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A CRITICAL INQUIRY APPROACH TO TEACHING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

Steffany Comfort Maher

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
English
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June 2018

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A CRITICAL INQUIRY APPROACH TO TEACHING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Steffany Comfort Maher, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2018

This dissertation presents a critical inquiry approach to teaching young adult literature in English language arts classrooms. Critical inquiry is derived from critical theory and critical pedagogy approaches, as well as pragmatic philosophies of inquiry. The author shows from convincing examples that a critical inquiry approach to teaching empowers students to ask meaningful questions about both what they are reading and the world they live in.

Chapter One: Methods of Teaching Young Adult Literature: Past, Present, and Future is an introduction to critical inquiry and the teaching of young adult literature. Chapter Two: Critical Inquiry in Teaching Young Adult Literature: Whole-Class, Literature Circle, and Independent Reading presents three effective approaches for teaching young adult literature in the English language arts classroom. Chapter Three: Critical Inquiry and Cultural Studies: Teaching Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* provides an in-depth, whole-class-read unit for teaching one of the most commonly taught novels in secondary English classrooms with a critical inquiry, cultural studies approach. Chapter Four: Critical Youth Studies and Young Adult Literature discusses an emerging field of scholarship in English education—critical youth studies—and how to apply it to the teaching of young adult literature. Finally, Chapter Five: Remixes and Mashups: Critically “Playing Around” with Young Adult Literature empowers students to playfully and critically inquire into culture; to analyze stories,

contexts, themes, and issues in young adult literature and other forms of popular culture; to engage meaningfully with technology in the English classroom; and to share ideas and make a difference in their local communities and in the world.

Drawing upon observation of several different English language arts classrooms, interviews with in-service teachers, the author's own teaching experiences, and solid theory and scholarship in the field of English education, this dissertation demonstrates how young adult texts have an important role to play in student inquiry. English teachers want students to question and read analytically, to explore complicated ideas and materials, to foster their imagination, and to become critically thinking citizens in a culturally diverse and still-developing democracy. This dissertation will help teachers to achieve these goals.

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Steffany Comfort Maher

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
-----------------------	----

LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
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CHAPTER

I. METHODS OF TEACHING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.....	1
Teaching Young Adult Literature.....	1
Defining Young Adult Literature.....	8
Young Adult Literature in the Classroom.....	10
“Mirrors” and “Windows”.....	15
Critical Inquiry.....	17
Chapter Overview.....	23
Chapter Two: Critical Inquiry in Teaching Young Adult Literature: Whole-Class, Literature Circle, and Independent Reading.....	24
Chapter Three: Critical Inquiry and Cultural Studies: Teaching Harper Lee’s <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> and Walter Dean Myers’s <i>Monster</i>	24
Chapter Four: Critical Youth Studies and Young Adult Literature.....	25

Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

	Chapter Five: Remixes and Mashups: Critically “Playing Around” with Young Adult Literature.....	25
II.	CRITICAL INQUIRY IN TEACHING YOUNG ADULT LITEATURE: WHOLE-CLASS, LITERATURE CIRCLE, AND INDEPENDENT READING....	27
	Critical Inquiry.....	29
	Whole-Class Reading.....	30
	Evaluating Young Adult Literature Texts.....	32
	Teaching Whole-Class Reading with a Critical Inquiry Approach.....	36
	Reading as Homework.....	37
	Writing.....	42
	Reading Aloud.....	45
	Reading Workshop.....	46
	Discussion in the English Language Arts Classroom.....	47
	Large Group Discussion.....	48
	Advantages of Whole-Class Reading.....	50
	Differentiated Instruction.....	52
	Literature Circles.....	53
	Critical Inquiry in Literature Circles.....	59
	Teachers Modeling Critical Inquiry.....	62

Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

	Advantages of Critical Inquiry Circle Reading.....	64
	Independent Reading and Critical Inquiry.....	65
	Critical Reading Journals.....	69
	Assessing Student Reading.....	76
	Combining Reading Approaches.....	79
III.	CRITICAL INQUIRY AND CULTURAL STUDIES: TEACHING HARPER LEE'S <i>TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD</i> AND WALTER DEAN MYERS'S <i>MONSTER</i>	81
	Single-Parent Families.....	82
	Racial Discrimination and Lynching.....	88
	Poverty.....	96
	The Criminal Justice System.....	102
	Choosing Texts to Teach.....	107
	Moving from Awareness to Advocacy.....	108
IV.	CRITICAL YOUTH STUDIES AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE.....	110
	Evaluating and Connecting with Young Adult Literature.....	115
	Reading with Lenses, Including the Youth Lens.....	119
	Social Issues and Thematic Teaching.....	127

Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

V.	REMIXES AND MASHUPS: CRITICALLY “PLAYING AROUND” WITH YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE.....	134
	Subvertisements.....	137
	Mashups and Remixes.....	143
	Music Mashups.....	146
	Wikis.....	148
	Multimodal Presentations.....	152
	Making a Difference.....	156
VI.	CONCLUSION.....	159
	REFERENCES.....	161
APPENDIX		
A.	HSIRB Approval Letter.....	188

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Katie's Response Notebook Covers.....	27
2. An Inside View of Katie's Response Notebook.....	28
3. A Multi-Flow Map Outline (Kelleher, 2015).....	43
4. A Student's Chapter Flow Map.....	44
5. A Subvertisement Created by a Student.....	141

CHAPTER I

METHODS OF TEACHING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Teaching Young Adult Literature

When I graduated from college with a BA in English Education, I was excited to become a teacher and change the world one classroom of students at a time. I knew I had the passion and love for literature and for teenagers that I needed to make a difference. I imagined having discussions like those I'd had in my college literature courses: deep conversations about symbols and interpretation and author intent brought about by close readings of the texts and in-depth examinations of historical contexts. But perhaps most of all, I hoped to instill in my students my love and admiration for Shakespeare.

While I did land a job soon after graduation, to my surprise, I found I was unprepared for the curricular freedom. Most teachers dream of the kind of freedom I had, but as a first-year teacher, I was looking for *some* guidance about what and how I should teach. When I was hired, I learned that I would be teaching English 9, a new course called "Modern Novels," a section of Government, and a new social studies course called "Global Studies." There were three new teachers teaching Global Studies that year (we were hired together). There were no guidelines for this course: we could design it ourselves and then order a textbook. We had two weeks before the school year began.

One of the other new teachers was also teaching English 9, and she and I decided to collaborate on materials. We asked the other two English teachers in our department what expectations they had for teaching English to freshmen; they said we had the freedom to teach

whatever we liked. When we asked what teachers usually taught in 9th grade, the only title they gave us was *Romeo and Juliet*. Looking for texts, my cohort and I searched through the book storage room and found some ancient textbooks. These textbooks had selections of short stories and poems and a (highly abridged) version of *Romeo and Juliet*. We also found a few classroom sets of the young adult novel *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen (1988). We decided to teach *Hatchet*.

When I asked our principal for a description of the Modern Novels course I would be teaching, he said that I could choose any “modern” books I wanted, and he would order them. He defined *modern* as “anything published after 1950 or so.” (The course probably should have been called “Contemporary Literature.”) While I have always been a reader, looking back, it surprises me that I had read so little young adult literature. Young adult literature was not a focus of my English classes in high school or college.

Though works had been published, adolescent literature was not yet being extensively marketed. When I was in late elementary school, I had read the *Sweet Valley High* books and the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* series, but when I moved to middle

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Did you grow up reading young adult literature?
- 2) What are some of your favorite books?
- 3) If you were able to choose any book to teach in a secondary ELA classroom, which book would it be?

school, young adult literature was for the most part not in view. I did read S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1966), but that was it. Soon, I jumped to the adult literature that was put before me.

So I was not sure what to teach my “Modern Novels” students. I decided I would ask them what they would like to read.

When I asked, however, I got blank looks and I-don't-knows. On the first day of class after we read a short story together, I gave them some book catalogues to look through and told them to think about it; as a class on the next day, we would vote for which books I would order.

The class discussion led to students choosing a couple of young adult texts, but the majority were adult fiction. It was an eclectic list that included often-taught texts like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (1969) and popular works typically for adults like *Interview with a Vampire* by Anne Rice (1991). We read the books they selected, discussed them in class, and completed common assignments.

I should take a moment here to describe my subject position and the composition of my students. I am a White woman, and the students in the school where I taught at the time were predominantly White. Socioeconomically diverse, my students lived in rural areas in mid-Michigan.

While I greatly enjoyed my first year of teaching—it was an enormous challenge and I loved connecting with the students—to be honest, the discussions we had were not like those I'd had in my college literature courses. I found that I had to ask specific, leading questions to get responses. Even still, some students sat silent. Perhaps bored by the reading, some were testing the limits. I had to devote much attention to discipline.

The saving grace that first year of teaching, though, was—as perhaps you may have guessed—Shakespeare. I adored his plays, and I was excited to teach *Romeo and Juliet*. The text was difficult, but my enthusiasm did seem to rub off. We read most of the play in class, so I was able to help students with the language. Watching film clips, acting out scenes, reciting

lines and discussing their meaning, even playing games in which students would respond to questions as characters might made class time enjoyable for us all.

The following year I was thrilled when the English 10 teacher asked me what I had done with my students in teaching Shakespeare because she had never had a group of students so excited to read *Hamlet*. Clearly, despite the arcane language, my passion made some difference, though I now also wonder if the fact that Romeo and Juliet are similar in age to my students, hanging with their friends in different social groups, meeting and falling in love, sneaking in and out of the house, and having sex for the first time might also have been part of the reason I was able to interest them in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Still, reading *Romeo and Juliet*, my students looked to me as the expert, waiting for me to “translate” the lines into something they could understand, and they were often too uncertain about the language to attempt their own interpretation. Even though I told them there were “no wrong answers,” my convoluted efforts to try to make their interpretations actually make sense with the text, once again led them back to looking to me as the expert.

I didn’t realize at the time, but the emphasis I put on close reading of specific passages and on literary terms and language in our reading of *Romeo and Juliet* showed that I was unconsciously applying an approach called “New Criticism,” the same approach most of my college professors had used. Teaching 150 students in six classes in four different subjects meant that I didn’t have time for much reflection about my teaching. When volleyball season started and I found myself coaching the varsity team (with zero prior coaching experience), I had even less. Thankfully, the other English 9 and Global Studies teacher and I shared resources.

Still, every night I took home binders for planning and stacks of papers to grade. Sadly,

most mornings I would bring back that stack of papers in exactly the same shape as it had been when I'd left the night before. Days began to blur together, and it was all I could do to get my lesson plans prepared for the next day. Yet if someone asked me then what I was most passionate about, I would tell them that I loved teenagers, and that I believed every teenager should be given the opportunity and necessary tools to read the classics.

That first year, I remember my principal talking at our staff meeting about a professional development presentation he had attended the day before. He told us that the speaker had been adamant that Shakespeare need never be taught in secondary schools. My face may have turned purple. My principal noticed and tempered his comment with the fact that he had been a social studies teacher and therefore didn't know anything about Shakespeare or whether or not it should be taught. But then he asked me why I thought it should. I spoke enthusiastically about culture and the human condition and allusions and Shakespeare's relevance to modern-day situations, yet in the back of my mind I wondered: why *does* Shakespeare need to be taught? I continued to teach Shakespeare for many years before I would come to the point where I actually admitted to myself and to others that maybe we English teachers didn't *need* to teach Shakespeare.

Even though I had, like most preservice English teachers, taken literary criticism in my undergraduate degree, I never made the connection between literary theory and teaching literature to high school students. It wasn't until I was working on my Master's degree and was re-introduced to Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory (1933) that I began to think about the relevance of literary theory to teaching secondary students. Reader response theory was freeing for me as a reader and as a teacher. Rosenblatt's concept of readers having "transactions" with texts rang true with me.

Unlike with New Criticism where close reading reveals a text's "true" meaning, I realized that from a reader response perspective the same book can mean different things to different people, and a second reading of a text could be a different reading as well. Each time I read Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1956), and especially after I had my own children, it was a different book. I had had different life experiences, different reading backgrounds, different ideas to consider, different questions to ask—I had changed, and so my reading of the book changed, too.

Discussion Question:

Have you ever read a book more than once? If so, how was that book different for you the second (or third, or fourth) time you read it?

During this time I also researched the history of the teaching of the British literature I loved so much and learned that this literature, first taught in India under the British Empire, tended to teach students to prize English literature and culture above any other, and, regardless of their own background, to view it as their own. I also realized that my desire that all students read the "classics" was limiting my inclusion of any multicultural perspectives. Thus, I began pairing texts: a classic paired with a multicultural text similar in theme or connected by an important issue, a concept I borrowed from Carol Jago's book *With Rigor for All: Teaching Classics to Contemporary Students* (2000).

The following semester, however, I was introduced to Robert Probst's *Adolescent Literature: Response and Analysis* (1984), and I read Allen Carey-Webb's *Literature and Lives* (2001)—in which he presents a response-based cultural studies approach to teaching literature—and entirely transformed my teaching practices. Carey-Webb's approach addresses cultural studies issues related to the texts students are reading that are important to their lives and the world around them.

Relevance is the key to engaged reading, and students need to make points of connection between what they are reading and their own lives (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2011). A response-based cultural studies approach allows opportunities for students to engage in reading that is relevant by connecting other genres (newspaper articles, poetry, documentaries, film, etc.) to the literature as they address important issues in the world today, be that bullying, Black Lives Matter, educational inequalities, gun control, immigration, or climate change. When I began to apply this method of teaching to my classes, I found that my students—even “disengaged” readers—became interested in the reading and in the related writing and projects I assigned.

I began teaching with a cultural studies approach, adding young adult texts to the classic texts centered on the issue I wanted to address with my students. For example, in the Advanced Writing and Literature course I taught, we focused on genocide, reading Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (1956), Marcus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* (2005), and Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007). In my English 9 course, we continued to read *Romeo and Juliet*, but with it we also read Luis J. Rodriguez’s autobiography *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (2005), and we focused on gang culture, viewing clips from Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. And when I taught Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), we focused on several social issues within the text that enabled students to relate the novel to our society’s history and present (I describe this in more detail in Chapter Three). In each of the units I taught, I incorporated various texts: literary and informational, visual and auditory, and multimodal.

As I began to explore texts related to important issues today, I found myself reading more and more young adult literature. So many of these texts dealt with issues important to teenagers

and relevant to society. For several years, I incorporated young adult texts into my curriculum by connecting them with a classic I wanted to teach. However, as I discovered the richness and complexity in many young adult texts, I began to let go of my predilection for the classics.

Today I continue to teach with a critical inquiry, cultural studies approach, even when I am teaching primarily young adult texts. For example, I could teach Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park* (2013), and focus on poverty, reading also Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (2011) as well as other informational texts related to poverty, and viewing clips from films such as *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006). Or I could teach E.R. Frank's *Dime* (2016), focusing on human trafficking and include Francine Rivers's *Redeeming Love* (2005), in which a young girl is orphaned and given into sexual slavery by her "uncle."

In each of these units—after reading and exploring the literature and related informational and/or historical texts, discussing similarities and differences, making connections and inferences, questioning and wondering, thinking critically about what we are reading—I give students the freedom to choose a related issue that is important to them. Students could then research this issue, write on their findings, and present their findings to the class. Sometimes students could work on these related projects individually and sometimes in groups. It is my own history as a committed secondary teacher that guided me to young adult literature, and it is what I have learned about meaningful teaching of young adult literature that has generated and shaped this book.

Defining Young Adult Literature

Literature written by, for, and about young adults has had many different labels: "adolescent literature," "adolescent fiction," "junior teen novels," "juvenile fiction," "young

adult literature,” “teen literature,” “teen books” (Bushman & Haas, 2005; Barnes and Noble). Different labels can be confusing, and scholars in the field sometimes make much of subtle differences between labels and categories. As Herz and Gallo (2005) point out, there is no definition of young adult literature on which all, or even most, scholars agree: “some have defined it as any kind of literature read voluntarily by teenagers; others delineate it as books with teenage protagonists, or books written for a teenage audience” (p. 11). They contend that there is a “distinct body of literature written specifically for young adults and being read by them” and that this body of literature is increasingly more complex and “high-quality” with each passing decade (p. 11).

In their book *Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation, and Appreciation* (2010) Bucher and Hinton explain that the key point is that young adult literature reflects young adult reading levels, interests, experiences, points of view (p. 10); that it is written for young adults and captures their attention; that it teaches about people and the world, the “realities of life” and the “functions of institutions of society;” and that it allows teens to escape and provides pleasurable reading while also containing “excellent...writing” and providing increased “literacy and the ability to analyze literature” (p. 11).

While many of these qualifications allow readers to categorize a book as written for or about young adults, we must also be careful not to make assumptions of who young adults are. Young adults, like any age group of people, can come from vastly different experiences, backgrounds, and cultures. They have different social groups, practice different religions (or no religion at all), take part in various activities, live in different countries and situations, etc. I write this book for middle and high school teachers, to help them meaningfully and effectively integrate young adult literature into the classrooms and lives of young people from diverse

backgrounds. To that end, I address literature written for and about diverse young people around the ages of middle and high school youth. Throughout this book I will use interchangeably the terms “young adult literature” and “adolescent literature.”

Young Adult Literature in the Classroom

More and more middle and high school English language arts teachers are bringing young adult literature to their students. Scholars cite a variety of good reasons: students relate to and engage with these texts (Brozo, 2012; Carter, 2011; Elliot-Johns, 2012; Hansen, 2012; Hughes & Morrison, 2014; Kajder, 2006; Moley, Bandré, & George, 2011; Niccolini, 2015); young adult literature offers a vast selection of texts at various reading levels (Herz & Gallo, 2005); it provides complex text for students to analyze and evaluate (Elliot-Johns, 2012; Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011; Hughes & Morrison, 2014; Probst, 1987); and many young adult texts offer opportunities to address important issues in students’ lives and in the world around them (Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Glasgow, 2001; Hazlett, Sweeney, & Reins, 2011; Kraver, 2007; Rozema, 2014; Wolk, 2013).

As I did at first, some English teachers are teaching young adult texts along with more canonical works. Others are teaching exclusively young adult literature. As with the field of literature as a whole, the category of young adult literature has become more inclusive. It now includes many genres, among them young adult novels, verse novels, poetry, multicultural works, and even multimodal texts such as graphic novels, comics, and film.

Early scholarship on the teaching of young adult literature focused on defending it as relevant and valid for secondary schools (Hunt, 1996). Scholars, teachers, and authors emphasized that young adult literature can interest and engage students disengaged by literary

classics. Their defense proposes young adult literature as a “bridge,” where a young adult text interests the student, and then prepares the student to progress through more and more “complex texts” until the student achieves the reading ability and sustained interest to read the desired classic (Herz & Gallo, 2005). In this view the young adult text is of less interest in itself, except as a bridge between a classic text and the student’s interest (Jago, 2000; Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Willhelm, 2011) or between a non-reading student and, after reading adolescent literature, a classics-reading student.

Teacher/authors such as Nancie Atwell in her book *The Reading Zone* (2007) and Penny Kittle in her *Book Love* (2013) advocate creating a “reading workshop.” In the reading workshop students read independently a book of their own choosing, often from classroom or school libraries. They have substantial time in class for independent reading and give “book talks” to engage the interest of classmates. Teachers encourage and monitor student reading, grading on participation rather than testing of comprehension.

One road block in a teacher’s path to implementing a reading program in which students are reading young adult literature is the general perception of the literature itself. As Herz and Gallo (2005) contend, “too many teachers in middle and high schools still perceive YAL as supportive reading or as an alternative literature curriculum for lower-level English classes” (p. 11). I have seen this in my own experience and in my observations of secondary teachers’ classrooms. Young adult texts are often reserved for middle school English language arts classrooms, and when included in high school classrooms, they are often reserved for “struggling” or “disengaged” readers.

Recently there haven't been many comprehensive studies of what secondary students are required to read. In 1989 Arthur Applebee found that the book-length texts being taught in high school English courses in public, private, and parochial schools had hardly changed since 1963. In 1989, these were the top 10 works being taught in high schools: *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare (1603); *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1884); *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850); *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck (1937); *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925); *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (1954); and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960).

In a more recent survey spanning two years (2002-2004), Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber asked 142 English teachers in 72 public schools in Alabama what books they teach in their high school classes. Their results nearly matched Applebee's from 1989 except that *Hamlet* and *Of Mice and Men* were not on the top 10 list, but were replaced by other "classics:" *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller (1953), *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1945), *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles (1959), *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte (1847), *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry (1959), and *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder (1938). All of these works were in the top 20 most-taught works in Applebee's 1989 study, except for *Wuthering Heights* and *A Raisin in the Sun*—the only work on the list by an author of color, debuting on Broadway in 1959 and addressing race relations nearly 60 years ago.

Teacher/author Kittle (2013) argues that while teachers may be assigning these classic texts as whole-class reading (books that all students read at the same pace and discuss in class), many of our students are, in fact, simply not reading them (p. 2-3). Turned off by works lacking interest and relevance, instead of actually reading what they are assigned, vast numbers of students glance at SparkNotes or other online sources.

Kittle contends that if our goal as teachers is to develop life-long readers—readers who will read for understanding and for pleasure—then our students must be reading, not simply skimming online summaries. Kittle argues this means teachers need to guide students to books that interest them, that are at or slightly above their reading level. She is not against reading classics but believes that students should have opportunities to read what they want to read, to read what interests them. She finds that when she gives students choice, they often choose to read young adult texts (2013). The work of Atwell, Kittle, and others—and the mass marketing of the for-profit program Accelerated Reader—has led to a substantial increase in choice (independent) reading in schools.

Accelerated Reader and other programs that assess texts according to various components

Discussion Questions:

1) What was your reading experience in high school? What reading practices did you observe in your classmates? How did required reading in English classes affect your reading practices?

2) Did you have an Accelerated Reading program in your school? What was your experience with this program?

(such as word length) and designate for them a “reading level” can provide problems for teachers and students. These programs assign a number of points to a text that a student can earn when they read the text and pass a comprehension test. The number of points they earn depends on their test score, and the total number of points the book is worth depends on the reading level the book has been assigned.

Many schools use Accelerated Reader and similar systems to motivate students to read. Some require a certain number of points per marking period in order to earn a grade. And some schools require students to read texts that closely match their assessed “reading level” (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2017). However, tests that measure the readability of texts can vary greatly in their assessments of the same text. Similarly, readers can score quite differently on

different tests created to assess their reading levels. Due to the variability in these tests, “the expectation that texts *can* be closely ‘matched’ to readers’ skill levels is clearly unfounded” (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2017).

There are various other factors that affect readers’ abilities to read a text, including their background knowledge of and interest in the subject matter, their familiarity with the genre in which the text is written, and their motivation for reading the text (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2017). Thus, while Accelerated Reader and similar programs might provide students with extrinsic motivation to read in order to accrue points, they do not necessarily intrinsically motivate students to read. In fact, if teachers ask students to choose from books at only a certain reading level, they are limiting student choice, which can result in limited reading motivation (Kittle, 2013).

