because she had already visited the school during a methods practicum, Laurie was familiar with the specific context in which she would teach *The Absolutely True Diary*: she knew the students, their backgrounds, and the community in which they lived.

In order to help preservice teachers gain confidence and develop their identities as experts in the field, teacher educators should construct methods assignments that invite their students to scrutinize "issues within race, class, ethnicity, and gender" and which help them incorporate and interrogate "multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives" (Gay, 2002, p. 108). They should also actively ask preservice teachers to make associations between what they learn in methods and the decisions they make during student teaching internships.

During our class discussions, one student at the Southern university, Adri<sup>4</sup>, supported this approach:

Ultimately, my thoughts on teaching young adult literature are gathered from my own reading experiences and the information I have been fortunate enough to receive from my studies. My next step is to put what I have learned and what I think about teaching young adult literature into practice. If I believe defending a controversial text is beneficial for my students, then I will need to be able to demonstrate the courage to do so. My teaching career has just begun, and I want to start off with my heart in the right place. It should be about my students, and what I feel will be valuable in my classroom in order to make space for teachable moments. I want my students to be prepared to meet the standards of education, but most importantly I need them to be prepared to face the world that exists outside of the classroom.

### **Making Meaningful Connections**

Preservice teachers at the Southern university also learn the importance of analyzing a broad cultural perspective. One methods assignment with excellent results is an action research project in which preservice teachers select a YAL novel or topic to examine. They complete textual research as well as interviews, observations, and surveys, culminating in a narrative about the story of their research, a personal story of discovery, and what they believe to be true.

As a thought-provoking activity, the assignment centers around the following questions: What books should students read—in school and for pleasure—and why? What do you, as a citizen, parent, and/or future teacher, believe should be the public schools' role in guiding students' reading? Should adolescents read books that talk about openly about sex? Violence? Money? Drugs? Bullying? Race? Homosexuality? Divorce? Alcoholism? Murder? Gender? Religion? Abuse? AIDS? Addiction? Diversity? The Occult? Rape? War? Death?

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Ending with a statement that disrupts preservice teachers' preconceived notions of YAL, I remind them that literature for adolescents is not easy to read. Truly great writers and educators tackle difficult subjects with honesty and vibrancy that only words alone can reveal in all their naked truth.

One preservice teacher's presentation based on her research was focused on the mentor text *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan and 25 other young adult texts. Brenda<sup>5</sup> created a Jeopardy-style game in which she categorized books by LGBTQ issue, grade level, genre, and teaching strategies. Amanda played the game with her methods class colleagues as well as with ninth and tenth graders in a local high school. She learned from her classmates that the information from the game helped them to expand their abilities and understanding of texts that tap into sensitive topics without making them feel uncomfortable. Because she works with a prescribed curriculum, Amanda uses these YAL texts to inform her high school students about resources that are relevant and timely to the culture, especially in light of the recent mass shooting at a nightclub in Orlando frequented by the LGBTQ community (Garunay, 2016). The adolescent literature provided resources about LGBTQ issues in an engaging way. Amanda's experiences creating and teaching the game helped her to make meaningful connections to her students and her classmates through the YAL that she selected and categorized.

Similarly, one intern from the Midwestern university, Elena<sup>6</sup>, found herself teaching at an alternative high school. Elena describes the students as having many struggles in and out of the classroom, including difficulties with "substance abuse/drug addiction/recovery (with themselves and their parents/guardians/families), poverty (some might not eat until they return

to school again), physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, along with a multitude of mental and physical health issues, often untreated by professionals." She chose to teach John Green's *Looking for Alaska*.

In her reflection on teaching *Alaska*, Elena notes that she wanted to give students "creative freedom to explore and relate to a subject." For students' final projects, she designed four options to "tap into different creative interests while showing a comprehensive understanding of the novel" including

- Finishing the story (what happens after the tragedy?)
- Creating a TV or radio report (interviewing characters involved with the incident)
- Authoring a song about Alaska (taking on Pudge's perspective or dropping a sick rhyme as Takumi)
- Writing an advice column about dealing with grief

Elena noted that one of her students struggled to stay in school, in part because he had little support at home and was not being challenged intellectually or creatively in the traditional classroom. Elena says, "I have ensured that he has a lot of room to be creative in my classroom and freedom to express himself and his talent, which is writing." By choosing to teach young adult literature, and by asking students to respond in ways through which their creativity (and individuality) will be appreciated and accepted, Elena helped students to make meaningful connections with the YAL texts.

Moreover, because Elena was immersed in the culture of the school, she was able to select culturally relevant literature, which helps students develop critical consciousness (Freeman, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995). We agree with Freire and Macedo (1995) that it is our responsibility "to intervene in challenging students to critically engage with their world so they can act upon it and on it"

(p. 391). By using culturally responsive literature in our methods courses, we are helping preservice teachers develop the necessary "critical tools to understand their world [. . .] so they can read the word as well as the world" (p. 388) and for their students in the secondary schools to have the same tools.

Through the selection of culturally relevant literature, Amanda and Elena brought into their secondary classrooms texts that helped students connect personally and culturally while disrupting notions of normality and alternative realities. Ladson-Billings argues that "a culturally relevant pedagogy is designed to problematize teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of the student-teacher relationship, the curriculum, schooling, and society" (p. 483). That is what we do in our use of YAL in the methods classes and what our students, as novice teachers, take into the secondary classroom—a healthy inquiry of their learning and teaching, curriculum and lesson planning, school culture, and students' cultural, educational, and emotional needs. English leaders, through YAL combined with culturally relevant pedagogy, can facilitate preservice teachers' abilities to make connections with their students and the world of literature they have already encountered.

## Conclusion

*It is not systematic education which somehow molds society, but, on the contrary, society which, according to its particular structure, shapes education in relation to the ends and interests of those who control the power in that society. —Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Freire (1990) says that the teacher is "an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves" (p. 181). English education leaders, through designing

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and implementing effective assignments with young adult literature such as those shared in this article, provide nonthreatening spaces where preservice teachers can explore their own identities as well as those of the secondary students they teach. As Cherry-McDaniel and Young (2012) argue, “English curricula should present texts that challenge students, disrupt narrative, create crisis of the mind, and engage students in examining their own understandings of difference” (p. 8).

Young adult literature is timely, culturally relevant, and offers preservice teachers a bridge to canonical texts that are typically included in prescriptive curricula. What we do with YAL in our methods classes better equips our preservice teachers to have the agency to select and implement appropriate literature relevant to varied educational settings, contextual realities, and students’ cultural needs. English educators should design assignments in which preservice teachers can analyze and formulate their own identities as readers while learning to teach literature in *any* school to *all* students. Moreover, we contend that by investigating, critiquing, and preparing lessons that integrate young adult literature in our methods courses, preservice teachers can become more confident in themselves and competent in their pedagogical choices, which is especially important while working in a system of surveillance such as public education. Preservice English teachers need to connect their students to texts and to the world around them. And to do this, they should use young adult literature and culturally responsive teaching. The examples shared here are intended to highlight how English educators and other supervisors can empower preservice teachers to become more empathetic, culturally sensitive, confident educators ready to take on the challenges and joys of working with adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds. ●

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