In this book, I take the stand that young adult literature has become an important part of our culture and offers such a vital way to develop reading and critical thinking skills that it can and should be a significant part of the curriculum in middle and high schools. As I explain in Chapter Two, young adult literature is a crucial part of reading workshop, or an independent reading program. I also believe, based on my own experience and that of many secondary teachers with whom I have collaborated, that young adult literature is appropriate to require of students both as whole-class reading and in literature circles (I discuss this further in Chapter Two). The question is not: *Should young adult literature be taught?* Nor is it: *How do we use young adult literature to transition students to something higher and better?* But rather the question is: *How do we teach young adult literature well, to engage students, to develop their empathy and understanding, and to foster critical thinking about themselves and the world around them?*

While student choice is an important component in teaching literature and reading, when we consider the goals and purposes of education, it is also vitally important what students read: not simply in terms of text complexity and reading levels, but in terms of content. In schools we are preparing young people to be healthy, caring, thoughtful, and active citizens in the communities in which they live, and in our diverse and conflictive world. Contemporary young adult literature has an important opportunity to play. Herz and Gallo (2005) point out that the content of young adult books “has grown better with each decade, with more high-quality, hard-hitting books being published in the past five years than ever before” (p. 11).

“Mirrors” and “Windows”

One of the areas where young adult literature has emerged as an important resource in secondary teaching is addressing the voices, experiences, and perspectives of people of diverse, multicultural backgrounds. As we have seen, multicultural literature is shown to be sorely lacking in the studies of what is actually taught in schools, and this at a time when school-age populations themselves are rapidly changing. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in the United States:

In fall 2014, the percentage of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools who were White was less than 50 percent (49.5 percent) for the first time and represents a decrease from 58 percent in fall 2004. In contrast, the percentage who were Hispanic increased from 19 to 25 percent during the same period. (The Condition, p. 1)

English language arts teachers have an incredible opportunity to help students engage critically with texts, fostering empathy and the value of diversity. The expression “multicultural literature” is often used to refer to literature written by and about groups of people who have

been “marginalized in the dominant society” (Webster, 2002, p. 5). In this book, I use the term “multicultural literature” broadly to refer to any cultural or racial group (other than White males of European descent), women, LGBTQ+ people, religious groups, people in other countries, youth, the elderly, and people with disabilities—groups that traditionally have been excluded from the curriculum. I also use the term “underrepresented groups.” Joan Parker Webster in *Teaching through Culture* (2002) says reading multicultural literature “can be a way for students to maintain and affirm their culture and also learn about cultures other than their own” (p. 5).

Teachers incorporate multicultural adolescent literature to provide students with literature in which they can see themselves—a “mirror,”—or literature in which they can see into a life different from their own in an intimate way—a “window” (Bishop, 1990; Parsons & Rietschlin, 2014). “Mirrors” offer readers imagined characters they can connect with, identify with, and relate to—characters who may look, act, feel, or struggle with issues like they do. “Windows” provide readers with characters and situations they may not identify with but from which they gain access to characters with lives different from their own—characters with whom they can learn to empathize, understand, and find commonalities across differences (Clark & Blackburn, 2009, p. 28). The idea of literature as “mirrors” and “windows” while risking simplicity is powerful for teachers to understand. Webster (2002) argues for the importance of teaching culturally relevant texts, stating that “using literature that provides cultural connections for the students [is] the most successful way to engage these learners actively and improve their comprehension” (p. 4).

Teachers and researchers in English education often write about using a window/mirror approach. Joyce Hansen (1998) describes a Puerto Rican student of hers who “found himself” in Nicholas Mohr’s *Felita*, a book about a Puerto Rican family (p. 17).

Alyce Hunter (1998) employs Nancie Atwell’s reading and writing workshop in her classroom and uses multicultural literature to teach about China, Chinese culture, and Chinese Americans. Jeffrey Kaplan (1998) offers suggestions for how an English teacher might teach about religion by using young adult literature with Jewish themes in order to teach about Jewish culture beyond the Holocaust.

Laura Renzi, Mark Letcher, and Kristen Miraglia (2013) and Caroline Clark and Mollie Blackburn (2009) observe and engage in teaching LGBTQ-themed adolescent literature in secondary classrooms. Lisa Hazlett, William Sweeney, and Kevin Reins (2011) discuss teaching young adult texts with LGBTQ adolescents with intellectual and/or physical disabilities in order to promote inclusion in schools. Robert Rozema (2015) advocates for teaching manga to and about students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, arguing that teachers “have a critical role to play in developing the capabilities of neurodivergent students and in nurturing empathy in their neurotypical classmates” (p. 67).

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Have you ever read texts where the main characters are from ethnic or social groups similar to your own (a “mirror”)? If so, can you describe that experience?
- 2) Have you ever read about characters from different ethnic or social groups than your own (a “window”)? If so, can you describe that experience?

Critical Inquiry

In the 21st Century, it is more important than ever to teach culturally diverse literature, to create “mirrors” and “windows” for all of our students and develop culturally relevant pedagogy. Along with including diverse, multicultural literature, in this book I advocate that our teaching provides ways for students and teachers together to inquire into the experiences of diverse

people, cultures, races, age groups, etc. and how they are portrayed in literature. We need to extend that inquiry into our culture-at-large, our society within the United States, and the wider world. I believe that happens best when we invite students to engage in critical inquiry.

Adolescents are important members of society. Their ideas and beliefs warrant attention, and developing their skills and powers of inquiry and analysis is essential work in which young adult literature can play a vital part. Adolescents are consumers, and even if they are not purchasing items themselves, they influence adults to purchase for them. Marketing to adolescents is prevalent; from phones and music to food and clothing, adolescents hold purchasing power. Young adult books, too, are marketed to adolescents, which is why labels of these texts have so often changed, and sections in bookstores now advertise “Teen Books” or “Teen Lit” rather than “Adolescent Literature” or “Young Adult Literature,” terms that may not be as appealing to teenagers (Barnes and Noble).

Young adults need to be critical thinkers about the values and lifestyles taught by advertising, and the implications of their choices supporting fair and just workplaces already impacting their lives and world. Young adults are important political actors, playing roles throughout history in struggles for freedom, justice, and equality from the efforts to end child labor to the Civil Rights Movement, from climate change to gun violence.

But how do we as teachers foster critical thinking?

First, in order for students to take the time to read and think critically, they must care about what they are reading and learning. It must matter to them. Research shows that one key factor in student engagement is student choice (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2011; Kelley, Wilson, & Koss, 2012; Kittle, 2013). In fact, research suggests that when students choose

the texts they are reading—when they read for enjoyment—their standardized test scores are positively impacted as well (Curwood, 2013; Elliot-Johns, 2012; Bull, 2012).

Second, students need to engage in critical inquiry. They need to ask their own questions based on their interests, passions, and concerns related to the materials they are reading and the world they live in. As we will see throughout this book, those questions need to play some role in guiding their learning.

The term “critical inquiry” as I use it in this book has a specific history. It is derived from critical theory and critical pedagogy approaches, as well as pragmatic philosophies of inquiry. There are two schools of critical theory: one in sociology and political philosophy, often called “social critical theory,” and the other in literary studies and literary theory, often called “literary critical theory.” Social critical theory was originally developed in the Neo-Marxist philosophy of the Frankfurt School in Germany in the 1930s. This theory draws on the work of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud and was further developed by Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Erich Fromm. It is a philosophy which Horkheimer argues is aimed at actually changing society—through liberating people—rather than simply understanding it (1982). Critical theory involves recognizing the systems of power within a society as well as learning means to change these systems so groups of people are no longer marginalized or oppressed within that society.

A critical pedagogy approach connects critical theory and education. This philosophy was first defined by Paulo Freire and has been further developed by theorists like Henry Giroux, Michael Apple, bell hooks, Joe L. Kincheloe, Peter McLaren, Patti Lather, Ira Shor, and Shirley Steinberg. Critical pedagogy invites teachers and students to learn together in what Freire (2000)

calls a “problem-posing method” of teaching, in which the teacher offers materials to the students, or the students offer materials to the class, and then teacher and students consider the materials, share their own positions on them, and reconsider their positions as others share their ideas and considerations. Teachers and students learn together. A critical pedagogy approach focuses on raising consciousness of power structures within society and how knowledge affects and is affected by those structures, again, in order to create a more just society.

I’ve talked about the special history of the word “critical.” The other word in the name for my approach to teaching young adult literature is “inquiry.” “Inquiry” is derived from philosophies of logic and has been developed by pragmatic philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and—particularly important to education—John Dewey. Dewey (1938) defines inquiry as “the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole” (p. 1).

In other words, people ask questions that are important to them, and as they seek to learn more about the questions they have asked, they develop meaning. In the classroom, critical inquiry allows students to ask their own questions about what they are reading, questions especially focused on inequality within the reading and that are connected to society or the world at large. These questions can draw on emotion as well as intellect. How do students feel when they read about something that isn’t fair? How can these feelings become a way to raise questions? How can research into those questions become a way to learn how to better understand themselves and others? As students explore these questions, they may also ask how they can make a difference, and inquiry can ultimately lead to advocacy.

In this model, young adult literature doesn't always carry the simple or the same messages or information to all readers. The students' own backgrounds—what they know and bring to the table—and the questions they ask and themes they explore influence what they learn. The process of critical inquiry invites students into the making and transformation of knowledge, as it also raises questions about the educational process. As Giroux (2010) describes it:

Giving students the opportunity to be problem posers and to engage in a culture of questioning puts in the foreground the crucial issues of who has control over the conditions of learning and how specific modes of knowledge, identity, and authority are constructed within particular classroom relations. Under such circumstances, knowledge is not simply received by students, but actively transformed, as they learn how to engage others in critical dialogue and be held accountable for their own views.

In a critical inquiry classroom, teachers and students together “enter into a process of social construction of knowledge that encourages critique, diversity, rigor, and meaning making” (Fecho, 2000, p. 195). In a student-centered, critical inquiry classroom, students are engaged in their own education because they have the power to pose their own questions regarding their curiosity, concerns, and passions when they explore their classroom texts and the world they live in, and then these questions guide their learning within the classroom (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2016). Thus, a critical inquiry approach looks different in different classrooms.

This book makes the case that young adult literature has a central role to play in critical inquiry in secondary schools. Young adult literature often focuses on issues adolescents are interested in and can relate to from perspectives they can analyze, research further, and disagree with. As literature it portrays characters interrelating in rich and complex ways and settings—

fostering the power of the imagination to identify with, understand, and examine the experience and perspective of others.

Cindy O'Donnell-Allen (2011) engages in “tough talk” with her students, asking students to critically examine texts, wrestle with questions those texts raise, and approach the text from various perspectives through student-centered discussion. O'Donnell-Allen is applying a critical inquiry approach to teaching, one that is student-centered and considers the personal, social, and political facets of their readings.

As you read this, you may be thinking: critical inquiry with young adult literature sounds like a wonderful way to teach, but how practical is it given high-stakes testing, the standards movement, and top-down school reform? Is it even possible to teach with a critical inquiry approach today?

The answer is, of course, yes (otherwise, I wouldn't be writing this book).

As Jeffrey Wilhelm writes, “critical inquiry can be used to reframe all of what we already do in school” (2004, p. 47). He has worked with over 300 teachers across the nation, asking them to “reframe” their curriculum by using critical questions. He offers the example of transforming a unit on civil rights by having students “inquire into the question: What are civil rights and how can they best be secured and protected?” (p. 47). This form of questioning invites students to ask their own questions about civil rights, to explore their own experiences and those of others, and to “eventually stake their own claim and undertake social action” (p. 47). This type of inquiry-based teaching enables students to “see and respond to instances of injustice” (Riley, 2015, p. 417) because it “fosters engaged learning, rich understandings of self and others, and an empowered sense of citizenship” (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2016, p. 5).

This book offers many examples of successful critical inquiry approaches to teaching young adult literature in today's classrooms. Many different teachers working with diverse

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Take a few minutes to write your own definition of critical inquiry, in your own words.
- 2) Share your definition of critical inquiry with your small group and listen as they all share their definitions. Together, compose a group definition to share with the class.

student populations from rural to urban are shown to be meeting and raising expectations. As we explore critical inquiry, we will see different strategies and methods. We will come to understand young adult literature as inclusive of a wide range of texts—including multicultural, comics, graphic novels, verse

novels, and film—and ways to combine young adult literature with research, informational texts, and other genres.

We will look at how teachers can foster student choice in independent reading and also use literature circles and whole-class reading (Chapter Two). We will learn about analyzing young adult texts from multiple cultural perspectives through an in-depth, whole-class reading unit for teaching Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* (Chapter Three). We will explore critical youth studies—an emerging category of study within the field of English education that draws on sociology and ethnography—and how it can help students critically inquire into young adult literature in meaningful ways (Chapter Four). And we will see how new media, the Internet, and new technologies engage with critical reading of young adult literature (Chapter Five).

Chapter Overview

I offer here an overview of each chapter (in the dissertation but not in the book).

Chapter Two: Critical Inquiry in Teaching Young Adult Literature: Whole-Class, Literature Circle, and Independent Reading

Chapter Two further describes a critical inquiry approach to teaching young adult literature and focuses on three different methods often used in secondary classrooms to teach literature: whole-class reading in which the entire class of students reads the same book at the same pace (either together, out loud—perhaps the teacher reads to the students for portions of class time—or individually, during and/or outside of class) and they discuss the book in whole-class discussions, perhaps completing additional assignments related to the book; literature circles (also called book clubs or book groups) in which students place themselves through book choice into groups and each student reads the same book as the other students in the group and they meet periodically to discuss their reading, perhaps completing additional assignments related to the book; and independent reading, in which students choose their own books and read them at their own pace. This chapter offers several examples of actual classroom teachers who have employed these methods of teaching young adult literature in their classrooms.

Chapter Three: Critical Inquiry and Cultural Studies: Teaching Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*

Chapter Three offers an example of a critical inquiry and cultural studies approach to teaching one of the most commonly taught texts in secondary English language arts classrooms, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. This chapter describes my own teaching practices and provides a detailed description of the unit I taught to my ninth and tenth grade English students in which we explored several important issues within the text—single-parent families, lynching and racial discrimination, the criminal justice system, and poverty—through our reading of the novel and other supplemental texts, including *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (1999).

Chapter Four: Critical Youth Studies and Young Adult Literature

Chapter Four discusses the emerging field of critical youth studies in English education. Youth studies comes to English education from many different fields of study: sociology, anthropology and ethnography, cultural studies, education, and literary studies. Youth scholars view adolescence as a social construct, examining stereotypes surrounding youth and then complicating those stereotypes. In English education, critical youth studies can be applied to literature written for and about young people in ways that enable students to complicate widely-held views of themselves and their peers.

Chapter Five: Remixes and Mashups: Critically “Playing Around” with Young Adult Literature

Chapter Five examines several ways to “play around” (Pope, 1995) with texts that are created for youth, including young adult literature. Maneuvering texts through remixes and mashups provide ways for students to critically analyze these texts and then create something new to “speak back” to mainstream media and corporate advertising. Students can create collaborative or individual projects and presentations through Glogster, Voicethread, and Google Docs. They can create Book Trailers, their own Wikipedia pages, subvertisements—all for the purpose of teaching others about what they are learning. Furthermore, students can publish their work online and even take what they are learning into their communities, making connections between the literature they are reading and the people with whom they interact in the world in which they live.

Just as my teaching experience led me to explore new ways of engaging my students in their reading and learning through further education and research, I hope this book leads you to question and further explore how best to teach your students. For now, I invite you to join me in

discovering exciting, engaging ways to bring the wonderful worlds of young adult literature to today's middle and high school students.

CHAPTER TWO

CRITICAL INQUIRY IN TEACHING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: WHOLE-CLASS, LITERATURE CIRCLE, AND INDEPENDENT READING

Katie Sluiter is a White, female, 8th grade English language arts teacher at a racially, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse urban junior high school in Michigan, and her students read young adult literature all year. Katie's enthusiasm is contagious. She is constantly reading and sharing what she's reading with her students through book talks, a class Instagram account, bulletin boards, and her Response Notebook. This notebook looks like the ones her students keep, and Katie uses hers to model what students might write in their own notebooks as they respond to their reading.

Here are some photographs of Katie's Response Notebook:



Figure 1: Katie's Response Notebook Covers

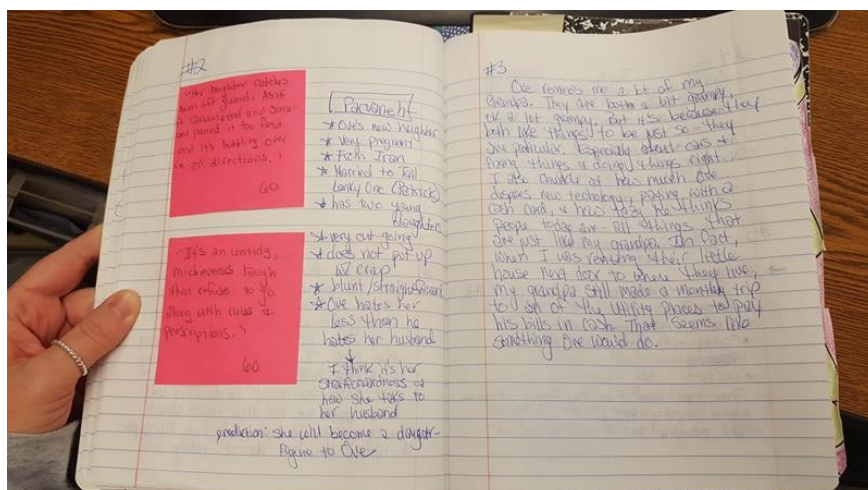


Figure 2: An Inside View of Katie's Response Notebook

She keeps the notebook on her desk and allows students to look through it to gather ideas for what to write in their own notebooks or to explore their teacher's responses to books she has read to aid them in choosing their own independent reading.

Every day at the beginning of class when students have 10 minutes of silent reading time, Katie sits on the stool in the front of the class or at the chair at her desk—also reading. “I could get other ‘teachery’ things done during that time, but I know it’s so important for them to see me reading. And honestly, I’d rather be reading than doing the ‘teachery’ work, anyway,” she says with a smile. “The hardest part for me is telling them to stop reading when I’m at a really good part in my book!” (Sluiter, personal interview, 2016).

Fostering independent reading is one of the most important, and enjoyable, things that English teachers do. Young adult literature, like any literature, can be taught in different ways: whole-class reading, where all students do the same work; literature circles, where students in the same group read the same book, but different groups read different books; or independent reading, as Katie's students were doing. For a long time, the traditional way of teaching was for

all students to read the same book at the same time. Today, language arts teachers need to know how to utilize each one of these strategies. While that makes teaching more complicated, it also makes it more likely that the reading matters to the students, and that is clearly important to student success.

Critical Inquiry

Regardless of whether students are reading on their own, in groups, or with the whole class, *A Critical Inquiry Approach to Teaching Young Adult Literature* makes the case that critical inquiry provides a meaningful approach to teaching young adult literature. This chapter will explore fostering student reading, drawing on all three strategies within a critical inquiry approach that is thematic and student-centered. The chapter sets forward best practices in the teaching of secondary English, always with a focus on young adult literature.

In the teaching I describe, students explore meaningful questions. Critical inquiry methods help students understand what is known and accepted, but then question and critique accepted and practiced “norms” (Wilhelm, 2004). Thus, critical inquiry often considers social, cultural, and political facets of students’ readings. This methodology encourages student questioning into not only what they are reading in class, but also how class is conducted, what is happening in the students’ community and in the world, what and how the media is communicating, and students’ own personal beliefs.

Teenagers tend to have questions—as they should—about the world and their understanding of it, about societal “norms” and challenging them, about how they can make an impact. Critical inquiry is a perfect fit with young adult literature, as this literature is written for and about teenagers. Reading and writing naturally fit with inquiry, as questions can lead to

research, which can lead to reading, which can lead to writing about learning, which can lead to discussion and then further reading. Critical inquiry approaches address the most important mission of education: preparing young people for democracy and global citizenship.

As Chapter One describes, in a student-centered, critical inquiry classroom, students are engaged in their own education because they have the power to pose their own questions regarding their curiosity, concerns, and passions when they explore their classroom texts and the world they live in, and then these questions guide their learning (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2016). Thus, a critical inquiry approach differs from classroom to classroom.

For example, if students were reading *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017), they may ask questions about police shootings of Black men, as a police officer shoots Starr's friend Khalil while she is with him. Or they may wonder about Starr's experience of living in a poor, predominately Black neighborhood while attending an affluent, predominately White preparatory school. Or they may want to know more about available opportunities and/or challenges for Black convicted felons who have been released from prison, like Starr's Daddy. Whatever questions students may ask while reading this young adult novel, a critical inquiry approach invites them to research further into these topics, learn about laws and "rules" of society and how they affect Black people, and learn how they can make a difference.

Katie's classroom is not only about independent reading, though; critical inquiry takes place with all three strategies: whole-class reading, books clubs, and independent reading.

Whole-Class Reading

As you likely experienced in your own education, whole-class reading is a familiar approach to teaching literature. With this approach, the teacher chooses for all students in the

class to read together, either on their own at the same pace, with the teacher assigning a certain number or pages or chapters to read each night for homework, or aloud together in class (or in a combination of in-class and at-home reading). Teachers typically choose a text for the whole class based on several criteria, such as:

- 1) student interest: the teacher may feel that students will connect with this text in some way;
- 2) an issue or theme that the teacher wishes to focus on, such as poverty or bullying;
- 3) cultural diversity or relevance: perhaps several students identify as part of a culture that the teacher would like to reflect in the reading, or perhaps there is a culture the teacher would like to present and learn about with the class;
- 4) it is “required”: perhaps an administrator or other teachers in the department have determined that this text will be taught to all students in the course (more on common assessments and teacher freedom later in this chapter);
- 5) it is “tradition”: perhaps, at some point in time, a teacher chose to teach a certain book, and this book has been taught every year since (and there are copies in the book room, so the tradition is easy to carry on);
- 6) as a “mentor text” to foster a certain style of writing or to teach certain skills;
- 7) it has been determined to be at an appropriate difficulty level: with adequate support, all students can read it;
- 8) any mixture of any of these.

While each of these reasons is valid and one you may encounter while teaching, the first three best lend themselves to teaching with a critical inquiry approach. Making decisions based on student need and interest is important, and focusing on issues relevant to students helps them to

engage with texts. However, even if you make decisions based on criteria #4-7, you can still employ a critical inquiry approach.

Evaluating Young Adult Literature Texts

Several scholars in the fields of English education and young adult literature have developed criteria for evaluating young adult texts. These systems typically consider both literary quality and reader interest in the text—such as Chelton and Broderick’s *VOYA* magazine code (www.voyamagazine.com/about)—while others provide questions for teachers to ask themselves as they are reading a young adult book in order to evaluate it according to plot, characters, setting, theme, point of view, and/or style and tone (e.g., Bucher & Hinton, 2010; Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013; Short, Tomlinson, & Lynch-Brown, 2014). For example, Bucher and Hinton (2010) provide questions like these: “Will adolescents relate to or understand the characters? Is the theme appropriate/worthwhile for adolescents? Will adolescents be able to understand the theme? Will the tone appeal to adolescents?” (pp. 32-35).

When teaching with a critical inquiry approach, teachers may consider the issues presented within the text of equal or more value than the “literary merit” of the text. “Literary merit” is an interesting and complex topic. Historically the term “literary merit” has too often served as a way to marginalize or exclude writers of color and women, and specific genres such as science fiction, biography, popular fiction, or young adult literature. Contemporary relevance, controversy, and political issues in a literary work might make it harder for that text to be considered “literary”—even if those features are exactly what makes a text more engaging in the classroom.

Certainly, quality of writing should be a consideration in the selection of classroom texts. Works that rely on simplistic stereotypes, artificial dialogue, and unrealistic plots are less likely to interest students or inspire imitation, even if such works can be used to develop skills of analysis and critique. The literary canon has changed greatly over the years, and this book welcomes the opening of the canon and experimentation by teachers and students with diverse texts and materials. Teachers who wish to emphasize inquiry especially consider: What are their students interested in and/or concerned about? What do their students need to learn about the world? What texts might help to accomplish this learning?

Cindy O'Donnell-Allen (2011) promotes a critical inquiry approach to teaching, and she suggests asking preservice teachers the following questions as they consider whether or not they should teach a text to their future students:

- Does this book focus on significant issues that my students are likely to see as relevant? (p. 34)
- Do the characters wrestle with different social, emotional, and moral choices? Do these choices demand that the characters exercise values and, often, question those values? (p. 40)
- Is this a book my students would choose to read? Will my students see this as a book worth talking about with one another? (p. 44)

While some of these questions target issues that may be important to students, asking these types of questions poses the problem of grouping all students in a given class into a single group of “adolescents,” with assumptions that they all think similarly. In this way, a teacher might create a “hypothetical adolescent reader” (Sulzer & Thein, 2016), rather than remembering

that each student has his/her own personal experiences, cultural and social background, and context. (I discuss this further in Chapter Four.)

All teachers can benefit from examining their own presuppositions and biases and thinking carefully about what literature they want to teach. Experienced teachers are constantly expanding their knowledge about young adult literature. For new teachers who have not read many young adult texts, there is no substitution for reading widely—an enjoyable pastime! English teachers should be familiar with many (and a range of) texts so they can effectively recommend books to students and choose the best works for the whole class.

Of course, it is easy to find information about young adult literature online. Teachers might begin by looking to book awards, book lists, and review journals. Bear in mind, however, that book prizing is a controversial topic (Kidd & Thomas Jr., 2016). Still, many of these sources are on the internet. Here are some websites with links to information on young adult literature:

- 1) ALAN Review (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE): www.alan-ya.org
- 2) High School Teachers—website at Random House: www.randomhouse.com/highschool
- 3) Teen Reads: <https://www.teenreads.com>
- 4) Young Adult Library Services Association (American Library Association):
www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/yalsa.cfm
- 5) Nerdy Book Club: <https://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com>

Here are some websites for book awards and selection criteria:

- 1) Alex Award: <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/alex-awards>
- 2) Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults (YALSA):

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/amazing-audiobooks>

3) Arab American Book Award: www.arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward

4) Best Books for Young Adults (YALSA): www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/bbya

5) Books for the Teen Age (New York Public Library):

<https://www.nypl.org/help/getting-oriented/resources-teens>

6) *Boston Globe—Horn Book*: <https://www.hbook.com/boston-globe-horn-book-awards>

7) Carnegie Medal: <http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk>

8) Carter G. Woodson Award: www.socialstudies.org/awards/woodson

9) Coretta Scott King Award: <http://www.ala.org/rt/emiert/cskbookawards>

10) Fabulous Films for Young Adults (YALSA): <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/fabfilms>

11) Margaret A. Edwards Award: <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/edwards>

12) Michael L. Printz Award: <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz>

13) Mildred L. Batchelder Award:

<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/batchelderaward>

14) National Book Award: <http://www.nationalbook.org>

15) Newbery Award:

<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/newberymedal>

16) Outstanding Books for the College Bound (YALSA):

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/obcb>

17) Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults (YALSA):

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/popular-paperbacks-young-adults>

18) Pura Bel Pre Award: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal>

19) Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (YALSA):

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/quickpicks>

20) Teachers' Choices List: <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/reading-lists/teachers-Choices-reading-list>

21) Teens' Top Ten Books at YALSA: <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/teenstopten>

Good Reads (www.goodreads.com) is another source for researching books. On this website users rate books they've read and share why they give the rating they do. This would be a great activity for teachers to get their students involved in, as they could create a class account where students could post their reviews of young adult books they've read. The Amazon website includes blurbs from the publisher and, often, reviews from Publisher's Weekly, the School Library Journal, Booklist, and other established sources. Amazon also includes customer reviews and ratings. Again, teachers could get students involved in writing reviews of young adult books they've read. Sometimes the number of reviews on Amazon can be overwhelming, though. At the time that I write this, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2010) has over 73,700 reviews on Amazon.

If you are looking for young adult literature related to a particular critical inquiry question or theme, putting the question/theme into Google and following with "young adult literature" almost always brings up relevant works.

Teaching Whole-Class Reading with a Critical Inquiry Approach

Once teachers have chosen the text they wish to read with the class, they must decide how the class will read the book. Will they all read it together, aloud, in class? Will the teacher

read it aloud to the class? Will the teacher ask students to read it outside of class? What will students be expected to do while reading?

Reading as Homework

Many English teachers assign reading as homework. This can be highly effective if the teacher makes the homework meaningful and holds students accountable for the reading. In too many classrooms students simply do not do the assigned reading. They read bits and pieces, “SparkNotes” texts, talk to other students who have done the reading, listen to discussion and repeat with variation other students’ ideas, remain silent, or actively disrupt class activities to show their failure to complete the homework. Yet in other classes with similar students, the students are doing the reading. What is the difference?

Meaningful homework is work that is done outside of class which affects what students are doing inside the classroom. If teachers decide to assign reading as homework, then they should discuss the importance of the homework often in class, pointing out the value of it and explaining why they assign it. There are several ways teachers can make reading homework engaging and worthwhile for students to do:

- **Give clear instructions, both oral and written.** Teachers need to provide handouts with homework assignments written on them, write the homework assignment on the board, and talk to the students about the assignment before class is dismissed. Possibly follow up with text messages (using the Remind system) or email.
- **Make sure assignments are at the appropriate difficulty level.** Difficulty level tends to refer to a text’s vocabulary and sentence length as well as abstract ideas and use of literary devices. While some teachers focus heavily on reading levels, teachers of critical

inquiry approaches understand that when students are engaged in the reading, they will be willing to put in more work to understand difficult reading. Teachers should assign enough reading that students will need to do it but not so much that it will feel overwhelming to them. As teachers get to know their students, this will become easier to discern.

- **Prepare students for homework reading during class.** When students have background knowledge of the reading content, they will be better prepared to comprehend and respond to assigned reading. This background knowledge can be developed during class time. Teachers can begin to read the book in class and then the students can discuss it. Supplemental historical or cultural readings can be done in class as well, readings that will prepare students for the content of their homework. Reading and discussing these during class will give students the confidence they need to read the book later at home.
- **Integrate the reading homework into the next day's class activities.** In order to make reading meaningful, and to promote critical inquiry in students, teachers could ask students to come to class with two thoughtful discussion questions to ask the class about their reading for that day. When students are thinking critically about and questioning their own reading—and then teachers provide spaces for small group and large group discussions about those questions and critical thoughts—students are engaged in their own learning and are questioning and learning from one another. If students do the reading and then come to class and the reading is not addressed, then many will not do the reading the next time.

Of course, as teachers make reading assignments meaningful, they also need to hold their students accountable for the reading they assign. Whichever means of accountability a teacher may choose, the most important thing to do is to create expectations for students and to communicate those effectively to students and to parents. This might be done as a contract that students and parents read and sign and then return to the teacher. There are several ways teachers can do this:

- **Provide discussion questions that pertain to the reading and ask students to complete them before or during class.** If teachers ask students to complete questions as part of the reading homework, however, they may find that some students will not complete the reading and will just copy others' responses to questions. Thus, having students complete work in class that pertains to the reading may better hold them accountable for reading.
- **Ask students to complete reading quizzes.** When students know that they will have a short quiz on the reading the next day in class, they may be more apt to read the assignment. While a quiz can hold students accountable, it may feel like more of a negative assessment than a positive one, and some quizzes present the illusion that there is one "right" answer to a question about the text the class is reading. This could undermine a reader response approach. Yet other quizzes—such as giving the students a key word from the reading and asking them to write about why that word is important or writing about a meaningful question—can be a springboard for discussion after students write their responses to the quiz.
- **Have students write responses to their readings in class and turn them in.** Teachers might call these journal entries or reading responses. Writing a response to the reading

calls for a deeper understanding of the reading, as well as more critical thinking at higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. In this way, students are not simply comprehending and recalling information, but are also applying, analyzing, and evaluating the text as well. This could be a more positive approach to accountability.

- **Have students keep Readers' Notebooks or Journals.** Rather than asking students to turn in their responses each day, teachers could ask student to keep their own notebooks and respond in those. These notebooks might be used for other class activities and interactions as well, and teachers could choose to grade them however often they might like to. Notebooks simply allow for a common space in which to respond to reading and class activities.
- **Have students create their own blogs and write blogposts often, even daily.** Another, more modern, common-space approach might be a Student Blog. Students can create their own blogs and connect them to their teacher's blog as part of a class "blogroll." As often as the teacher decides, students could respond to their reading in electronic form, as a blogpost. In this way, their writing is more public than a private Reader's Notebook, so the types of responses they write may be different than ones they would write in a private journal. Teachers would also be able to check students' responses without having to carry home actual notebooks for grading.
- **Ask students to bring discussion questions to class.** Teachers can ask their students to create their own discussion questions based on what they think is important in the reading. They might ask students to bring one or two thoughtful discussion questions about the reading homework and then pose their questions in small-group and/or large-group class discussions. Studying discussion questions in class and looking at what

makes them effective will lead to students creating better questions and having better discussions. Teachers could also ask that students turn in their questions in order to hold them accountable.

- **Confer with students about their reading.** Teachers can schedule brief one-on-one conference times with students during class reading time in which they discuss the students' reading, ask deeper questions to help students think critically about their reading, and recommend books for future reading. Teachers can create a schedule so that they confer with each student about once every two or three weeks.
- **Connect with students about their reading and hold them accountable.** Teachers can collect writing assignments and responses to reading questions from students at their desks—this helps the teacher to connect with each student and also holds a student more accountable for their work than just turning the paper into a pile or class slot in the classroom. Teachers can also invite students into the class discussion in ways that depend on students having done the reading, thus holding them accountable. When students realize that their teachers care about them doing the work, they may be more motivated to complete it. And when students have not done the reading, teachers can follow up with them in private conversations before or after, or even during, class or by email. Once again, this helps to hold students accountable.

While teachers may choose one or a combination of these options in order to hold students accountable for their reading homework and to engage them with their reading, they may find that students still will not complete their reading homework. Thus, teachers may want to have consequences for not completing homework assignments. One possible consequence could be

simply not earning the points attached to one of the above means of accountability, and the student's grade will suffer.

Another possible consequence could be a “working lunch” in which students go to the teacher's classroom during lunch to complete their reading assignment. (Of course, teachers must be willing to give up lunch with their colleagues in order to monitor this activity.) Another option is that students go to the teacher's classroom during “study hall” time and read their assignment then. If there are some students who consistently do not complete their reading homework, this could become a routine, and teachers may choose to have students do the reading together, aloud, quietly in a corner of the room during study hall or lunch.

Discussion Question and Activity:

- 1) If you were teaching whole-class reading, how would you hold your students accountable for reading homework?
- 2) Create a plan for making reading homework meaningful for your students that draws on critical inquiry approaches.

The key is for teachers to be attentive to their students' habits and needs, to discuss the importance of completing the reading, and to be creative and persistent with their students in holding them accountable for their reading.

Writing

Asking students to write responses to their reading is an excellent way to hold them accountable, and it also helps them to think more deeply about what they have read. In Katie's 8th grade English language arts class, after students have read their young adult book, she asks them to write in their Response Notebooks. In order to provide ideas for students who may be stuck, Katie provides prompts, but she also allows choices for the students. One choice is always to write about your book in your own way. For example, one class prompt looked like this:

During your response time...

- Describe the major conflict or problem in your book. Write what caused it and what is happening because of it. You may want to use a multi-flow map to do this!
- Or choose your own way to write about your book.

Katie has students write about both their whole-class read and their independent book in this manner. She also provides “reading map” posters all around her classroom. These maps help students to organize the information they’re reading about and turn them into visual images on a page. For example, a multi-flow map outline looks like this:

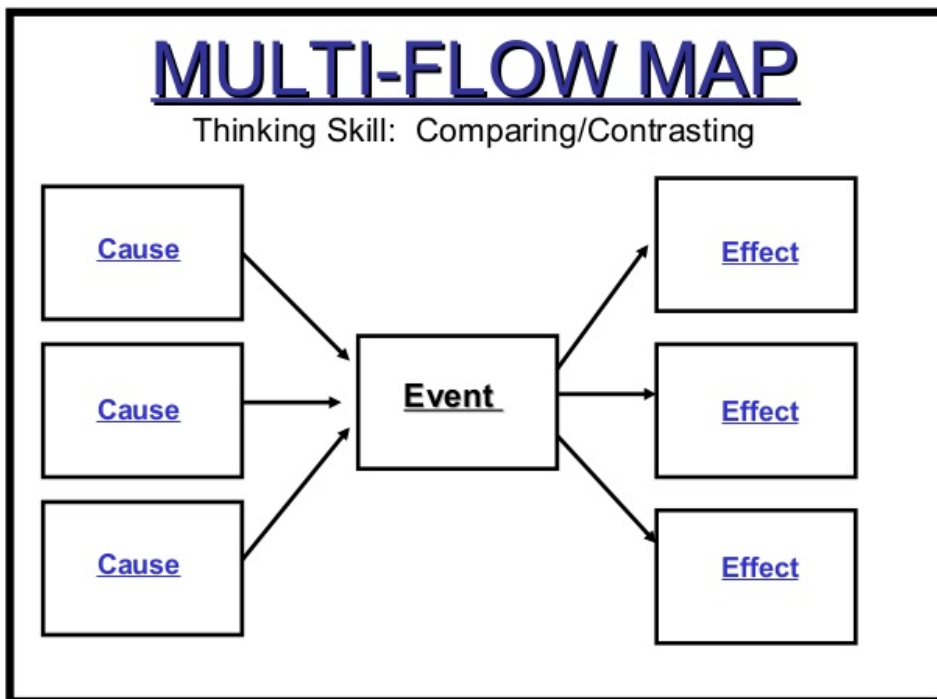


Figure 3: A Multi-Flow Map Outline (Kelleher, 2015)

These maps can help to foster critical thinking. Students can take this outline and create their own reading map with information from the book, and there are several different reading maps students can use. Here is one student's chapter flow map from her Response Notebook:

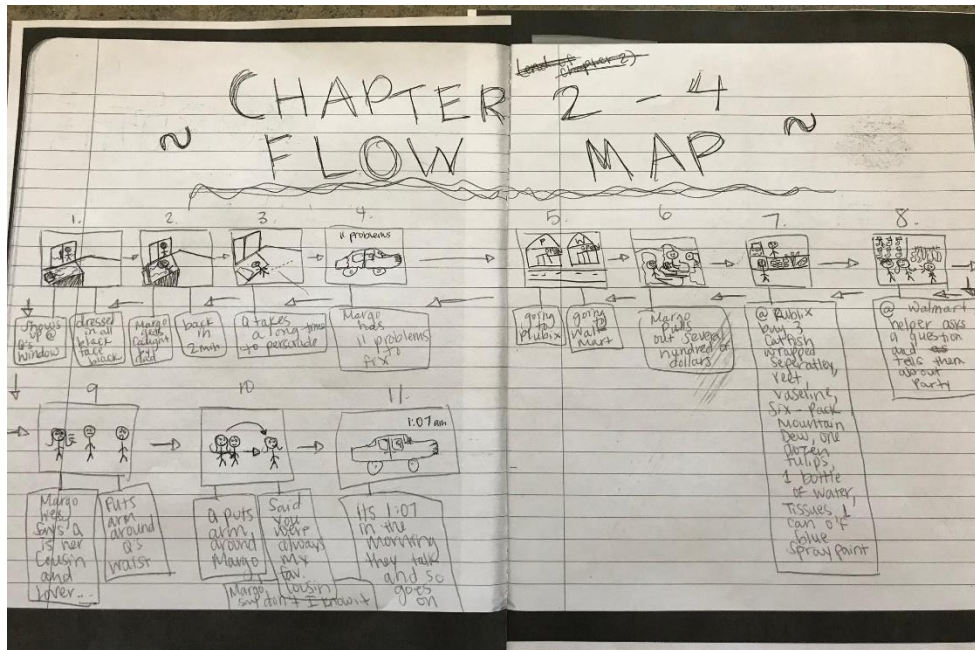


Figure 4: A Student's Chapter Flow Map

Asking students to write about what they have read is an excellent technique for helping students to think, and then to understand and process what they think. Writing can become a form of inquiry. When students first begin to write in their notebooks, teachers may want to model critical inquiry for them. Teachers could ask students to come up with questions that matter, and then as a class they could answer them in exploratory ways. For example, here are some critical inquiry questions students might ask about their books (I list many examples of critical inquiry questions like these throughout this chapter):

- Which characters are not treated fairly? Why?
- Which characters have power? Where does their power come from?

- Are there social inequalities that impact the characters?

When students write on their own, whether in Readers' Notebooks or student blog posts, they are able to articulate their thoughts about what they are learning in a safe space to think through their ideas and responses to the text. When teachers grade these writings for completeness only, then students feel safe to explore and question without worrying about how the content of their writing will be perceived by the teacher.

Reading Aloud

Katie teaches four whole-class reads over the course of the year, one per marking period. During the first marking period she chooses to read the book out loud to her students as part of their class time. Katie has found over the course of her teaching career that students are “never too old to have someone read to them” (Sluiter, personal interview, 2016). Thus, she takes the time to read *Hero* by S. L. Rottman (2007)—her first-quarter whole-class read—to her students in class, and during silent reading time, some students choose to read ahead in the book. Katie doesn't worry about this, as she says those students will then go back and follow along through the book while she is reading it aloud, or they may just sit and listen to her read. Either way, their reading is being reinforced when she reads the text aloud to them.

There are benefits to a teacher reading aloud to students rather than having students “popcorn read” (take turns reading aloud). When teachers read, they can use their voice inflection to make the reading interesting to their students. Teachers can emphasize important portions of the text, use dramatic pause to encourage suspense, and even use different “voices” for the characters when they speak. They can also pause at key moments for discussion or background information. In these ways, teachers engage their students in the reading and model

for them how they might “hear” the reading when they read on their own. Dramatic reading can be accomplished through listening to an audiobook as well, as usually actors or the authors themselves are reading the texts. Teachers could utilize these and just pause when they want to discuss a topic.

Of course, having students “popcorn read” at times is appropriate as well, as it helps them to develop their own “read aloud” voices. Reading aloud in small groups can provide a safer space for students to practice their reading than reading to the whole class. In fact, if students divide into groups of two, then up to 15 students can practice reading aloud instead of just one.

Reading Workshop

Sheridan Blau (2003) describes what a Reading Workshop might look like in his book *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and their Readers*. He identifies three features of a literature workshop:

1. There is the posing of genuine questions or problems that face readers of literature individually and in groups as they engage in literary study or participate in the discourse of literature.
2. There is the demand that workshop participants monitor how they experience the problems set by the assignment, along with the related demand that:
3. Participants reflect on and talk about or write about the problems they encountered and how they addressed them. (p. 13)

When students come to class prepared to discuss the problems they may have encountered while reading a text, they are engaging in critical pedagogy, as students are directing the class as much as the teacher, and all students along with the teacher can discuss and share their reading and

problem-solving experiences (Blau, 2003, p. 13). Thus, students can come to class with questions or problems to discuss, and then during class they might write about those questions—which, in Blau’s experience, can help students to better understand the reading (p. 38)—and then discuss them in small and large groups.

If students are particularly “stuck” with reading a text, Blau advocates for rereading. While this may seem like a logical strategy to employ, Blau notes that it is not often used by students—especially those who might consider themselves non-readers or “reluctant” readers. However, it is definitely a worthwhile strategy for teachers to ask students to engage in. As Blau notes:

Reading is a process of constructing meaning or composing a text, exactly like writing.

The reading of any difficult text will entail drafting and revision (largely in the reader’s head) and will frequently begin with what amounts to a zero draft. Just as writing may be defined as rewriting, so is any reading worth doing essentially a process of rereading.

(p. 53)

This rereading technique can be done individually, but it may also be beneficial to ask students to reread collectively, in small groups, and to discuss and share their understandings of the text. A reading workshop setting allows for this to take place within the classroom. Once students have worked through their problems and reread sections of text individually and in small groups, they may be more readily engaged in large-group discussion.

Discussion in the English Language Arts Classroom

In order to encourage students to read a text carefully, English teachers need to help students to think critically about what they are reading and then provide opportunity for

discussion of their thoughts with one another. Students are more willing to share with their classmates when they have had the opportunity to process their thinking on their own first. If students have already formed some thoughts about their reading through initial writing, then sharing their thoughts aloud through class discussion allows other students to reconsider their own positions, thus fostering a recursive process of thinking, sharing, considering, rethinking, sharing, reconsidering, etc. (Freire, 2000).

Discussion can take place in small groups or as a large class. With a critical inquiry approach, it is especially helpful to have students discuss their initial responses to the text (which they have already written down) in small groups before holding a large-class discussion. This would be an opportunity for students to discuss critical inquiry questions in a safe space where they can consider their own ideas, positions, and questions about the literature before discussing them with everyone in the class. When students have several opportunities to consider their own thinking—through writing and small-group discussion—they will be more likely to share their opinions and questions with the rest of the class, and large-group discussions can be fruitful.

Students can even work in small groups to create critical inquiry questions. They can discuss how well the questions they're asking address issues of power structures and inequality and tweak questions to address issues of race, gender, socioeconomic background, (dis)ability, etc.

Large Group Discussion

When thinking about how best to foster a whole-class discussion, teachers should first consider the physical positioning of the participants. Students should be in a good position to see everyone who will be participating in the discussion. Thus, the best way for students and the

teacher to position themselves is in a large circle. While some classrooms may have tables rather than individual desks, or the size of the room may not be conducive to forming a circle, having the students move so they're all able to see one another as well as possible makes it more likely they will talk to each other rather than just to the teacher.

Teachers next should consider how they want students to engage in discussion. Will they raise their hands so the teacher can call on them? Or will they be allowed to “call out” responses to questions and talk whenever they feel like talking? Students go from classroom to classroom hearing the word “discussion,” but it means different things in different settings with different teachers. Telling students what “discussion” means in your classroom is important, and since that may vary day to day, sharing expectations about each specific whole-class discussion is a good idea.

For example, the teacher may wish to have students introduce the issues most important to them in their reading homework. Or they may want to have the students delve deeper into a specific issue during their discussion that day. In all class discussions, though, students should know that they will not be allowed to interrupt other speakers; that they need to raise their hands and wait to be called upon before speaking (if the expectation is to raise hands); that they will be expected to speak to one another respectfully, even if they disagree; that they should look around the circle at everyone involved in the discussion when speaking (and not at the teacher only); and that the teacher expects everyone to participate in the discussion and may call on students if they do not volunteer to speak.

Inviting non-volunteers to participate is an important way to foster student involvement in class discussion. Let students know that discussion time is like a laboratory: everyone is

experimenting with ideas, listening, making and changing hypotheses, and letting their ideas change, grow, and develop. In this context, ideas are not “wrong.” The classroom is a safe place to try out their thoughts. When a teacher invites a student who has not volunteered, that student should be allowed to “pass.” Yet, when you call on non-volunteers, you may discover that they often have wonderful ideas. Students who volunteer less often will typically start volunteering more often after they have been invited a few times.

Sure, some students are shyer than others, but shy students benefit from learning to share ideas—and the whole class often benefits greatly from hearing what they have to say. A kind and inviting teacher can make shy students feel comfortable and willing to share. Having students write first, then talk in pairs and/or small groups, helps prepare students for large group discussions. Sadly, many students go through whole days unnoticed and unheard. It is important for teachers to be mindful of who has not participated in any given class period and find ways to bring those students into the discussion. Good discussions should include everyone, not just the teacher and a small group of students.

Discussion Question and Activity:

- 1) How might you invite a non-volunteer to participate in large-group discussion?
- 2) With a partner, take turns practicing what you would say to invite a student to share in class discussion.

Advantages of Whole-Class Reading

There are several benefits of teaching whole-class texts. One key benefit is that students and teachers are able to learn from one another through whole-class discussion. Discussion itself is a powerful form of inquiry. Another is that the entire class can explore a specific text or issue on a deeper level than when reading a text individually. Through supplemental reading

connected to the whole-class read, common projects and assignments, and small-group and large-group discussions, students are able to ask critical questions and explore issues on a deep level with one another and with their teacher.

Whole-class reads also allow for common assessment (more on assessment at the end of this chapter). As students read, write to explore, choose issues within the reading that are important to them, and examine those issues more deeply through small- and large-group discussion and research, they can further explore through writing assignments, creative projects, and presentations. It is exciting to create a classroom where students are able to learn from one another about important issues in society.

Discussion Question:

Your students have been learning about an issue important to their community. How could your students take action within the community in order to promote change? Brainstorm some ways students can teach, learn, and make a difference in their community.

However, whole-class reads do not allow students choice, as all students are asked to read the same text. Choice is important, increasing interest, relevance, involvement, and motivation. During whole-class reading, teachers can provide choice in other ways. Students can choose what they write about in their notebooks, what issues they focus on when they are asking questions throughout their reading, and what topics they choose to research and explore further. Allowing students choices in these aspects can help balance out a lack of choice in whole-class reading.

Students may also have choices in selecting further reading materials as they research into specific issues—when they find interesting material that addresses an issue in the whole-class reading that matters to them, they may become more engaged with the entire class activity.

These connected readings allow for a deeper learning about their chosen issues—and about the book they are reading together as a class.

Differentiated Instruction

Every class includes students with diverse reading abilities. Sometimes that diversity is enormous—for example, some students reading at a fourth-grade level and some at a college level in the same room. Having all students read the same book at the same pace, when they have widely divergent reading skills, can leave some students behind while others are bored. Having the teacher read aloud reduces the issue, making a text comprehensible—even one that is several grade levels of difficulty “too hard” for some readers. But if the teacher asks students to read it on their own, there may be some students who don’t keep up with the reading and others who are frustrated because they want to read ahead.

Of course, spending entire class periods reading aloud is time consuming and leaves less room for discussion. When reading a common text with diverse students, teachers may want to balance teacher reading aloud and students reading to themselves. Close monitoring of student progress and having students read in small groups during class and any additional “study hall” time are other ways to support slower readers.

As we will see, literature circles and independent reading offer important strategies to support the success of all students. These strategies can be combined with whole-class reading. It may be useful, especially for more advanced readers, to have students reading independent young adult books at a wide range of difficulty as well as the whole-class reading assignment. This way when students finish their reading of the whole-class text, they still have something

interesting to read on their own. This would fulfill students' desires to have choice in what they are reading as well.

One option that allows for some student choice in reading while also providing space to discuss the reading with others who are reading the same text is a literature circle format. Just as with a whole-class, common text, literature circles and independent reading can be built around focused critical inquiry themes.

Literature Circles

Jenny Sanford is a White, female English language arts teacher at a rural, predominantly White, socioeconomically diverse middle school in Michigan. She and Jamie Isham, a White, female social studies teacher at the same school, collaborate on a unit of teaching about World War II. While Jamie is teaching about the war in her social studies classes, Jenny offers each of her classes more than 50 options of young adult books about World War II. Some are non-fiction texts, like *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank (1993), *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand (2014), and the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1996); some are historical fiction, like *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry (2011), *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne (2007), and *Code Talker: A Novel about the Navajo Marines of WWII* by Joseph Bruchac (2006). (I discuss this unit further in Chapter Five.)

Discussion Questions:

Imagine collaborating with a teacher from a different field of study, like Jenny and Jamie did in this chapter.

- 1) What might your collaboration look like?
- 2) Would you teach whole-class reading, critical inquiry circles, or independent reading?
- 3) How might you collaborate with your colleague—what will you teach in your classroom, and what might your colleague teach?

Students choose the books they are most interested in and put themselves into groups according to their choices.

This use of literature circles is a bit of a departure from the best-known version of literature circle set forward by Harvey Daniels and Nancy Steineke (2004) because the students are reading books that focus on a common theme. Literature circles, also called “book clubs” or “book groups,” are meant to be student-led, so they allow for students to set the pace of reading within their groups. Teachers can inform students about when they would like them to have the reading finished, and then the groups decide how they would like to schedule the reading.

While class time in literature circles is generally used for groups of students to discuss the book they are reading together, teachers may also allow students to read the text aloud or silently in their groups—or to present to the rest of the class what their book is about and what they are learning in regard to common inquiry questions the class is exploring. As Daniels and Steineke (2004) explain, literature circles can be developed and organized in different ways, as the teacher decides. Thus, here I’ve modified their outline to fit Jenny’s purposes:

- Students choose their own reading materials from books about World War II in Jenny’s classroom library.
- Small groups (three to six students) are formed, based upon book choice.
- Grouping is by text choices, not by “ability” or other tracking. Students in Jenny’s class are informed that some books are more challenging than others, but they are still free to self-select based on interest.
- Different groups choose and read different books.
- Groups create and meet on a regular schedule.

- Members write notes that help guide both their reading and their discussion.
- Discussion questions come from the students, not teachers or textbooks.
- Teacher-led mini-lessons serve as bookends, before and after meetings.
- The teacher does not lead any group, but acts as facilitator, fellow reader, and observer.
- Personal responses, connections, and questions are the starting point of discussion.
- A spirit of playfulness and sharing pervades the room.
- When books are finished, groups share highlights of their reading with classmates through presentations, reviews, dramatizations, book chats, or other activities.
- New groups form around new reading choices, and another cycle begins. Jenny includes literature circles along with whole-class and independent reading, so her students do not form new groups again right away.
- Assessment is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation. For Jenny's class, students are also assessed by their projects, presentations, and collaborative writing.

(Daniels & Steineke, 2004, modified)

These elements portray a student-centered classroom—one in which groups meet while a teacher observes, explains or demonstrates expectations for group time, or participates as a fellow reader, and one in which discussion is peer-led.

Katie also offers a book club unit to her students. While Jenny's class connects through a specific time in history (World War II), Katie's unit connects through genre—historical fiction—and thus also delineates from the Daniels and Steineke (2004) model. Katie asks her students to choose from several different historical fiction texts, offering a variety of topics so that students

can choose what interests them the most. She gives her students a sheet of paper with pictures of the book covers, the titles, authors, and synopses of the books, and then asks students to rank the books in the order of their reading preferences. She then uses these rankings to put students into literature circle groups, which will eventually become inquiry circle groups.

Here is the handout Katie gives her students:

Name: _____ Hour: _____

Rank the following books in order of which interest you the most. 1= the one you are MOST interested in reading, 10 = the one you are LEAST interested in reading. For the book you rate #1, tell me why you want to read that book so much.

_____ ***Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai (2013)**

For all the ten years of her life, Hà has only known Saigon: the thrills of its markets, the joy of its traditions, and the warmth of her friends close by. But now the Vietnam War has reached her home. Hà and her family are forced to flee as Saigon falls, and they board a ship headed toward hope. In America, Hà discovers the foreign world of Alabama: the coldness of its strangers, the dullness of its food . . . and the strength of her very own family.

Lexile: 800 Pages: 260

_____ ***Climbing The Stairs* by Padma Venkatraman (2010)**

Fifteen-year-old Vidya dreams of going to college— an unusual aspiration for a girl living in British occupied India during World War II. Then tragedy strikes, and Vidya and her brother are forced to move into a traditional household with their extended family, where women are meant to be married, not educated. Breaking the rules, Vidya finds refuge in her grandfather's library. But then her brother does something unthinkable, and Vidya's life becomes a whirlwind of political and personal complications. The question is, will she be strong enough to survive?

Lexile: 750 Pages: 247

***My Name Is Not Easy* by Debby Dahl Edwardson (2013)**

My name is not easy. My name is hard like ocean ice grinding the shore...Luke knows his Iñupiaq name is full of sounds white people can't say. So he leaves it behind when he and his brothers are sent to boarding school hundreds of miles away from their Arctic village. At Sacred Heart School, students—Eskimo, Indian, White—line up on different sides of the cafeteria like there's some kind of war going on. Here, speaking Iñupiaq—or any native language—is forbidden. And Father Mullen, whose fury is like a force of nature, is ready to slap down those who disobey. Luke struggles to survive at Sacred Heart. But he's not the only one. There's smart-aleck Amiq, a daring leader— if he doesn't self-destruct; Chickie, blond and freckled, a different kind of outsider; and small, quiet Junior, noticing everything and writing it all down. They each have their own story to tell. But once their separate stories come together, things at Sacred Heart School—and the wider world—will never be the same.

Lexile: 830 Pages: 248

***A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park (2011)**

A Long Walk to Water begins as two stories, told in alternating sections, about two eleven-year-olds in Sudan, a girl in 2008 and a boy in 1985. The girl, Nya, is fetching water from a pond that is two hours' walk from her home: she makes two trips to the pond every day. The boy, Salva, becomes one of the "lost boys" of Sudan, refugees who cover the African continent on foot as they search for their families and for a safe place to stay. Enduring every hardship from loneliness to attack by armed rebels to contact with killer lions and crocodiles, Salva is a survivor, and his story goes on to intersect with Nya's in an astonishing and moving way.

Lexile: 720 Pages: 121

***Far From Home* by Na'ima B. Robert (2012)**

Will I ever see my home again? I do not know. Will I ever see my father again? I do not know. Will life ever be the same again? I do not know. Katie and Tariro are worlds apart but their lives are linked by a terrible secret, gradually revealed in this compelling and dramatic story of two girls grappling with the complexities of adolescence, family and a painful colonial legacy. 14-year-old Tariro loves her ancestral home, the baobab tree she was born beneath, her loving family - and brave, handsome Nhamo. She couldn't be happier. But then the white settlers arrive, and everything changes - suddenly, violently, and tragically. Thirty-five years later, 14-year-old Katie loves her doting father, her exclusive boarding school, and her farm with its baobab tree in rural Zimbabwe. Life is great. Until disaster strikes, and the family are forced to leave everything and escape to cold, rainy London. Atmospheric, gripping and epic in scope, *Far from Home* brings the turbulent history of Zimbabwe to vivid, tangible life.

Lexile: not available Pages: 344

***Homeless Bird* by Gloria Whelan (2001)**

Like many girls her age in India, thirteen-year-old Koly is getting married. When she discovers that the husband her parents have chosen for her is sickly boy with wicked parents, Koly wishes she could flee. According to tradition, though, she has no choice. On her wedding day, Koly's fate is sealed. What Koly never dreams of is that she will be a widow in that very same year. When her sickly husband dies, Koly is left without any rights, sentenced to a life of hunger, loneliness, and servitude to her cruel mother-in-law. Just as Koly begins to accept the hardships of her existence, her life once again takes a devastating turn.

Lexile: 800 Pages: 186

***Never Fall Down* by Patricia McCormick (2013)**

When soldiers arrive in his hometown, Arn is just a normal little boy. But after the soldiers march the entire population into the countryside, his life is changed forever.

Arn is separated from his family and assigned to a labor camp: working in the rice paddies under a blazing sun, he sees the other children dying before his eyes. One day, the soldiers ask if any of the kids can play an instrument. Arn's never played a note in his life, but he volunteers.

This decision will save his life, but it will pull him into the very center of what we know today as the Killing Fields. And just as the country is about to be liberated, Arn is handed a gun and forced to become a soldier. Based on a true story.

Lexile: 710 Pages: 216

***The Surrender Tree* by Margarita Engle (2010)**

It is 1896. Cuba has fought three wars for independence and still is not free. People have been rounded up in reconcentration camps with too little food and too much illness. Rosa is a nurse, but she dares not go to the camps. So she turns hidden caves into hospitals for those who know how to find her.

Black, white, Cuban, Spanish—Rosa does her best for everyone. Yet who can heal a country so torn apart by war? (In English and Spanish)

Lexile: not available Pages: 166

***One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia (2011)**

Eleven-year-old Delphine has it together. Even though her mother, Cecile, abandoned her and her younger sisters, Vonetta and Fern, seven years ago. Even though her father and Big Ma will send them from Brooklyn to Oakland, California, to stay with Cecile for the summer. And even though Delphine will have to take care of her sisters, as usual, and learn the truth about the

missing pieces of the past. When the girls arrive in Oakland in the summer of 1968, Cecile wants nothing to do with them. She makes them eat Chinese takeout dinners, forbids them to enter her kitchen, and never explains the strange visitors with Afros and black berets who knock on her door. Rather than spend time with them, Cecile sends Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern to a summer camp sponsored by a revolutionary group, the Black Panthers, where the girls get a radical new education.

Lexile: 750 Pages: 218 (Sluiter, 2016)

Katie also has students write on sticky notes while reading and discussing in their book clubs and then put them in their Response Notebooks. She asks them to do this so that they can jot quick notes on the sticky note (so as to interrupt their reading as little as possible) and then, after reading, they can write more details in their Response Notebooks about what they've written on the sticky note.

So how do teachers ensure that students are thinking critically about their reading and are inquiring into topics and issues connected to their reading while in literature circles?

Discussion Questions and Activities:

You are planning to teach a literature circle unit on an issue important to you.

- 1) What questions might be valuable to inquire into?
- 2) Choose the issue, and find 6-8 different young adult texts that address that topic in some way—texts your students might choose from in order to put themselves into literature circles.
- 3) Create a handout like Katie's that describes the books for your students.

Critical Inquiry in Literature Circles

Fostering critical inquiry in literature circles means that students need to be asking meaningful questions about systems of power and inequality while reading in groups. One way teachers can do this is to transform literature circles into inquiry circles (Harvey & Daniels, 2009). Inquiry circles develop as students read and discuss their books in their literature circles. When students are aware that these groups will soon become inquiry circles, they ask critical questions as they are reading and discuss these questions in their groups.

According to the Harvey and Daniels inquiry circle model (2009), there are four stages of student inquiry in these groups:

1. Immerse: Invite curiosity, build background, find topics, and wonder
2. Investigate: develop questions, search for information, and discover answers
3. Coalesce: intensify research, synthesize information, and build knowledge
4. Go Public: share learning, demonstrate understanding, and take action

(Harvey & Daniels, 2009, pp. 201-202)

After students finish reading their books in Katie's class, their literature circles transition into inquiry circles. In their group meetings, students discuss issues they found intriguing and important within their texts while reading. Together, they decide which issue they would like to explore further, and then they research into this issue in groups. For example, one group reading *Homeless Bird* by Gloria Whelan (2001) wants to know more about girls' rights in India. They want to research further into the tradition of arranged marriage and learn what freedoms young girls may have in that regard.

In the inquiry groups, research is guided by critical questions the students ask about their chosen issue, and the students research many different types of text. They read multiple genres, including Wikipedia pages, interviews (written and video recorded), video clips, films, memes, still images, documentaries, and historical documents. Once they complete the research, students collaboratively write a paper about what they are learning, create a presentation, and present their research to the class. (I further discuss these inquiry circles in Katie's classroom in Chapter Five.)

In order to foster critical inquiry in students, I recommend that teachers move beyond inquiry circles to create *critical inquiry circles*. Critical inquiry circles would form around student choice in books the teacher offers that all address a similar theme or question rather than a topic (like World War II) or a literary genre (like historical fiction). For example, a teacher might want to focus critical inquiry circles on Black Lives Matter and unequal police and criminal justice responses to people of different races and social positions. This teacher could offer many different young adult texts that discuss this issue, such as novels like *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (2015), *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017), *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (1999), *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone (2017), *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018), and *How It Went Down* by Kekla Magoon (2014). They may also want to add some non-fiction options, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) and Wesley Lowery's *They Can't Kill Us All* (2016). Students would choose one of these texts to read, put themselves into groups according to their choice, and ask critical questions within these groups.

Another issue on which a teacher might develop critical inquiry circles is homelessness. Possible young adult texts the teacher could offer for this topic are *Homecoming* by Cynthia Voigt (2012), *In Real Life* by Cory Doctorow and Jen Wang (2014), *Munmun* by Jesse Andrews (2018), *Tyrell* by Coe Booth (2007), and *Can't Get There from Here* by Todd Strasser (2012). Again, a teacher may want to offer some non-fiction texts as well, like *Run, Boy, Run* by Uri Orlev (2007) and *The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez (1997). Of course there are many other texts that discuss these issues, and teachers can choose from a variety of genres. There are also many different social and political issues teachers and students can choose to focus on in critical inquiry circles.

Developing critical inquiry in reading includes modeling for students what critical questions about the reading look like and how to take note of them. Teachers could model how to ask questions through mini-lessons (Daniels & Steineke, 2004). Critical inquiry circle mini-lessons take place before and after group meetings and can be directed toward any aspect of the meetings that the teacher feels students need to improve upon. Short and directed by the teacher, mini-lessons teach students how to conduct meetings with their critical inquiry circles and how to conduct themselves within those meetings.

These mini-lessons would be less than ten minutes in length and can focus on reading strategies students need to employ in order to read critically and effectively. Lessons could begin with the asking of simple questions which model how people tend to naturally read books: What do you remember about the reading? What stood out to you? Which character interests you and why? How might things have been different if a character had made a different choice?

After beginning with simple questions, students can then move on to more critical questions, such as:

- Imagine you are of a different race or social background than the characters in the book you are reading. How would you see the book differently?
- How are male and female characters portrayed differently?
- Are issues or problems in the book portrayed as individual or societal?
- How might characters solve problems more fairly?

Teachers Modeling Critical Inquiry

When I teach critical inquiry circle units, I take some time before the groups meet to model how I question while reading. One book I use is *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2006).

I give the students a brief summary of the book up to the part I will share with them (this part of the text is when the protagonist, Liesel, steals a book from the pile the Nazis are burning and her Papa discovers that she has it), and then I read a short excerpt I have propped up under the projector so students can follow along.

I stop reading to wonder aloud about Papa's reaction to Liesel stealing the book from the burning pile. While he could have punished her for putting her life and that of her parents in danger for a simple book, he instead tells her that this book will be their secret—that they will read it at night as they have previous books (Zusak, 2006, p. 127). I then model how I would write this on a sticky note to put into my Reader's Journal later.

I then tell the students what I speculate might have happened differently if Liesel had been with Mama—that Mama probably would have smacked her and called her names. I write that down on a sticky note as well. I then re-read a portion of that page from the book and decide to make an inference about what Papa realizes when he is talking about the book with Liesel and why he trades cigarettes to purchase a copy of *Mein Kampf*, so I write that on a separate sticky note. Then I demonstrate how I would stick these notes into my Reader's Journal and write more about them on that page. I model how I ask questions, wonder in writing, and make inferences surrounding the sticky notes on the page.

I then talk through the issue of power in the text, how the Nazis are in power, and how the German people—and Papa in particular—are not allowed to disagree, how Papa is in trouble with the local people in power because he has waited so long to join the Nazi party. I write that he had to join the party or he would put his family in danger. I then wonder aloud how many other Germans were like Papa and didn't agree with Hitler's Nazi party but felt powerless to

fight against it. Finally, I make a prediction that Papa will fight against the Nazis in some way, that he will figure out a way to subvert their power.

When I finish, I have students move into their groups and begin their own discussions of their readings, pulling out their sticky notes and Readers' Journals to share their notes and then to take more notes as they discuss in their groups. Students might consider questions like:

- How would you react in the same circumstances?
- Could similar circumstances ever arise for us in the United States?
- How do we need to act so that such circumstances don't arise for us?

In this way, I model critical inquiry for my students. It is exciting to see students applying critical inquiry to their own reading, asking important questions and making inferences as they read and discuss in their groups.

Modeling critical reading like this allows teachers to teach their classes how to become independent readers, thinkers, and leaders, as the students then go to their groups and take turns speaking and sharing, sometimes arguing about a point (another mini-lesson teachers often need to teach—how to disagree respectfully), and sometimes drawing out quieter students to see what they think, too. Thus, these small-group discussions, though student-led, are meaningful interactions between students and effectively allow them to share ideas and learn from one another.

Advantages of Critical Inquiry Circle Reading

One advantage critical inquiry circle reading has over whole-class reading is that students are given some choice in the books they read. While a literature circle that follows the Daniels

and Steinke (2004) model allows complete freedom in choosing a book to read, some teachers (like the examples provided in this chapter) allow a “restricted” choice by choosing from books they have available. Teachers might do this for a variety of reasons: they have certain books available in their school and/or classroom libraries with several copies of each; they want to focus on a common theme or issue through the book club reading; or they want students to explore a different genre than what they might be used to reading. Choice is a powerful motivator for students and natural to an inquiry approach.

Critical inquiry circles also allow for student-led discussion of the reading, albeit in small groups, which is a more natural way to discuss reading than to answer pre-written questions or complete a quiz. Students are able to discuss their personal reactions to characters and events described in the books they’re reading, sharing their emotional and intellectual reactions, and those reflections can take them to higher-level thinking: ethical questions and evaluations of right conduct, social change, controversy in history and politics, etc. When students debate these topics, they also ask questions about issues that matter—questions about fairness and justice—and how they connect to these issues and can act upon what they are learning. This can lead to further research within their critical inquiry circles, and students have choice to research what they are most interested in.

Independent Reading and Critical Inquiry

Independent reading is a third approach to teaching literature in addition to whole-class reading and critical inquiry circles. Some language arts classes are built almost entirely around students choosing their own books and reading them on their own. Nancie Atwell (*The Reading Zone*, 2007) and Penny Kittle (*Book Love*, 2013) write persuasively about English classes as

“reading workshops” where students select their own reading often from classroom or school libraries, have substantial time in class to read, share their enthusiasm for particular books with each other (through book talks), and are monitored by their teachers through regular short, individual conferences.

One of the most popular (for profit) programs in elementary and middle schools is Accelerated Reader, where students read independently books determined to be at their grade levels and take multiple-choice tests. Many teachers encourage independent reading simultaneously with their regular literature curriculum, combining whole-class reading and independent reading.

Allowing students choice increases their motivation. Reading lots of books enriches vocabulary and increases fluency, stamina, and comprehension. Young adult literature, typically appropriate to student reading levels and addressing topics of interest to adolescent readers, is one of the most popular features of many independent reading approaches. Clearly fostering independent reading is part of quality English instruction and an important strategy for teaching young adult literature.

In this section I want to talk specifically about how to bring a critical inquiry approach to independent reading strategies increasingly common in middle and secondary schools. As important as independent reading is, unfortunately teachers and students engaging only in independent reading miss out on some of the most valuable dimensions of literature in school: talking with others about what you have read; diving deeper into texts and ideas with a group of peers and a thoughtful teacher; analyzing the way people are treated; considering questions of voice, power, inequality, and justice; and developing ideas for how to make a positive impact on

others. A critical inquiry approach to independent reading seeks to have it all: choice and meaning, engagement and exchange of ideas, extensive and careful reading, pleasure and making a difference.

One way teachers can promote critical inquiry in independent reading is by helping students create reading lists based on their interests and issues they would like to explore. As I discuss in the critical inquiry section of this chapter, teachers can easily find young adult texts that address an issue. When a teacher confers with a student and discovers what critical issues the student is most interested in, they can then collaborate with the student to create a reading list that student will be able to choose from. Of course, students shouldn't be limited to choosing from this list—if students want to explore a different issue or find a new book related to the issue they are exploring, they should be free to read that book. A reading list simply provides a resource for students as they continue in their independent reading throughout the year.

Katie's classroom library is divided into sections by genre: dystopian, science fiction, historical fiction, memoir, biography, etc. But teachers could also sort books according to theme—shelving books in groups like racial inequality, wealth inequality, body image, human trafficking, abuse, gender inequality, bullying, etc. As Katie's students read independently throughout the school year, she has built up a classroom library of over 1,300 books. Many of these books have been donated to her classroom; Katie conducts "Go Fund Me" drives and asked fellow bloggers and friends on social media to send new or gently used books. Katie has found that people who enjoy reading want to donate books to classrooms in order to encourage students to read. All she has to do is ask for books—in person, via social media outlets, or at conferences. Other options include shopping at garage and library sales—often libraries are happy to donate

books to teachers when they know they will be made available to students through classroom libraries.

Teachers can also join a reading club, like Scholastic. When students order books for themselves, their teachers gain credit toward books for their classroom libraries. Bargain book sections are great places to find inexpensive books, as are retail and online bookstores. Often times stores will have reduced prices on books, and teachers can even buy multiple copies of one book for a critical inquiry circle set.

There are also excellent online resources specifically for classroom libraries, like The Reading Resource Project (http://www.lefbooks.org/reading_resource_project/), First Book (<http://www.fbmarketplace.org/>), and Kids Need to Read (http://community.kidsneedtoread.org/?page_id=1916), all of which provide books at greatly reduced prices for classrooms. Teachers can also apply for grants, and they may have a better chance if they team up with other teachers in their district to write a great grant proposal. The Snapdragon Foundation (<http://snapdragonbookfoundation.org/>) awards grants every year, as does the Dollar General Literacy Grant (<https://tinyurl.com/yb2rnzoq>), the Build-a-Bear Foundation (<https://www.buildabear.com/brand-about-giving-foundation.html>) and the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries (<http://www.laurabushfoundation.com/>). Of course, schools must qualify for many of these grants (Deringer, 2017).

Fundraisers like the ones Katie does can help to purchase classroom sets of books as well as single copies for independent reading, and often teachers can enlist the help of parents to run a fundraiser. Teachers do have many options for building classroom libraries and whole-class reading and literature circle sets of books.

When Katie's students want to check books out from her classroom library for independent reading, she has them write down their name, hour, and book title on a clipboard she hangs on her classroom door. She also keeps track of what they are reading by asking students to complete a Reading Log. Each day during silent reading time, this log is passed around and students write down their name, the title of the book they're currently reading, and what page number they're on, a concept she has borrowed from Nancie Atwell's *The Reading Zone* (2007).

A teacher taking a critical inquiry approach could also ask students to include on the Reading Log an issue they are exploring through their independent reading. When students are reading independently but are reading about issues other students are also reading about, there can be some class time devoted to connecting these students in critical inquiry circles for sharing their learning. Some of their discussion can be on sharing about their different books, but most of it can be sharing what they are learning about their issue.

Jenny develops groups on this basis in her classroom. Students in the group will most likely all be reading different books (though sometimes two students are reading the same text), but they will be connected by theme. Even though students are reading different books, rich discussions develop from questions they ask about their chosen issue, and the fact that they are reading different texts on a shared topic means that students bring varied perspectives to the discussion (Sanford, personal interview, 2017).

Critical Reading Journals

At a large racially, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse suburban high school, two English language arts teachers, Betsy Verwys and Sara Pitt (both White females), also utilize the Reading Log concept. Along with the rest of their English staff, Betsy and Sara use Critical

Reading Journals and classroom conferring to promote critical inquiry while reading independently. Betsy teaches 10th grade English and Sara teaches 9th grade. While all English teachers in this district use journals in their classroom, so the students are familiar with them by the time they reach Sara and Betsy's classes, each teacher utilizes the journals in a different way.

Sara uses the journal as a space for students to write down their critical questions and thoughts about their reading, as was the initial intent when the English department decided to establish them. Sara, like several other English teachers in her department, provides the students with a list of prompts for writing in their Critical Reading Journals. The following example is developed from their work:

Prompts for Critical Reading Journal Writing:

Let's Move Past Summary!

Note: As you work on your Critical Reading Journal, you are encouraged to choose 1-2 of these at a time and write for 10 minutes total. Do not write longer; do not write less. Hold you pen to your paper and write, write, write, write. You want to address ONLY 1 or 2 bullet points per 10-minute period. Encourage yourself to expand your answers by giving examples, asking questions, developing hypotheses, making comparisons, drawing connections, etc.

Remember, all Critical Reading Journal Entries should be set up like:

CRJ # _____ Date of Entry _____
Title and Author of Book _____
Prompt _____
Writing:

Prompts:

- Discuss an action in the book. Is this action fair or just? Why or why not?
- How is a character in the book treated unfairly?
- Discuss a major event that just occurred in the section you read. Who has power in this situation and how do we know?

- Compare this book to a whole-class text that we read. Who has power in these stories? How do we know?
- Identify an important issue in the novel and write about it: Why might the author choose it? Where do you see it? Why is it important to you? To society? To the world?
- Choose a quotation you particularly love and expand upon it, demonstrating why it is important.
- How do people make change in the book? Is it always individual, or do characters rely on each other/join together to make a difference?
- How does this book connect to the world? How does it connect to current events?
- Why would the author write a book like this at this time? What social or political events might have prompted the author to write this book?
- Are there social inequalities in the book? How do they make characters feel? How do you feel about them?
- What struggles do the characters encounter? Why are they struggling?
- Who benefits from the situations in your book and who suffers? How might characters make the situation fairer or more just?
- How does the gender of a character impact their action or understanding?
- How does the race of a character impact their action or understanding?
- How does the culture or religion of a character impact their action or understanding?
- What is the author trying to show you about the world?
- How are characters treated unfairly in your book? What characters are working to make their situation fairer?
- Do the characters accept their world or try to change it?
- How might you change an event in your reading for today to make it fairer?
- What other book, TV show, and/or movie connects to your book through an important issue or problem?
- Is there a better solution to the main conflict in this book? If so, what is it? Why is it better?
- Did this book end the “right” way? Why or why not? How might you change the ending?
- What motivates the characters in your book? Who has power? What does that power look like?
- How are teenagers portrayed in this book?
- How do characters treat their environment?
- Is the perspective of characters in your book local or global?
- Quote a specific part of the book you love—why do you love it? What does it make you think about?
- Are there inequalities between characters? If so, describe them. How might the characters work to lessen these inequalities?
- How is the mass media portrayed in this book?
- How did this book challenge your assumptions?
- What is the meaning of the title? Do you think it is a good title? Why or why not?
- Does this book show people working together or against each other, or both? Why do they work together? Why do they work against each other?
- What has happened to hurt a character’s feelings? Why do you think they are hurt by that?

Questions such as these will help students to examine power struggles within the texts they are reading, which can then translate to the society in which they live. Sara asks her students to choose one or two of the questions provided each time they write in their journals and respond to them. Her students respond to their reading every day, as they have 10 minutes at the beginning of the hour each day to read and then 10 minutes to write in their Critical Reading Journals. Sara asks students to choose a different question each time they respond.

While students read independently in Sara's classes, she conducts timed reading sessions throughout the school year, asking students to record how many pages they read in a 10-minute period. They record their reading, and Sara uses this data to calculate how many pages a student would be able to read in a two-hour period. As teachers in Sara's district ask students to read two hours every week, they have an idea of how many pages a student would be able to read in those two hours, and then they evaluate their reading through reading logs the students keep each day. In this log, students write down what book they are reading and what page they are on. Sara can then keep track of how many pages students are reading each week, and the students are still reading at their own pace. This is a nice differentiated approach to assessing independent reading.

While students are reading independently and writing in their journals, Sara quietly calls up students one at a time to confer with them about their reading. During this time, Sara asks students what critical questions they are considering, and they discuss them. Sara may also ask questions to help students think more deeply about issues in the books.

Betsy utilizes her students' Critical Reading Journals for more than just responding to their own reading. She asks students to keep sections in their journals. Among these are: *My Books*, *Book Talks*, and *Critical Reading*. *My Books* is a space for students to list the books they are reading, the authors, and the dates they start reading them. Teachers who collaborate with students to create reading lists surrounding a particular theme or issue could ask students to keep their reading lists in this section.

Book Talks provides space for students to list the books that their teacher and classmates "book talk." A book talk is a presentation in which the reader/speaker discusses the book: sharing the author, characters, setting, and genre; providing a brief summary without giving away too much of the plot; and "hooking" their audience members with something that will make them want to read the book. Students should also share the critical inquiry questions they asked while reading the book and share with their classmates what they learned.

If students are taking part in critical inquiry circles on similar themes in their books, they could even present their book talks together: each one could share the plot, characters, and setting; then together they could teach the class what they have learned about their common issue. In this way, book talks could turn into collaborative teaching presentations. (I discuss book talks and book trailers further in Chapter Five.)

Finally, *Critical Reading* provides a handout with writing prompts like the ones I listed earlier in this section. In Betsy's class, students staple this handout to this section of their journals in order to easily refer to it when writing in their journals. Betsy asks her students to choose one of the prompts that applies to what they have been reading—it doesn't matter which one—and to respond to it in their journals.

By conferring with students and responding to their journal entries, Betsy pushes them to read deeply and to respond critically to their reading. When she feels like they aren't responding critically, she asks them questions to help them think more critically and then asks them to write their responses in their journals and to continue to respond critically in future journal entries. In this way, Betsy is scaffolding critical response to her students' independent reading. Again, if teachers have students meet in critical inquiry circles, then students can push one another to critically respond to their reading. They could even research together in their groups to learn more and share their research with the class.

For example, a student might be reading *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli (2015). This young adult novel tells the story of Simon, a teenager who is forced to come out to his family, friends, and entire student and teacher population at his school as gay when another student "outs" him on social media. By asking students to respond to critical reading prompts while reading this text, a student might consider the question: *How are characters treated unfairly in your book? What characters are working to make their situation fairer?* And the student might write about how it's unfair that Simon had to come out to everyone because of what Martin posted online, and that Simon's friends and family are trying to help him through this situation.

Then, during conferring time, a teacher might ask the student to think further about this line of questioning by asking something like: *Why does Martin have power over Simon before he shares his "secret?" What about our society gives Martin this power?* And the student might consider that we live in a heteronormative society in which Simon has to "come out" over and over to different people in his life. Heterosexual people, of course, do not have to do this—it is expected that they are heterosexual until proven otherwise. The student might inquire into this

imbalance in power, wondering how it could be made fairer. (The film based on this novel—*Love, Simon* (2018)—focuses more on this, and if the student has seen the movie, they could bring it into the written discussion of the topic as well.)

Another option for teachers to take a critical inquiry approach to independent reading is to have all students reading independent books on the same topic, like sexual orientation (texts with no LGBTQ characters might even be included so the class would have counterpoints). Then students would read independently, but could also move into critical inquiry circles to discuss their reading and what they are learning about their topic, developing critical questions together in small groups. Teachers could also use class time to share other texts, such as film, documentary, images, poetry, music, etc. (students, of course, could contribute texts as well) that brings other perspectives to class learning. Large group discussions could focus on questions about sexual orientation, discrimination against LGBTQ people, and working for justice, and students could address the questions from the perspectives of their own reading and learning, sharing with and learning from one another.

Discussion Questions:

Your students have been exploring gender identity through an independent reading unit. They are creating presentations to teach the class about their own inquiry into issues in their books.

- 1) How could they share their learning outside your classroom?
- 2) Where might they publish their projects and/or presentations?

In this way, students have the benefit of reading at their own pace and choosing the texts they would like to read while also enjoying the benefit of small- and large-group discussion and whole-class learning about a meaningful issue.

Assessing Student Reading

All teachers, including critical inquiry teachers, need to assess their students' learning. Assessing student learning from their reading and responding to young adult literature is complex. From a critical inquiry perspective, assessment by multiple-choice standardized tests or by formulaic papers written just for the teacher is narrow and inadequate. In this section I introduce ways to understand assessment that value the diverse skills and understanding of students, that in fact motivate students rather than discouraging them, and that provide students with valuable feedback that can lead to deeper and richer learning.

All teachers, especially critical inquiry teachers, need to know that there is more to assessment than simply assigning letter grades to a final project. In fact, there are two different types of assessment: formative and summative. Formative assessment takes place throughout the unit of study and allows teachers to determine what and how students are learning. This kind of assessment is important to the teacher in order to evolve further instruction for that unit. *Given what I know about what students are learning at this point, what do I need to do next?* If a teacher determines that students are struggling in a particular area—such as identifying discomfort, pain, or suffering that characters are experiencing—then the teacher can choose to take extra time in class to focus on that area, perhaps through teaching about how better to empathize with characters, observe from description or dialogue how characters are feeling, and analyze factors that contribute to their well-being—all of these are important to developing critical inquiry reading of texts.

Some formative assessment is solely for the purpose of gauging student learning in order to determine what and how to teach effectively and should not count toward students' grades.

Examples include asking students for a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” on whether or not they are understanding a concept, or a “fist-to-five” quick assessment, which asks students on a scale of zero (fist) to five (all five fingers) how well they are understanding a concept. Some teachers ask students to close their eyes before holding up their hands so they will give an honest answer and not worry about what other students think. Clearly teachers engaging in critical inquiry instruction should not grade students on their beliefs, but instead provide a variety of perspectives and encourage growth of ideas and mutual understanding.

Formative assessment has a primary goal to foster student engagement. Meaningful learning activities that foster inquiry and understanding are important to include, such as Readers’ Notebooks or journals, questions students bring to class, participation in small groups, and so on. Through reading and responding to students’ writing in their notebooks, teachers can both determine how well students are understanding concepts and recalling information from their reading and plan for mini-lessons to help further exploration and analysis of ideas and issues. Conferring with students also helps teachers to gauge how students are reading, responding, and thinking.

Summative assessment takes place at the end of a unit of study and measures what students have learned throughout that unit, what they are taking away from the unit of study. This kind of assessment is best when it is “authentic.” “Authentic assessment” can be devised by the teacher or in collaboration with students. It calls for writing, presenting, sharing, and taking actions that are in the authentic context of what students are learning—not an “add-on” activity created just “for the teacher.”

Betsy assesses independent reading and whole-class reading together in a combined assessment at the end of each semester. These assessments ask students to write about what they have learned from their whole-class read and then to connect it to one of their independent reading books. She asks them to choose a social issue that connects the two texts in some way, to research into this issue, and then to connect all these pieces in writing, sharing what students are learning. In this way, Betsy is asking her students to think more critically in Bloom's higher-order thinking, to synthesize and connect reading, to evaluate reading, and then to create something new, all while considering questions of ethics and justice.

When the whole class reads a book together, the teacher can assess the class with a common assessment. This assessment could take the form of a test or a written assessment, or it could take a more creative form, such as a project, a presentation, or a combination of these options. With a critical inquiry approach, students may actually collaborate with the teacher to create a test, devising the questions in advance and then studying together to prepare answers.

Other assessments may be more authentic, though. According to Meg Ormiston (2011), authentic assessment asks students to complete projects and tasks that reflect what people are doing in that field in the world outside the classroom (p. 2-3). Thus, these assignments are "real-world" assessments, perhaps written in a genre that one might create in a workplace. Teachers who want to use authentic assessments begin a unit by asking themselves what they want their students to learn. Once they have the assessment, they create the curriculum. In a critical inquiry classroom, though, students are guiding the curriculum as well, asking their own questions that guide their learning. Thus, just as critical inquiry teachers are flexible with curriculum development, they may also be flexible with summative assessment, collaborating with students on assignments and allowing student choice.

For example, teachers could ask students to create a presentation they might give if they were an employee in a business that was damaging or improving the environment; or write a narrative about Black Lives Matter they might publish on social media; or create a podcast in which they interview a character about being discriminated against due to their religion, like a segment on NPR.

Students could demonstrate what they are learning through creating performances for their peers and for a wider audience of parents or the community; writing pieces such as essays, poems, narratives, children's books or letters that reflect student learning and could be published in a class

Discussion Topic or Activity:

Create an authentic assessment for an independent reading unit. Begin with what you want your students to learn. Create the assessment. Then describe how the independent reading unit would prepare students to create the assessment.

book; projects that students write collaboratively on Google docs or another platform (I discuss collaborative writing in detail in Chapter Five); presentations in which students share their learning and even teach others in and outside the classroom about what they have learned; giving book talks or creating book trailers; conducting service learning projects in their communities in which students can write, speak, and advocate for themselves and others; and reflecting on their own learning. (I provide more specific examples of summative assessments in Chapters Three and Five.) Many of these assessments can be effective in whole-class reading, critical inquiry circles, or independent reading.

Combining Reading Approaches

The most effective critical inquiry approaches to teaching young adult literature are likely to draw on all three strategies: whole-class, group, and individual reading. Typically, it makes

sense to begin with some kind of whole-class reading and investigation, but that can quickly evolve into student groups and individual reading. Critical reading is essential in English classrooms, and these three approaches to reading offer excellent methods for engaging students in their reading, responding critically to what they are reading, inquiring further into connected social and cultural issues, and sharing what they are learning through writing, discussing, presenting, and teaching.

In the next chapter, I present an example of a reading from my own teaching that draws on many of the ideas in this chapter: whole-class reading, engaging students through critical inquiry into relevant and important topics, offering student choice in research and assessments, and promoting student advocacy.

CHAPTER III

CRITICAL INQUIRY AND CULTURAL STUDIES: TEACHING HARPER LEE'S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* AND WALTER DEAN MYERS'S *MONSTER*

Teaching young adult literature in an English language arts classroom with a critical inquiry, cultural studies approach means that all areas of English studies teaching are encompassed. Students are not only reading a young adult text, but they are also inquiring into and researching issues that connect to their lives and the world around them. They read multiple genres of text—including informational text—in a comparative, thematic method that engages them, deepening and complicating ideas. Students are also writing in meaningful ways. For example, I asked my students to keep reader-response journals to respond to their readings and to what we were learning. Their writing became a form of inquiry, examining their feelings and personal responses, raising questions, discovering ideas, organizing thoughts, and probing their reactions. Graded for completeness, journals allowed students the freedom to explore thoughts, feelings, and ideas without worrying about making grammar “mistakes.”

While our focus is on young adult literature, I describe teaching young adult literature in a full context of what it means to teach English well. Thus, young adult literature is a vital part of a rich and meaningful curriculum, brought together with other genres, including traditional works, poetry, informational text, film, and documentary. Young adult literature is one piece of engaging students in inquiry, in meaningful research about their own questions. Young adult literature inspires different responses, including writing, multimodal presentation, and empowering students to make a difference in their schools and communities.

When teaching young adult literature with a critical inquiry approach, English teachers will want to be familiar enough with the literature and with their students that they can identify topics and themes that matter. Teachers need to think about and plan around issues relevant to their students, issues that foster critical thinking about society and the wider world.

In this chapter I use *To Kill a Mockingbird* to illustrate this approach. It is one of the most frequently taught texts in secondary schools, and it tells a story of racial injustice in a small town in Alabama in the 1930s. Told from the point of view of a six-year-old girl, the novel won the Pulitzer Prize when it was published in 1960. A critical inquiry approach is effective when teachers have the freedom to select the texts they want to teach, or it can also be an excellent approach when teachers have texts they “must” teach for their curriculum. Critical inquiry and cultural studies can bring fresh, engaging, and relevant perspectives to established and canonical works. As I put together ideas for teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*, four topics emerged as critical inquiry areas to explore: single-parent families, racial discrimination and lynching, poverty, and the criminal justice system.

Single-Parent Families

To begin, I assigned the first several chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* for students to read at home. When they arrived in class, they wrote a free-response journal entry about their reading. Students shared some of what they had written, which led to class discussion of their responses to the beginning of the novel. Several wrote about the characters they were getting to know: Scout, the young narrator; Jem, her brother; Dill, her best friend; and Atticus Finch, her father. One topic that interested students was Atticus’s relationship with his children.

Atticus is a single father, and this created an opening for the first cultural studies issue we inquired into: single-parent families. I then transitioned to viewing three film clips portraying single fathers from *Finding Nemo* (2003), *The Pursuit of Happyness [sic]* (2006), and the 1962 classic black-and-white film adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After each clip, I asked students to write responses and connect the clip to what we had been learning about in class. Next, we returned to the chapters they had read and considered how what we were learning about single fathers connected.

While each film clip presented an interaction between single father and child, the clip that struck my students the most was from *The Pursuit of Happyness [sic]*. In the clip, father and son have been evicted and have been staying at a local shelter each night. This night they are too late to get into the shelter—it is full when they arrive at the front of the line, and the volunteers have to turn people away. Having nowhere else to go, father and son end up spending the night in the subway bathroom, sleeping on the floor.

Though most of the students in the classes I discuss in this chapter come from White, middle-class, two-parent families, the classes also included one student who identified as Black, one who identified as Hispanic, and a few students who lived with single parents or were members of blended families. During our discussion, Jenna, who lived with her widowed mother, said, “I feel bad for all single parents trying to raise children and make a living at the same time. That can be a lot of stress and really hard trying to balance both jobs alone. You don’t have anyone to help when you need it.”

Faith, whose mother had recently remarried after being a single mom for several years, said she thought the film clips showed “the real struggle actual families go through every day.”

Other students were struck by how difficult it would be to focus on school when one's basic needs, such as shelter or food, are not met.

While Atticus is a single father and this undoubtedly poses problems for him, his social class and educational and professional background certainly contribute to his ability to care for his family. Atticus has an African American maid, Calpurnia, an important character in the novel, who helps him with his children and with household duties, as one student pointed out in class discussion. This prompted a discussion about socioeconomic class in which we noted that single parents who have the means to hire help are in a different position than those who do not.

When teaching young adult literature, pairing film clips with reading can be an effective way to engage students, raise issues, and foster inquiry. Repeated viewing and discussion of short clips can foster students' skills in analysis. Students are likely to more readily examine films than literature, but analysis of film can lead to reading more critically (Muller, 2006; Simmons, 2011). The clips don't always have to be of film versions of the novel; thematically related clips can extend analysis to issues beyond how the movie was different from the written text. Teachers of young adult literature can find many ways to incorporate film, images, and other media into their instruction. (I share more about this in Chapter Five.)

As the students were asking questions about children living in single-parent homes, we decided to research into this topic. Many students found that these children are living under the poverty line—an issue we discuss later in this unit. When my students were exposed to situations some children experience, they began to realize just how difficult some children's lives can be and how many turn to outside influences because their single parent is working hard to provide for the family.

One student, through a simple Google search, found a *New York Times* article that states that 53% of children born to women under 30 years of age are born outside of marriage and that researchers “have consistently found that children born outside marriage face elevated risks of falling into poverty, failing in school or suffering emotional and behavioral problems” (DeParle & Tavernise, 2012, p. 1). Our class

discussions of the single-parent situation in *To Kill a Mockingbird* moved toward an examination of the realities of single parenting in the United States today, particularly

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What other resources might you use to explore poverty in the United States? In the world?
- 2) A student comes to you after class upset about some research they have found on single-parent families because her parents have recently divorced. How do you respond?

single mothers and the difficulties they face on their own. Many of these women live in poverty, working hard for their families and struggling to be both parents to their children.

While Atticus’s racial, educational, professional, and socioeconomic status differ from the people whose lives we were researching into, *To Kill a Mockingbird* opened the door to learning more about single-parent families. This theme matters to students, and there are many young adult texts that focus on the issue more pointedly.

The Impossible Knife of Memory by Laurie Halse Anderson (2014) tells the story of Hayley Kincaid and her single father, Andy, who have finally settled down in Andy’s home town after moving several times over the past five years since Andy returned home from Iraq. Andy’s struggles with PTSD and drugs add another dimension to this story of a daughter and her single father longing for “normality.”

Fangirl by Rainbow Rowell (2013) is a story of Cath, a girl who turned to the Simon Snow series—and writing fanfiction about Simon Snow—when her mother left her and her sister with her father. When she leaves for college, she is on her own for the first time—without her sister—and she doesn’t want to let go of Simon Snow, or think about how lonely her father must be at home without her.

Angela Johnson’s *The First Part Last* (2003), brings a different perspective to single parenting, as the protagonist, 16-year-old Bobby, discovers he is going to be a father. He and his girlfriend, Nia, struggle to decide what the “right thing” is to do for their baby, but when complications occur during birth and Nia suffers irreversible brain damage, Bobby takes his daughter home, determined to raise her as a single father. Johnson’s novel provides insight into the male side of teen pregnancy.

Other young adult titles that address the issue of single parenting are: *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia (2010), *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* by A.S. King (2010), *Nothing Like You* by Lauren Strasnick (2009), *Slam* by Nick Hornby (2007), *Tyrell* by Coe Booth (2006), *The Boy in the Black Suit* by Jason Reynolds (2015), and the *Alice* series by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (2002).

This chapter illustrates critical inquiry approaches in action in my classroom. I took an entire quarter to teach this unit because, as this chapter demonstrates, my classes went into depth exploring important topics through reading, discussion, research, writing, and presenting. Teachers could shorten or extend a unit like this to fit their teaching schedules. For this unit, I was teaching two sections of 10th grade students at a predominately white yet economically diverse high school. Some of my students came from affluent families while others were

struggling to pay rent and thus had to move often. I wanted my relatively privileged students to become better readers, but also to become more socially, historically, and culturally aware—a goal I view as vital in teaching any literature, including young adult literature.

In the previous chapter, I described three different approaches, where the whole class reads the same book, the class is divided into literature circles with groups reading different texts, and independent reading where every student reads on their own. As you can see from this first issue of single-parent families, all the students in my class were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a whole-class read along with a number of informational and visual texts, adding depth to student inquiry.

When I taught these texts there were frequently race-related issues in the news. And as I write this chapter, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is in the national news for once again being banned, this time by a school in Biloxi, Mississippi. Teaching in the United States, you will have racial and political tension, so such themes are likely to remain relevant.

Allen Webb (Carey-Webb, 2001) maintains that a cultural studies approach fosters “engaging thematic curriculums where culture, social structures, and historical circumstances are explored side by side with a particular emphasis on how those issues touch real people in the present day” (p. 8). He describes this approach as relevant to classic and contemporary literature, and inclusive of informational texts, films, speakers, research, etc. that enable the students to fully explore the important issues or themes they examine. Students should learn about history, current events, and cultural practices in their own nation, around the world, and in their personal lives. They should be encouraged to ask questions drawing on their own interests, concerns, and passions as they come to form their own opinions and beliefs. Given the real-

world dimension of cultural studies, students may begin to ask what they can do to make a difference in their homes, their communities, and their world. The rest of this chapter shares other examples of thematic teaching and offers opportunities for students to take action.

Racial Discrimination and Lynching

As we continued to read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the issue of race quickly became apparent. Teaching about racial inequality in the U. S. should confront the reality of racial discrimination in our nation's past and in the present. Thus, we also took a close historical look at the issues of discrimination, unequal treatment, and the perversion of justice. In particular, we focused the second portion of this unit on lynch mob violence, a powerful way that African Americans were intimidated and white supremacy enforced.

It is important to note that teaching about race relations with a novel like *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be problematic because it is written by a White author and told from the point of view of a White protagonist. This could be said of many texts commonly taught in secondary schools (such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*). This makes it all the more important to use cultural studies, critical inquiry approaches that bring in other materials with other perspectives.

When my students arrived to our next class, I asked them to write in their journals about questions they had been asking about racial relations as they had been reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Several students wondered about Calpurnia and her relationship with the family. One wondered why Cal cared so much about how the children looked when she took them to church with her. Another asked why a White family might have a "Black maid" working for them if there was so much segregation during this time. I then showed a clip from the important PBS miniseries *Eyes on the Prize* about the history of the Civil Rights Movement which tells the

story of Emmett Till—a young man close in age to my students.

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoaKysHwLI8>]

Till, a 14-year-old African American from Chicago, went to visit family in Mississippi in 1955 and was brutally beaten and lynched for either whistling or saying, “Bye, baby” to a White woman (accounts differ). That night the woman’s husband and another man took Till from his uncle’s home, beat him, gouged out his eye, shot him, tied a cotton gin fan to his neck, and threw him into a river. His body was found days later.

When the video showed Emmett’s brutally disfigured teenage body in the open casket, several students had to look away. Immediately after the video, I asked students to write a response in their journals. We then discussed how this event contributed to the civil rights movement. Afterward, I read aloud *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, a heroic crown sonnet written by Marilyn Nelson (2005). After my reading, several students expressed their appreciation of the poetry and their amazement at Nelson’s skill at including such difficult material in a poem.

With a cultural studies, inquiry approach to teaching, bringing “texts” such as documentary clips, poetry, literary works, movies, informational text, music, and images to the inquiry provides opportunity for students to consider issues from multiple perspectives. Some students connect through literature and reading. Others connect through historical accounts and reporting; through art, photography, or poetry; through music; or even through statistics. By addressing issues through multiple genres and perspectives, all students are more likely to become engaged and develop more detailed, nuanced understandings. Young adult literature, which engages the imagination and facilitates the understanding of others in rich social context, is likely to be central to thematic curriculum.

A thematic approach enriches the understanding of all of the texts under consideration. Because we had read, watched film clips, and discussed material about Emmett Till's story, the complex poem *A Wreath for Emmett Till* was not intimidating to students. They were able to make connections and delve deeper. Students who are comfortable with film clips or young adult literature can be intimidated by poetry. When the poetry is part of thinking deeply about an issue that matters to students, they can overcome that anxiety and make connections.

When I introduced historical artifacts and informational text to my students, rather than groaning about reading informational text—and because the text was connected to the issue we had been learning about—students were actually eager to read and discuss it.

Our class examined the website *Without Sanctuary* put together by James Allen (which is no longer available online, but Allen did publish the book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* in 2000) of nearly 80 postcards and photographs taken as souvenirs of lynching. This website exposed the horrors of lynching, and it is sobering, to say the least, to see in the photographs white people of all ages—including teenagers apparently on a date, or young

children holding ice cream cones—watching terrible things being done to other human beings. Clearly the White people pictured viewed people of color as less than human.

My students were appalled. Stacy said, “How could anyone mail that to a relative and say, ‘Look what I did this weekend!’?” Tanya looked away, disgusted, when the images appeared on the screen, and many other faces formed looks of revulsion. One of the postcards shows two beaten and broken bodies of Black men hanging from a tree. Underneath, a large crowd of white people pose for the photograph, some pointing, others holding hand and smiling. This photo can be viewed here:

<https://www.gettyimages.com/event/the-american-souths-troubling-history-of-racism-560585453>

(In Focus).

Immediately after viewing the postcards of lynching, the students wrote a freewrite in their journals about what they had just seen and heard. For several students, it was a jarring experience, as

Without Sanctuary

The following account of this lynching image is taken from James Cameron’s book *A Time of Terror* (2016):

“Thousands of Indianans carrying picks, bats, ax handles, crowbars, torches, and firearms attacked the Grant County Courthouse, determined to ‘get those goddamn Niggers.’ A barrage of rocks shattered the jailhouse windows, sending dozens of frantic inmates in search of cover. A sixteen-year-old boy, James Cameron, one of the three intended victims, paralyzed by fear and incomprehension, recognized familiar faces in the crowd—schoolmates, and customers whose lawns he had mowed and whose shoes he had polished—as they tried to break down the jailhouse door with sledgehammers. Many police officers milled outside with the crowd, joking. Inside, fifty guards with guns waited downstairs.

The door was ripped from the wall, and a mob of fifty men beat Thomas Shipp senseless and dragged him into the street. The waiting crowd ‘came to life.’ It seemed to Cameron that ‘all of those ten to fifteen thousand people were trying to hit him all at once.’ The dead Shipp was dragged with a rope up to the window bars of the second victim, Abram Smith. For twenty minutes, citizens pushed and shoved for a closer look at the ‘dead nigger.’ By the time Abe Smith was hauled out he was equally mutilated. ‘Those who were not close enough to hit him threw rocks and bricks. Somebody rammed a crowbar through his chest several times in great satisfaction.’ Smith was dead by the time the mob dragged him ‘like a horse’ to the courthouse and hung him from a tree. The lynchers posed for photos under the limb that held the bodies of the two dead men.”

Cameron attributes his escape to the Virgin Mary, and “he has committed his life to retelling the horrors of his experience and ‘the Black Holocaust.’”

Jenna expressed: “Our world is so messed up! I don’t know why God lets things like this happen.” Hope said, “Who could possibly have that much hatred in their heart, killing human beings like that! The postcards made me angry, terrified, and heartbroken.” Some even identified with the people who had committed these crimes simply because they are also white Americans, as Jamie’s use of the word “us” illustrates: “It just makes me sick to my stomach thinking about what they did. I mean what possessed us to think these things. God didn’t make us to be killers.”

Clearly the classroom activities made these situations real for students. As Webb (2001) notes in *Literature and Lives*: “Cultural studies allows us to examine issues in the lives of our students and connect them with questions as deep as that of their own identity. Taken together, cultural studies and reader response approaches help students examine, understand, and creatively speak back to the social categories, images, and roles that tell us who we are” (p. 26).

If teachers aren’t comfortable with showing lynching images, there are other options. Some teachers choose not to show horrific images of slavery and lynching because Black people should not have to look at images like these if they don’t want to, and sometimes White people can brush over similar images or even fetishize the Black body in agony. Alternatives might be to show images of White people holding racist signs or images of White people in the audience of a lynching. Many of these images can be just as effective and put the burden on the White reader to understand how their subject position is often erased or softened in historical accounts.

As they read further in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, my students wrote in their journals as a way to “speak back,” as Webb describes. One entry asked them to list everything they know about the Civil Rights Movement. Some asked students to continue to ask and explore their own

questions about what they have been learning. Others asked questions about the novel, specifically the scene in which Atticus and Scout prevent the mob from lynching Tom Robinson. From their responses, I gathered that because we had taken the time during class to look at what has happened to people in history, the students better understood the gravity of Robinson's situation in the novel. They realized, too, that Atticus and even the children are in danger.

One of Dan's journal entries exemplifies this: "Atticus was in great danger when he decided to protect Tom Robinson from the mob, and Scout and Jem also put themselves in danger when they ran to Atticus. If Scout hadn't spoken to Mr. Cunningham, there might have been some killings that night." Dan also recognized the nature of a mob: "When a mob comes together, they are angry about one thing, and everything else is forgotten." Because I taught this unit with a critical inquiry, cultural studies approach, students were more deeply understanding the characters, actions, and setting of the novel.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What other materials about race relations might you include in a unit like this? Why?
- 2) Your large-group discussion on race gets heated when someone shares a sentiment another student views as racist. How do you respond?

As I write this in 2018, I find myself thinking of the Black Lives Matter movement. With lynching as portrayed in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or in the material we were examining, White mobs took the law into their own hands, often with the covert or even direct help of law enforcement officials. Today law enforcement officers are again and again filmed on cell phone cameras harassing, even killing African Americans. If I were teaching this unit now, we would definitely explore the connections.

A thematic approach to teaching can prompt interesting and meaningful student writing. Students chose an issue we had examined in our reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They explored the issue further through research, in order to create both a written piece and a presentation piece to share findings with the class. I allowed my students to choose the genres for both their written and presentation pieces—as long as those two genres connected in some way.

For example, for his final research project, Jesse chose to write a traditional research paper on the history of lynching in the United States. When he shared his research with the class, he described lynching, including shocking statistics, and then pointed out that the novel shows Tom Robinson treated better than most African Americans in his situation. Jesse wrote in his PowerPoint: “Tom was given due process of law. He survived his time in jail and was given a trial. This was uncommon during this time period.” He explained that even though Tom’s trial is unfair, it is rare for a Black man in his position to ever make it that far in the court proceedings. Most are lynched long before. “Tom’s story,” Jesse said, “occurred toward the end of the ‘lynching era;’ this was evident throughout his trial. He was given a well-respected lawyer to make his case. The jury took a long time to decide his fate.”

Robert also focused on the lynching issue, writing a narrative piece from the perspective of a young girl who witnesses her neighbor—a White man—being beaten and lynched for aiding a Black man. Robert thus takes an issue we have studied in class a step further: addressing the lynching of White people who would attempt to provide help for a person of color. For his presentation, Robert created a movie trailer based on his narrative, enlisted the help of his family and friends as actors, and edited it on iMovie. He also posted it on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4PAG15y5rs).

Both of these projects included careful research and are capably composed in the chosen genre. These students had freedom to choose their focus, to ask questions that mattered to them, and to choose the genre in which they would disseminate their research. As a result, they invested time and energy in creatively and effectively presenting what they learned. Many thematic associations are possible. In future projects, I might encourage students to explore connections to the death penalty, the importance of due process, and criminalization of youth.

While *To Kill a Mockingbird* allowed our classes to examine these issues, there are many other young adult texts that focus on racial discrimination and lynching. *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (2015) tells the story of sixteen-year-old Rashad, who goes to a corner bodega to buy a bag of chips and is mistaken as a shoplifter by a police officer. When Rashad tries to explain that he wasn't stealing, the officer assumes he is being belligerent, and when Rashad doesn't want to leave the bodega, the officer assumes he is resisting arrest and beats him, terribly. The officer, Paul, is the guardian of Quinn, one of Rashad's classmates and basketball teammates, who witnesses the incident, and everything was caught on surveillance tape as well. Told from the alternating perspectives of Rashad and Quinn, this novel grapples with issues of race taken right from recent news headlines.

If I Ever Get Out of Here by Eric Gansworth (2013) is set in 1975 and tells the story of Lewis "Shoe" Blake, a boy growing up on the Tuscarora Reservation. George Haddonfield's family has recently moved to town with the Air Force, and Lewis and George—bonding through shared taste in music—become fast friends. Lewis also has an enemy, though: Evan singles out Lewis to bully relentlessly. While he struggles with Evan, Lewis also worries: will George still want to be his friend if he discovers how poverty-stricken his family is?

Told from the point of view of eleven-year-old Roger, *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* by G. Neri (2010) tells of Roger's search for answers about who his tough, but also sweet, friend Yummy was and why he ended up dead. This graphic novel describes youth gang life surrounding the incident in 1994 Chicago when a young girl was hit by a stray bullet and killed. Neri and illustrator Randy Duburke offer insight into Yummy's life, leaving the reader questioning definitions of "good" and "evil."

Other young adult texts examining racial and cultural issues are: *AhGottaHandleOnIt* by Donovan Mixon (2017), *American Street* by Ibi Zoboi (2017), *Does My Head Look Big in This?* By Randa Abdel-Fattah (2005), *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds (2017), and *The Walls Around Us* by Nova Ren Suma (2015).

Poverty

While my class discussed poverty when exploring the issue of single-parent homes, we examined this issue more in depth as we continued our reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. To transition to a new issue, I first asked students to write in their journals what they think of when they hear the word *poor*. Their responses varied from people being irresponsible with their money to people begging for "spare change" on street corners with "old, rusty cups." Clearly students held stereotypes that we could examine.

Because we had been exploring race and would continue to explore it throughout our study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I thought we might look at some of the racial dimensions of poverty in America. First, we focused on impoverished White America. I showed students a large poster of the famous photograph "Migrant Mother, 1936" taken by Dorothea Lange, a picture of a woman holding one of her seven children while two others lay their heads on each of

her shoulders. This photograph was taken during the Great Depression, the time period of the novel. I asked my students to focus on this photograph and freewrite for ten minutes. Their responses were interesting.

Hope wrote: "I wonder if the kids have a father / the woman has a husband. Their clothes look very worn. They look poor, and the mother looks worried. The mother looks like she's had a tough life." Liza wrote more scattered thoughts: "Sad, dirt, poor, tired, frustrated, hard working mother, looking for relief, at wits end, the picture makes me have pity on this family."

After writing, we discussed their responses and then read an article about "Hooverilles," as Depression-era Shantytowns were called after the name of the "do-nothing" president, Herbert Hoover. Students were interested in what life was like for many people during the Great Depression.

The next day, we listened to the song "Coal Miner's Daughter," an autobiographical country music song released by Loretta Lynn in 1969. The song depicts growing up in rural Kentucky and life on a coal miner's salary. Once again I asked them to freewrite as they concentrated on the words. Students shared what they had written. Many students were struck by how proud Lynn was of her modest beginnings and how thankful the family was for the "little things" in life, like a new pair of shoes after not having any all summer long. They also noted how hard the father and mother both worked. Catey wondered aloud how anyone could function, working all night as a coal miner and all day as a farmer.

As we transitioned to a close examination of the relationship between poverty and race, students became more aware of the effects extreme poverty can have on families and individuals.

We read an article in *Yes! Magazine* (2011) in which Michelle Alexander writes that at the height of the Civil Rights Movement:

Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders made clear that they viewed the eradication of economic inequality as the next front in movement building—a Poor People’s Movement was required. Genuine equality for black people, King reasoned, demanded a radical restructuring of society, one that would address the needs of black and white poor throughout the country.

While people usually think of King as focused on racial questions; in fact, he recognized that poverty was an issue for both Black and White people in the United States and that only when this issue was addressed could the move toward racial equality be effective.

After thinking about depictions of poverty, students were better equipped to look at poverty in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. When we discussed poverty, I asked them to think about similarities and differences between the Ewells and Cunninghams, poor White families depicted in the novel. Students shared details from the text that informed them how poor the two families are:

Catey: The Cunninghams were poor because they couldn’t pay Atticus except with things like chestnuts.

Alyson: Yeah, and Walter never had lunch to eat.

Dan: But the Cunninghams would never take something they couldn’t pay back somehow, while Bob Ewell would drink away any money they got.

Carissa: Mayella had to take care of the kids and the house. Her dad was just a drunk and beat them.

Catey: But Mr. Cunningham was respectable and paid back his debts the best he could.

While their focus was on the character of the two men, when I suggested that Mr. Cunningham's work ethic does not seem to bring him out of poverty, they were struck by this concept. No matter how hard he works, he does not appear to get ahead. Catey noted the parallel between him and Loretta Lynn's father who worked so hard yet was never able to bring his family up out of poverty. We then took some time to discuss how this is evident today, with restaurant servers and other low-paying jobs. In 2010, 15.1% of all people in the United States lived in poverty (How does, 2012). Many of these people work hard at their jobs and still cannot rise above the poverty level.

Poor White families, referred to in the novel as "white trash," struggle for dignity in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. When Scout first goes to school, she has to explain to her teacher that she is "shaming" one of her students by giving him money for lunch. Accepting charity from someone like his teacher would be shameful for Walter Cunningham, as he knew he wouldn't be able to pay her back. While the children who have grown up in this town understand this, their middle class teacher who has recently moved to their small town does not. And while students seem to respect Walter, the Ewell family is viewed with scorn. Bob Ewell is an alcoholic, and his children are forced to provide their own food (or go without).

The issue of discrimination against "white trash" is in the background of the novel; bringing it to the forefront adds richness to our reading of the text. When we compared the

Ewell and Cunningham families with the Robinson family, however, an important point arose: racial discrimination puts the Robinson family in an even worse predicament. Race and class are sometimes difficult to separate. Later in our unit when students research incarceration rates, they are often cited together as causes, along with low education (Braman, 2007; Western & Pettit, 2010; Wildeman & Western, 2010).

When Robert pointed out in class that “the Ewells just went [to school] the first day every year and then didn’t go back,” it opened the door for us to discuss the importance of education, and how the lack of it can perpetuate poverty. Students discussed how Tom Robinson is accused and imprisoned due to his poverty and his race. Their discussion then moved to current times in which poverty can also force people to drop out of school and work in order to survive and to help support their families. One student pointed out the rising cost of college and how it drives many of those who are able to graduate from high school directly into the workforce at low-paying jobs. Thus begins a vicious cycle in which poverty causes lack of education, which can then perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

Hope chose the issue of poverty for her final project. She wrote a poem on impoverished White America, weaving in information about children being forced to quit school to work in a factory or another job to earn money for their families, or children being forced to go without much needed medical care because their families simply could not afford it. The PowerPoint she created presents her poem on a background of Depression-era photographs set to music, and she also posted her presentation on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3euOVmtjik).

There are many other young adult texts that present the issue of poverty or wealth inequality that can be jumping-off points or anchor texts for teaching with a critical inquiry

approach. If this is an issue you would like to explore further with your students, here are some young adult texts that present poverty/wealth inequality.

Make Lemonade by Virginia Euwer Wolff (1993) is written in free verse and tells the story of fourteen-year-old LaVaughn, who lives in the projects but is determined to go to college. But she needs money for tuition, and thus takes a babysitting job with Jolly, a young single mother of two. The two form a lasting bond as LaVaughn fights the odds to become the first in her family to graduate from college.

Trash by Andy Mulligan (2010) describes the “dumpsite boys”—Raphael, Gordo, and Rat—who live on the streets of an unnamed third-world city and scrounge through garbage every day to find food or anything they can sell. One day Raphael discovers something he immediately knows is special, though he doesn’t know what it is. Even when authorities offer a reward for it, he decides to keep it, a decision that soon has the three of them on the run from powerful people, searching for answers that could right a terrible wrong.

Tyrell by Coe Booth (2006) tells the story of Tyrell, a Black teenager whose father is in prison and who is currently living in a homeless shelter with his mother and little brother. While his girlfriend tells him she loves him, he doesn’t feel good enough for her. An opportunity arises for him to “score” some money, and Tyrell has to decide if the gain is worth the possible consequences: ending up just like his father.

Other young adult books that portray poverty or wealth inequality are: *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell (2012), *Now Is the Time for Running* by Michael Williams (2011), *Becoming Chloe* by Catherine Ryan Hyde (2006), *Feed* by M.T. Anderson (2002), *Lyddie* by

Katherine Paterson (1991), *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* by Meg Medina (2013), and *Homecoming* by Cynthia Voigt (1981).

The Criminal Justice System

After finishing our reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and while reading Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*, we began to address the issue of our nation's criminal justice system. "Pairing" texts with common themes—such as a classic work from the literary canon and a newer young adult novel—is an effective means to develop meaningful, high expectation curriculum (Kaywell, 2000; Jago, 2000; Herz & Gallo, 2005). With a critical inquiry approach, an entire semester or even a year could develop thematically through pairings of classic and young adult literature, informational text, film, photographs, documentaries, music, etc. Pairing Myers's *Monster* with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, along with the other texts included in this unit, created a rich study for my students and me.

The young adult novel *Monster* is written in the form of a screenplay, interspersed with journal entries. It centers on Steve Harmon, who has been accused of being the lookout in a robbery/murder. Harmon is a teenage, male African American imprisoned and now on trial for murder. One witness places Steve at the scene of the crime before the crime takes place. The insubstantial evidence leads the reader to wonder if the charges against Harmon might be racially motivated.

By the end of the novel we know that Steve is a generally good kid: he loves his family, does well in school, and has never been in trouble before. No one other than a gang leader can place him at the scene, and even he says that Steve did not do anything when he walked out of the store. Yet Steve's lawyer appears to be afraid of him after he is found not guilty. Why?

Other lingering questions are: What if this were not such a clean-cut kid? What if the person on trial had a record, or was a gang member, or had dropped out of school in ninth grade? If the evidence were the same, might that young man—if he were African American—receive fair treatment?

As we examined the important trial scenes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we were also reading through *Monster* and making comparisons and contrasts between historical Jim Crowe laws and the Civil Rights Movement to contemporary issues of race and criminal justice, including looking at discrepancies in imprisonment rates by race. Returning to the story of 14-year-old Emmet Till, we looked not at what happened to Till, but rather what happened to the White men accused of his murder. I showed students a clip from *Eyes on the Prize* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8QXNyCvDP4>) that presents the trial and acquittal of the alleged murderers of Emmett Till and their subsequent confessions.

We then read a synopsis of the events leading up to the “Mississippi Burning” case and the trial of the alleged murderers of three civil rights activists. I asked students to research into incarceration rates in the United States today. As they did so, it was clear to them that discrimination is still prevalent. According to the Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics, Black, non-Hispanic males have an imprisonment rate of 3,059 per 100,000. Black males in the United States ages 30-34 make up 7.3% of the population in state or federal prisons (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011, p. 7)

A discussion of our nation’s system of trial by an impartial jury and how it functioned ensued. I could see that my students’ sense of justice was bruised. They expressed anger at White male jurors who knew what was right and yet ruled otherwise. Our discussion

transitioned smoothly to the court scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Students brought up Tom Robinson's obvious innocence (he could not use his left arm and therefore could not have been the one to have hit Mayella), Mayella's motivation for lying and stating that Tom did attempt to rape her, Bob Ewell's despicable character (as he was the one who had most likely beaten Mayella when he found her with Tom), and Jem's response to the verdict. Many of my students shared that they had responded as Jem does: with anger and frustration, even tears.

As we read these novels and learned about our system of injustice, I also believed it was important for my students to know that there were many African Americans standing up for their rights and demanding equal treatment, and that there were also courageous White people who supported and joined with them. These people provide important role models. When I taught *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we also examined the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, including portions of Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous essay "Letter from Birmingham Jail." This essay, paired with the "No Easy Walk" portion of the PBS video series *Eyes on the Prize*, offers a view into how Black people, including school children in Montgomery, Alabama, were able to turn the willingness of society to imprison them against the system of racialized imprisonment itself.

When I began this unit, an African American mother asked to meet with me outside of school. She had some concern about her daughter reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* because of the multiple instances that it uses the word "nigger." When I spoke with her, I told her that as a White woman, I couldn't understand the complexities of what that word means to her and to her daughter. I gave her the option of reading an alternate text, but I also explained to her my approach to teaching this text and what we would be studying

Discuss: What other options might you present to a concerned parent like the one who approached me?

while reading it. Once she was aware of my approach, she and her daughter decided that she would read it for our class—in fact, they decided to read the text together and discuss it at home as well.

Classic and even contemporary texts sometimes include racist terms, even racist ideologies. I recognize that, as a White person, I may not be able to fully understand the impact of “nigger,” yet, I believe it is important that I listen and learn from others how it makes them feel. This is a sensitive issue for teachers, and merits our attention. Scholars have discussed race ideology in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and many other texts, such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, etc. *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s Tom Robinson has been described as “a symbol of the ‘Black race,’ [and identified] with a mockingbird, a defenseless victim, thereby reinforcing problematic racial ideologies about White heroes and Black victims” (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 419). While some teachers choose not to teach texts like *To Kill a Mockingbird* for these (and related) reasons, these texts do provide opportunity to critically examine dominant ideologies such as institutional racism (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone, 2014; Borsheim-Black, 2015).

In this unit students were engaging with literature, informational text, and statistics. They were invited to ask questions and look into issues that were important to them and to our society. They were writing about what they were learning in personal journal entries, taking their own research notes, composing final papers and projects, and, ultimately, they were teaching their peers about their findings. Bringing together *Monster* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*—shuttling back and forth between scenes in the novels and student inquiry into historical context and the same issues in the present day—held high expectations for student learning and made our study meaningful.

Through a critical inquiry approach, and with young adult literature as a starting point, English language arts students participated in a wide range of reading, writing, and speaking activities. The literature drew on their imaginations and invited them to empathize and better understand the experiences of others. Students were thinking more deeply about the world around them and their places in it. They wanted to contribute their responses to what they had read and learned. As a result, our classroom was an exciting place to be.

Class Activity:

Your building administrator observes your teaching and asks about your approach and why you are using it in class. Write her an email in which you give a rationale for teaching with a critical inquiry, cultural studies approach.

If teachers are interested in teaching about America's criminal justice system, there are many young adult texts that address issues and raise questions about this system. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017) is a novel about Starr Carter, a sixteen-year-old girl who lives in a poor, predominately Black neighborhood but attends a predominately White preparatory school. One night she is riding home with her childhood friend Khalil when he is pulled over and then shot and killed by a White police officer. Khalil was unarmed. His death sparks protests, and Starr is torn between telling the truth of what happened that night and protecting herself, her family, and her community from upheaval.

No Choirboy is a nonfiction text written by Susan Kuklin (2008) who has explored the youth criminal justice system and tells the stories of death row inmates—sentenced to death as teenagers—in their own voices. This raw, somewhat explicit book shares inmates' feelings about prison and how they landed there, inequities in the U.S. criminal justice system, and capital punishment in America.

Allegedly by Tiffany D. Jackson (2017) tells the story of Mary, a girl who was tried and convicted at nine years old of killing the baby she and her mother were babysitting. Yet Mary never confessed. Having survived six years in juvenile detention, she is now attempting to navigate life in a group home. Pregnant and worrying about the state taking her baby, Mary has to think of herself, Ted (her boyfriend), and her baby, and is finally ready to set the record straight.

Other texts that discuss our criminal justice system are *I am Alphonso Jones* written by Tony Medina and illustrated by Stacey Robinson and John Jennings (2017) and *How It Went Down* by Kekla Magoon (2014).

Choosing Texts to Teach

While I chose *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Monster* as the main texts for this unit, of course, there are so many books English language arts teachers might choose from. With a critical inquiry approach, teachers would want to make sure that the texts they choose address issues important to their students and relevant to society. Some teachers' choices are limited due to budget constraints, and they have to choose from the books provided by their district (I write about ways teachers can build classroom libraries and text sets in Chapter Two). Other teachers are pressured by their department to teach certain texts, whether due to common assessments or to common units of study.

For example, Katina McKibbin recently moved from a high school in a different district to the suburban middle school where she currently teaches. When she arrived, she was informed that both she and the other 8th grade English teacher must teach the same units, and that they have common planning time to encourage them to plan these units together.

Usually teachers have more freedom than they think when choosing a text to teach. Even if there is a common assessment, often skills and proficiency measured by that assessment can be reached with different texts. While this district encouraged their teachers to teach the same texts, Katina found that she had some freedom—even with common assessments—in choosing texts that addressed similar issues to the ones the other teacher was planning to teach. Even if teachers find themselves strongly encouraged to teach a specific text, they probably still have some freedom in *how* they teach it. When Katina and her colleague decided to teach the same text, Katina was able to teach her students with a critical inquiry approach, allowing students the freedom to pursue their own questions for the common writing assessment at the end of the unit. (I discuss teacher freedom in more depth in Chapter Two.)

Moving from Awareness to Advocacy

While I felt this was a successfully taught unit, I was left afterward with a lingering question: What are we going to do with this information? My students were made aware of serious issues, but awareness is not enough. If I am able to teach a unit like this again, and if others were to teach similar units, I would want us all to move beyond awareness to advocacy. We need to have conversations about what we will do with this information after we have learned it. How will students apply it? These types of questions could be worked into writing assignments.

For example, students could take the research they are finding and apply it to an assignment in which they educate others about what they are learning. They could research groups who are addressing the issues and invite speakers to come to class, which may lead to joining and supporting a group. Or they could write to members of Congress about issues they're exploring, sharing their research and taking a stand for what they believe in. Students can even research political candidates, learning what their views are on important issues, and then make cases for which candidates to support. These assignments could result in student-led advocacy groups, in which students create their own groups around ways to advocate for themselves and/or others, and then work in their communities in ways they develop themselves.

Class Activity:

Choose a young adult text you are familiar with that presents important topics you would like to focus your teaching on and create a list of classic texts, informational texts, films, documentaries, poems, comics, music, etc. that might connect with that topic. Brainstorm some ideas for inquiry that your future students may have.

When teaching with a critical inquiry, cultural studies approach, students can take ownership of their education in powerful ways, resulting in awareness, sharing newfound knowledge, and advocacy.

CHAPTER IV

CRITICAL YOUTH STUDIES AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

I wrote “16 years old” on the board and asked my students what that age makes them think of. They called out: “puberty,” “driver’s license,” “high school,” “angst,” “edgy,” “part-time job,” “getting ready to graduate,” “going to the mall,” “awkward,” “weird phrases,” “depression,” “young and reckless,” “resenting authority,” “rebellious,” “insecure,” “dating,” “parties,” “stupidity,” “drug experimentation,” “drinking,” “marijuana,” “curfew....”

After we talked (and laughed) through some of these ideas, I asked the same students to imagine what “16 years old” might look like in a Third-World country. They responded: “walking to get water,” “working for food for your family,” “being a mother or father,” “collecting trash to sell,” “caring for younger siblings,” “cooking....” I then asked what “16 years old” might have looked like in the U.S. in 1850. They said, “responsible,” “working on the farm,” “working in a factory,” “working for your family,” “caring for siblings,” “apprenticing for a trade,” “getting married....” Even if their associations about other countries or time periods were not richly informed, the activity quickly illustrated that they perceived 16-year-olds diversely, and that their perceptions were influenced by their presumptions about socioeconomic conditions, history, and likely race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and so on.

This simple experiment illustrates that the way we understand a category like “16-year-old” is “culturally constructed” (Lesko, 2001). The awareness of the “constructedness” of any age group, in particular the “constructedness” of the category of teens or adolescents, is critical to the approach of a field of emerging thought and scholarship: “Critical Youth Studies.” As we

will see in this chapter, critical youth studies has a lot to offer to help us understand and teach young adult literature with a critical inquiry approach. Critical youth studies connects young adult literature with a broad range of social categories, issues, and questions and provides many starting points for teaching. Centering the experience of young people and asking questions about how they are perceived engages students and helps them explore important questions in their world.

Critical youth studies brings together sociology and ethnography (eg., Ibrahim, 2014; Gaines, 2014), cultural studies (eg., Giroux, 2014), educational studies (eg., Lesko, 2001; Finders, 1999; C. Lewis & Finders, 2002), and critical reading of children's and adolescent literature (eg., Nikolajeva, 2009; Trites, 2000, 2014). By conceiving of adolescence as a social construct, it challenges any dominant or common understandings of what it means to be a teenager.

Critical youth studies considers the category "youth" to be both contextualized and dynamic, diverse and always emerging. It foregrounds the actions and perspectives of young people themselves and considers young people as active agents of the social world and creators of culture (Ibrahim, 2009; Best, 2007). As Awad Ibrahim puts it: "[critical youth studies] sees youth as action; as a performative category; as an identity that is both produced through and is producing our bodies and sense of self; as an agentive, ambiguous, fluid, shifting, multiple, complex, stylized, and forever becoming category" (p. xvi).

Scholars in youth studies have argued against a monolithic view of young people and explore "adolescence" in its diversity and complexity (Finders, 1998; C. Lewis & Finders, 2002; Ibrahim, 2014; Sarigianides, Lewis, & Petrone, 2015). In her book *Act Your Age! A Cultural*

Construction of Adolescence, Nancy Lesko (2001) examines “confident characterizations” (p. 2) of adolescents. She describes four stereotypes: adolescents gradually “come of age” into adulthood; they have “raging hormones” that control them; they are “peer-oriented;” and they can be represented by their age (p. 2). Lesko shows how these stereotypes of adolescence—and even the idea of an identifiable “adolescent” category—emerged at recent and specific historical and cultural moments and have been perpetuated by corporate marketing, cultural institutions, and our educational system.

Lesko looks back at the late 1800s and early 1900s, when the term “adolescence” was first used, to examine how “confident characterizations” about young people were created and defined. She examines “scientific studies in anthropology, physiology, criminology, and child study” in order to understand social groups in the context of their development. In her research, adolescence is seen as a period of developing the traits of productive citizenship “working for the larger good, being willing to sacrifice for a larger entity, and obeying laws,” along with “learning to govern oneself through proper sexual and gender identities” (p. 46). In this process, Lesko finds that “adolescence” was “gendered” and “raced” (p. 46):

...emerging ideas of teenagers and their proper growth centered on masculine characteristics as desired and necessary for the progress of individuals and societies....
What came to be defined as valued and normative adolescent behaviors were grounded upon white middle-class male lives, needs, and perspectives. (Lesko, 2001, p. 46)

She argues that the category “adolescence” was created in the United States with a view to the development of nationalism, patriotism, and a sense of global entitlement. Lesko identifies that the core of the “adolescent problem and potential is a sense of citizenship, and that proper

development is meant to produce well-socialized, productive citizens who will bolster the nation's policies, both domestically and abroad" (p. 46).

Today we know that adolescence is marked not only by gender, race, and nationality, but also by socioeconomic status; sexual orientation; (dis)ability; social groupings; urban, suburban, and rural environments; public, private, or homeschools; living with supportive parental figures; facing abuse; social media interactions; changing natural and social environments; and so on.

Contemporary young adult literature addresses all of these features, yet many of Lesko's stereotypes or "confident characterizations" of adolescents still find their way in. Authors of young adult literature often include what they think adolescents want—and need—to read, and portray adolescents in familiar ways (Cadden, 2010; Trites, 2000). Literary works offer imagined and contextualized representations of a "hypothetical"

Discussion Questions & Activities:

- 1) Brainstorm different ways that adolescence is constructed.
- 2) Examine what you brainstormed in #1 and think further about different areas you might explore through critical inquiry.
- 3) Why do you think it might be important for a teacher to teach young adult literature with a critical youth studies approach?

adolescent (Sulzer & Thein, 2016; Sarigianides, Lewis, & Petrone, 2015). Some representations are limited, unfair, or undemocratic—stereotypes may be perpetuated to fit specific didactic purposes (Thein, Sulzer, & Schmidt, 2013; Cadden, 2010).

Of course, there are young adult works that subvert stereotypes, though stereotypes still appear. In some works, youth are represented as specifically deviating from the expected "norms" or stereotypes of adolescence—for instance those who are sexually abused—and are

treated as “abberant” youth by the dominant culture (Kokkola, 2013). There can also be disparity between youth who are viewed as threats and those viewed as needing protection (Harris, 2012).

Because there are no simple ways to escape “confident characterizations,” young adult literature opens many possibilities for inquiring into the stereotypes, diverse experiences, construction of categories, and social nature of identity. Scholars and teachers often, and sometimes simplistically, talk about literature offering readers “mirrors” and “windows” (Bishop, 1990; Parsons & Rietschlin, 2014). “Mirrors” are texts that in some measure are familiar to or reflect a reader’s own life, and “windows” are works that allow the reader to view into, imaginatively experience, and begin to understand the life of another quite different from their own.

In the classroom young adult literature offers students a great resource of “mirrors” and “windows,” and many important opportunities for self-understanding, empathy, and human connection. It is vitally important that young people read works that serve as both “mirrors” and “windows”—clearly one of the great potential values of young adult literature. This value is enhanced when the examination is thoughtful, when students carefully examine and critically inquire into the representations and situations presented in the literature they are reading. Critical youth studies is a rich resource in this process.

Drawing on critical youth studies, teachers can create opportunities for students to ask questions, think more carefully about their own lives and experiences, about how young people are represented, and about their role in issues that matter. Students questioning, critiquing, and debating with one another and with their teachers prepares them to advocate for people and causes that matter to them. Thus, this approach to young adult literature helps young people to

“come to terms with their own power as critical agents” (Giroux, 2009, p. 131). It calls for teachers to be open to discussion and dialogue and to new ideas, perspectives, and materials that students may bring forward. It positions young people as contributing members of society rather than as acted-upon objects.

Evaluating and Connecting with Young Adult Literature

Ideas about evaluating young adult literature put forward by critical youth studies scholars are helpful for teachers and students. Sulzer and Thein (2016), drawing on research with preservice English teachers, developed these questions:

- To what extent do portrayals of adolescence/ts in the story align with common understandings about adolescents’ needs, desires, and abilities? To what extent do the portrayals of adolescence/ts raise questions about what is “normal” in adolescence?
- In what ways do young people’s intersectional identities inform the progression of the story? How do these intersectional identities complicate common understandings about how youths fit into society?
- What situations, actions, or pieces of dialogue does the author use to mark a character as being an adolescent? How is adolescence as a social construct leveraged in these textual elements?
- In what ways does the narrative voice evoke ideas of adolescence/ts? How is this voice in conversation with various beliefs about the place of youths in society? (p. 169)

These questions can help teachers and students to choose texts that represent young people positively, rather than with a deficit view. They can also be used to examine and analyze young adult texts that students have chosen for their independent reading or for reading in critical inquiry circles.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How might you use these questions to evaluate books in your classroom?
- 2) How might you help students to use these questions to evaluate books they are reading?

When teachers and students choose texts that attempt to subvert dominant stereotypes of youth and then carefully examine these subversions, students are able to think beyond views that may limit them and develop more complex understandings and possibilities. For example, Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017) is a young adult novel in which the main character, Starr, a teenage African American, recovers from witnessing a police officer shoot and kill her friend Khalil while she is in the passenger seat. Starr struggles throughout the novel to tell others that she was with Khalil when the police officer shot him. Eventually, Starr realizes that, even though she is young and not yet considered an adult, her voice has power.

At the end of the novel, Starr stands up with a megaphone at a demonstration that has turned into a riot, and tells everyone watching (there are TV cameras rolling as well as demonstrators and police officers all around her) that she was the one with Khalil, and that the not-guilty verdict the jury returned for the police officer who shot and killed Khalil was not fair. She says, "Not only did Officer Cruise assume we were up to no good, he assumed we were criminals. Well, Officer Cruise is the criminal," and then leads the crowd in a chant of "Khalil lived!" until the officers throw tear gas (p. 411-412). One can lands near Starr, and she picks it up and throws it back.

Starr realizes that her words and actions have consequences, not just for herself, but for her whole family. And she also inspires others. King is a drug lord who rules Starr's neighborhood with fear, and he burns down Daddy's store. Following Starr's example, Daddy breaks the unspoken "no snitching" law of the hood and tells the police that King started the fire (p. 423). The impact of Starr speaking out builds as several other neighbors "snitch" on King, corroborating Daddy's story. Finally, DeVante, Starr's half-brother and another high school student, tells the police that he will "turn witness" and help send King to prison. DeVante says to Starr, "After seeing you face those cops the way you did, I don't know, man. That did something to me.... And that lady said our voices are weapons. I should use mine, right?" (p. 430). This representation of Starr's impact subverts the stereotype that adolescents must wait until they become adults before they can have an impact on the world.

When high school students read about students their age tapping their power to make change, they can be empowered to do the same. This was the case with students in Virginia who read Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2009).

While I was completing my dissertation, the #metoo movement was born, and several women came forward to accuse Sherman Alexie of sexual harassment and abuse. After investigation, the American Indian Library Association (AILA) rescinded their 2008 Best YA Book Award for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Reese, 2018). Many young adult literature professors and scholars have decided not to teach Alexie's books or to include them in their future research. Because I was so close to my deadline for completing my dissertation, I have decided to keep this example of teaching critical youth studies with *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. However, I will remove this example when I publish this as a book.

At the 2017 NCTE conference I heard Renee Wilmot tell her students' story. Renee is an African American female teacher at an all-African-American academy in a Southern U.S. state. Her students were able to use Alexie's novel as both a "mirror" and a "window," and develop solidarity with the experience of Native Americans.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian tells the story of Junior, a high school student living on the Spokane reservation, making the difficult decision to attend an all-White school outside his reservation. Because of this decision, his relationship with his best friend Rowdy is strained. Junior must confront the disparity between the lives of his White friends at his new school and his American Indian friends and family on the reservation.

The stereotype that teenagers evolve through a graduated "coming of age" process into adulthood doesn't apply to Junior and the people living on the reservation. Facing serious problems of poverty, alcoholism, and family dysfunction, Junior and the other Native Americans grow up fast. Rather than simply celebrating Junior's decision to act in his own personal self-interest, the novel—through broken relationships, community isolation, and a deep sense of loss—challenges and complicates easy judgement.

Renee's students made important connections. Like Junior, they had chosen to attend their school—an all-Black academy—because it offered them "better education" and "more opportunities" than the neighborhood schools they could have attended otherwise (Wilmot, 2017).

As they read and discussed *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, these students watched the film "A Good Day to Die" (2010), chronicling the life of Dennis Banks—co-founder of the American Indian Movement in 1968—and the struggle for Native American

rights. Renee's students compared and contrasted what they learned with Martin Luther King's life and his leadership in the Civil Rights Movement (Wilmot, 2017).

Renee also wanted her students to think about how human rights struggles are not just in the past. They watched contemporary news reports of the Dakota Access Pipeline protestors, many of them Native American, attacked by police with water hoses in cold weather for defending clean water. Her students quickly compared videos they had seen of police officers doing the same to peaceful Black protestors during the Civil Rights era (Wilmot, 2017).

Wanting to learn more, Renee's students were engaging in critical inquiry. They researched the Dakota Access Pipeline and what people were protesting. They found that the protestors were trying to protect their clean water and ancient burial grounds, and her students were outraged. They wanted to help. One student found a public Amazon wish list for the protestors, and the students in Renee's class began a fundraising campaign to provide supplies that would help protect protestors from police brutality. The students also collaboratively wrote a letter of solidarity and sent it to the protestors (Wilmot, 2017).

These students, like Junior, made decisions they thought would better their own lives. But they also, like Starr, determined that they could use their own voices and power to support others in their fight for a better future, lending solidarity.

Reading with Lenses, Including the Youth Lens

At a large racially, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse urban middle school in Iowa, Anah Austin, a White female, teaches 7th grade Reading students how to read literature critically from different theoretical perspectives, or "lenses." Anah begins teaching about critical lenses with a creative activity. She gives her students a piece of white computer paper and

several different colored transparent sheets. With markers the same colors as the transparent sheets, students can write or draw whatever they want on the white paper.

Once they have finished, Anah asks her students to describe what they see. She then asks them to lay one colored sheet over the paper and describe what they see then. If the sheet is yellow, it blends with the yellow marker the student had used on the white paper, and thus the student can see only the other colors through it. She then asks the students to lay a different colored sheet over the white paper, and so on, changing through all colors and describing the differences as they go.

Anah suggests that the clear plastic sheets can be considered to represent “lenses” for reading literature. “Lenses” is a term she has borrowed from Deborah Appleman’s book *Critical Encounters in High School English* (2009). Appleman argues that the most effective way to help students understand and explore different ideologies in their reading is to teach them literary theory, as these theories “provide lenses that can sharpen one’s vision and provide alternative ways of seeing” (p. 4).

Appleman describes several different lenses for reading literature, including reader response, gender, and privilege/social class. Originating with Louise Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration* (1933), reader response theory focuses on personal responses to literature. Readers bring their own histories, education, and experiences to texts. Thus, when reading a text, each person has their own “transaction” with that text—or, as Appleman describes it, the reader and the text come together to create their own meaning (p. 36). Each reader’s meaning might be a little or vastly different than another reader’s meaning, depending on their prior knowledge and life experiences.

A gender “lens” draws attention to how male and female characters are portrayed—how gender is constructed within a text. With a gender lens, readers examine representations of both masculinity and femininity, questions of gender inequities, and how the gendered experiences of the author or the reader might impact the work and how it is interpreted. Applying gender theory to literary texts includes identifying stereotypes—in home and workplace settings, in social situations, in relationships—asking questions about and complicating those stereotypes.

Similarly, a Marxist or social-class lens identifies and examines characters who live in specific social classes, considering stereotypes, inequality, power relations, and possibilities for change and social justice. From this perspective, readers might consider the historical and political context of the literature. They might discuss which social groups the author likely expected or intended to read their work and how the work might look different to different groups or classes of readers. Inquiring into how a literary text presents social relations could be part of applying a Marxist “lens.”

Anah’s exercise with the plastic sheets helps students better understand an approach to reading that applies different “lenses,” different literary theories, helping them to more richly understand what they are reading and be able to “see” different ideologies within the text. Anah’s students were able to understand that, “nothing on the paper has changed, but their perspective of what is on the paper has changed” (Austin, personal interview, 2017). I spend some time here describing these lenses because they offer a valuable resource for teaching literature, and—in particular—young adult literature.

Drawing on Appleman’s work, critical youth scholars in English education, Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis (2015), have developed what they call the “youth lens” for reading

literature written for and about “adolescents.”

Like the gender and Marxist lenses, the youth lens allows readers to come to “see” ideologies within the text concerning representations of youth.

When applying a youth lens to a text, the reader asks two central questions:

- How does the text represent adolescence/ts?
- What role does the text play in reinforcing and/or subverting dominant ideas about adolescence? (p. 511)

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why might it be important for students to understand and apply literary theory in secondary classrooms?
- 2) What are some other activities you could do to help your students understand literary theory?
- 3) Think of some of your favorite young adult novels. How might you teach one of these texts with a youth lens?

Secondary English language arts teachers and college English professors are increasingly working with their students to analyze texts in this way.

For example, once they understand that “ideas of youth are constructed by society,” Anah’s students use the youth lens to “deconstruct and examine these ideas” or, in other words, to “investigate, question what it means to be a teenager” (Austin, personal interview, 2017). They begin by examining advertisements, then move to picture books, nonfiction, and young adult fiction texts. (I discuss more about examining advertisements in Chapter Five.)

As students learn to think critically about stereotypes of youth, they can also begin to inquire more deeply, for instance analyzing representations of particular groups of youth, such as African American, transgender, urban, or affluent youth.

Drawing on critical youth studies and the youth lens, my own students connected with and evaluated representations of youth in M. T. Anderson’s young adult science fiction novel

Feed (2002). In the novel the main character, Titus, spends the majority of his time with his peer group. Together they travel to the moon (which they find “null” boring), go to parties, and even go into “mal” (malfunctioning). In the novel, all of the characters have the “feed” (an aggressive, distracting, and unavoidable Internet/social media feed marketing products and pro-corporate ideas) implanted into their brains when they’re young. The thinking of characters in the novel is influenced by the “feed,” and they engage in unhealthy behaviors. Experiencing “mal” is similar to drinking alcohol or taking drugs: the feed malfunctions and Titus and his friends act drunk or high. Skin lesions become popular because the people on TV (which they can view in their feeds) have them.

Reading the novel, we discussed ideas about the influence of mass media and the Internet on young people. Drawing on their own experiences, my students compared drugs and alcohol to going into “mal,” and getting tattoos or piercings as similar to creating lesions. I asked if drugs, alcohol, tattoos, and piercings were solely “teenage” behaviors. Students quickly pointed out that adults “party,” too, discussing tailgating and home parties. They also brought up our nation’s current opioid crisis and how that affects adults, and pointed out that some adults get tattoos for varieties of reasons, just as some teenagers do.

My students were also quick to point out that they and many of their friends don’t abuse alcohol or drugs, and many of them don’t have tattoos, nor do they want them. They began to see how the activities attributed in the novel to teenagers built on stereotypes, “confident characterizations,” that a critical youth studies approach could help them examine.

As students critique stereotypes and the portrayals of teenagers in young adult texts, they may want to talk back to the text, challenge the way young people are represented, both in class

and to a broader audience, opening doors to meaningful discussion and writing both within and beyond the classroom.

Steven Arenas is a high school English teacher in Phoenix, Arizona. He self-identifies as Latino, the majority of his students identify as Latino/a, and his school has a free/reduced lunch rate of 91%, indicating that many of his students come from low-income households. In order to help his sophomore World Literature students think about adolescence as a social construct, he asked them to define adolescence. Students wrote sentences like: “Adolescence is people who are at a young age and they want to feel free and do whatever they want” and “Adolescence is a time when you are wild and reckless.” Steven then asked them to define what adolescence was like for their parents and grandparents. Students wrote words like: “hard working,” “mature,” “responsible,” and “obedient” (Arenas, 2017).

Steven then led the class in a discussion about how and why these definitions differ. Reading Matt de la Pena’s young adult novel *Mexican Whiteboy* (2008), Steven’s students critiqued how it represents Mexican-American youth, in particular. *Mexican Whiteboy* tells the story of Danny, a 16-year-old of mixed heritage: his father Mexican and his mother a blonde-haired, blue-eyed American.

Danny loves baseball, and much of the novel centers around him playing the sport in a town outside San Diego, California. As he attends a mostly-White preparatory school and then spends the summer with his father’s Hispanic family, Danny struggles to understand his identity. When he attends the prep school, Danny discovers that the students label him and “know” him based on his slightly browner skin, but when he lives with his father’s family, Danny doesn’t speak Spanish and feels he’s not “Mexican enough” for his uncles.

77% of Steven's students reported never having read a book with a Latino/a protagonist, and they had strong reactions to reading about a character who had experiences similar to theirs and with whom they could identify (Arenas, 2017). Steven realized that it was important to create opportunities for his students to read books that could serve as a "mirror," where they not only could see themselves, but also could think critically about questions of representation. Over the course of their study of *Mexican Whiteboy*, Steven's students identified and analyzed stereotypes of Latino/a youth. Some of these stereotypes were that they are lazy, or involved in gang activity, or not intelligent.

As they read *Mexican Whiteboy*, they analyzed the book, discussing possible stereotypes of youth in general and of Hispanic youth in particular. Steven said his class was split almost 50/50 when asked if Matt de la Pena perpetuates stereotypes of youth in this novel (Arenas, personal interview, 2017). When asked about stereotypes of Hispanic youth, students had responses like:

- "De la Pena's book isn't stereotypical. He's trying to give a realistic view of what our communities are like."
 - "Danny's a smart kid, but he's also half white. Why can't the smart kid be full Mexican?"
 - "This book might have some stereotypes, but it makes a difference that the author is Latino. I guess it kind of makes it ok."
 - "Yeah its [sic] kind of stereotypical, but this book is like my life and it's powerful."
- (Arenas, 2017)

The Circuit by Francisco Jimenez (1997), offers another example of investigating the representation of youth. Written as a series of essays, *The Circuit* tells a story of Panchito's life crossing the border from Mexico to California. Subsequent stories include Panchito and his siblings as they move from camp to camp, to tent, to shack, to garage; pick strawberries, cotton, grapes, carrots; enroll in schools late in the fall and leave whenever their family needs to move again for work; and—slowly—learn English.

Panchito's life does not fit at all with stereotypes of white middle-class youth common in young adult literature. Due to his extreme poverty, he takes on adult responsibilities at a young age in order to help feed his family. He is not even allowed to go to school while he can be working, and his older brother Roberto stops going to school in his early teenage years in order to work with their father.

Rich discussions can evolve from this text and its depiction of youth. However, teachers—especially those working with students from different backgrounds than Panchito, those for whom the text is a “window” rather than a “mirror”—will want to be careful that students do not simply “other” Panchito and his experiences or view the one text they have read about Hispanic teens as telling “the truth” about *all* Hispanic teens. As teachers we need to keep in mind the “danger of a single story” (Adichie, 2009).

In order to explore a diversity of perspectives, raise academic expectations, and better understand an important social issue, a thematic inquiry unit can be developed. Critical youth studies attends to many issues impacting the lives of young people, such as growing up in urban, suburban, or rural environments; race relations; gender identity; immigration; and the ability of youth to advocate for themselves and others. *The Circuit* might lend itself to a thematic approach

focused on the topic of migration. Teachers can incorporate other texts and resources on migrant/immigrant/refugee children, such as other young adult literature, short stories, films, documentaries, newspaper articles, guest speakers—each of which might share a different story or perspective. Thematic approaches to addressing social issues with young adult literature opens many possibilities for deep consideration of urgent issues in our nation and around the world.

Social Issues and Thematic Teaching

Combined with young adult literature, films or video clips can be a great resource for thematic teaching. For example, in a unit on immigrant experiences a teacher might include selections from: *In America* (2003), a story of an Irish couple and their two children who illegally immigrate to America in the 1980s and move to a run-down apartment in Hell’s Kitchen, New York; *The Immigrant* (2014), which follows Ewa Cybulska through Ellis Island and into 1920s New York; *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984), in which Vladimir Ivanoff, a Russian saxophonist, escapes the KGB while on tour in America during the Cold War and struggles to make a living in his new country; or even the Disney animated feature film *An American Tail* (1986), the story of Fievel surviving separation from his family in a land where the streets are “paved with cheese,” a parable of the Jewish immigrant story.

Discussion Question and Activity:

What other texts might be good to include in a unit like this? Take some time to brainstorm and research possible texts. Discuss how and why you might use the texts you’ve found in a thematic unit like this.

A thematic unit might include, along with *The Circuit*, other young adult texts that share the lives of migrant/immigrant youth, such as *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sanchez (2017). This book tells the story of Julia, Julia’s sister Olga (through backstory), and

their parents. Olga has recently died in an accident, and while her family is grieving, Julia finds some items in Olga's room that seem to discredit her as the "perfect Mexican daughter"—a daughter who wants to stay home and take care of her parents—that everyone thought she was. Throughout this story, Julia struggles with her own depression, her grief over the loss of her sister and guilt for not knowing her better while she lived, her overprotective mother and mostly absent father, and her strong desire to get away from their poor, rundown Chicago neighborhood.

With Lesko's "confident characterizations" in mind, students might consider the stereotype that adolescents are "peer-oriented" while reading *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. When they first explore the text, they may see that Julia does desire to be with her best friend Lorena or her boyfriend Connor more than her parents. However, upon closer examination, it appears to be due to Julia's rebellion against her mother's overprotective nature and her cultural expectations that her daughter stay home and take care of her parents than it does her "adolescent desire" to be with her friends.

This text would also be good to include in a thematic unit on teaching about poverty. One stereotype of Latino/a immigrants Steven's students identified is that they are lazy. *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* complicates that stereotype. Julia's parents both work hard at demanding, unskilled, low-paying jobs—and are anything but lazy. Julia's mother cleans houses for a living. When Julia is on a school break, her mother makes her help with the cleaning, and Julia learns just how hard her mother works every day. Julia becomes even more determined to get into a good college and leave their impoverished neighborhood in Chicago. Her father also comes home from work every day exhausted, and Olga used to soak and rub his feet. While Julia can't bring herself to take on this task after Olga's death, she does empathize

with her father's exhaustion. Both her parents work hard, yet they cannot afford more than a roach-infested apartment and little food.

Julia realizes just how poor her family is when she and Connor become friends and start dating. Connor is White and lives in a more affluent neighborhood. At one point in the novel, Connor and Julia go to a thrift store. Julia has brought all her savings: \$6.00. Connor buys a few items as jokes, planning on wearing them to a party, and Julia is faced with the reality that this is where she shops all the time, while Connor comes here only for entertainment. Examining the differences between Connor's and Julia's experiences, students might begin to see how different factors—and their intersections—can create different ideas of what it means to be an “adolescent.” In this novel, these factors include race, culture, socioeconomic status, and gender. Discussions of such factors impact the experiences of youth and can result in rich learning.

When teachers are using critical youth studies approaches, students can examine many different social issues. One example I will describe here is human trafficking. A text that complicates stereotypes of adolescence is *Dime* by E. R. Frank (2015). This novel presents a young girl who longs to escape foster care and find a family. When she first meets Daddy, he takes care of her, and she feels loved.

Frank portrays the lure of human traffickers in Daddy, a man who takes advantage of Dime's situation by first offering “love,” and then asking her to help pay for the care he's given her, to help her “family.” Daddy and Dime's two other “wifeys,” who are already prostitutes when Dime joins them. She feels compelled, and she complies with Daddy's requests. Before she seems to know what is happening, Dime is prostituting herself for Daddy.

While this may be difficult content for some students to read, it can promote awareness, and even offer a “mirror” for others to see situations potentially similar to their own. Dime is abused in many ways. She is not allowed a slow “coming of age”—no victim of sexual abuse is. Due to abuse, she distances herself from peers, rather than spending time with them (as the teen stereotype suggests). In fact, she is initially drawn to Daddy because she is seeking a family, rather than a friend, relationship.

Again, teachers need to be careful not to “other” Dime and her situation. As Lydia Kokkola describes in *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants* (2013), novels like *Dime* that share stories of sexual abuse of youths often distance the intended reader from the protagonist who is experiencing the abuse. Victims are presented “as ‘other’ people who live in ‘other’ places and ‘other’ times” which “disturbingly marks the reader as White and middle class and victims as impoverished girls of colour” (p. 199). Teachers can help their students work through this tendency to “other” victims of sexual abuse by bringing other resources to their teaching.

Teachers and students may be interested in reading articles or viewing photographs or documentaries on human trafficking that can complicate views on who victims of human trafficking might be and how they are trafficked. Teachers might start with photographs of human trafficking victims. A simple “Google Images” search for “faces of human trafficking” would show images of modern-day slaves and some who have escaped. Asking students to quickly research into who is affected by human trafficking and then sharing their research with the class might add complexity to ideas about victims.

Some helpful documentaries on human trafficking are *Not My Life* (2011), directed by Robert Bilheimer and narrated by Glenn Close. This film spans 12 countries on five continents, exploring human trafficking in many different

contexts. *Very Young Girls* (2007), directed by Nina Alvarez, follows Rachel Lloyd—a former prostitute who is now an activist—in New York City where she runs a support center called Girls Educational and

Mentoring Services, offering rehabilitation care and services that can help survivors to reenter society successfully. An episode of *Our America with Lisa Ling*, “3AM Girls” (season 2, episode 3, 2011), shows Ling going undercover with Tina Frundt, who escaped sex trafficking as a young teenager, to witness forced prostitution on the streets of Washington D. C.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Would you want to teach a text like *Dime* in your classroom? Why or why not?
- 2) How might you justify teaching a text like *Dime* to your administration? To students? To parents?

If documentaries are too long for teachers to show in class or unavailable to students at home, there are shorter clips about human trafficking available on YouTube. A Nightline segment *Hidden America: Chilling New Look at Sex Trafficking in the US* can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSgTmcq-bBk>. A survivor shares her story on “Teen Sex Trafficking Victim tells her story” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxmkLtVxsNg>. A clip from an episode of the Dr. Phil Show “How a Social Media Post Led a Teen into Sex Trafficking” can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utZV2opOnH8>.

Throughout reading and viewing these pieces, it is important for teachers to ask students to write about, respond to, and discuss what they are “reading.” Teachers and students may also discuss what adolescence looks like for Dime and other victims of human trafficking and how that varies from the stereotypes Lesko discusses.

Teachers will, of course, want to be aware that this topic could be a trigger for students, as some may have been abused or may be currently being abused. Thus, it's a good idea for teachers to have resources available for students before beginning a unit like this, including possible counseling, and to be prepared that if any students share that they are being abused, it is the teacher's responsibility to report it to the proper authorities.

If possible, planning a field trip to a local conference on human trafficking would add richness to this unit of study. Many universities and colleges are hosting conferences on human trafficking throughout the school year. Students might even be able to present what they're learning at a conference. Writing a proposal for a conference would be a real-world writing assignment for students to tackle. There are grants available to help students attend conferences, especially if they are presenting. But if attending a conference is not an option, teachers could invite guest speakers to come to class and share their expertise. Teachers (or students) could call local organizations that fight against modern-day slavery and/or provide help and support to survivors to see if someone would be willing to speak to their classes. An important component of this unit would be class discussions afterward about different lived experiences of youth, how youth have overcome horrifying obstacles, and what youth can do to make a difference in the fight against human trafficking.

At this point, in my classes, I would ask students to choose an aspect of modern-day slavery to research further. As an advocate for student choice, I would offer them several genres in which to write: a traditional research paper, a narrative, a poem, an advertisement, a children's book, a website, or another genre. I would then ask students to present their research to the class in a genre that complements their written genre choice. For example, a research paper could be paired with a speech or conference presentation, a narrative could be paired with a movie trailer,

a poem could be paired with a song. Whichever genre they chose, I would ask them to include research from at least three reputable sources as well as one piece of visual media.

Finally, as a class, I would also want to determine a way we could advocate for people. Students might check with local organizations working toward ending the pandemic of human trafficking and/or childhood poverty and homelessness (a large contributor). They might visit websites like Covenant House (www.covenanthouse.org), Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (www.iccr.org), or Be Free Dayton (www.befreedayton.org). On these and similar organizations' websites, students can learn ways to help fight or stop human trafficking. The website Shared Hope (www.sharedhope.org) lists by state shelters for recovered victims. Another great resource is the National Human Trafficking Resource Center: (888) 373-7888. Students could work as a class or in groups to make a difference.

Human trafficking is only one of an enormous number of powerful, relevant, and interesting topics students could explore as they bring critical youth studies to the reading and teaching of young adult literature. What topics can you think of? What young adult works might be good starting points? How could you help students critically inquire into the representation of adolescents? What additional materials might deepen the inquiry? These and other questions are great starting points for creating critical youth studies curriculum in your classroom.

CHAPTER V

REMIXES AND MASHUPS: CRITICALLY “PLAYING AROUND” WITH YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

So far we have looked at teaching young adult literature with critical inquiry, cultural studies, and critical youth studies. This chapter addresses subvertisements, remixes, mashups, wikis—different ways of “playing” with and inquiring into young adult literature. Remixing and mashing up young adult literature—with popular culture, new technologies, cultural mixing, and reading and writing in multiple voices—engages students. Doing so is also creative, relevant, and intellectually meaningful, and it raises important questions. Combining remixes and mashups with social media, your students can make an impact on issues that matter.

In Chapter Four my students applied critical youth studies and the youth lens to M. T. Anderson’s science fiction novel *Feed* (2002). In the novel, the “feed” “mashes up” the Internet, social media, and corporate advertising. Advertisements pop up constantly, in response to conversations, chats, or even characters’ own thoughts. Reading this young adult novel, my students turned to ads and memes in their own world. For instance, they looked at close-ups of an Apple advertisement like the one for iPad 2 found here:

<http://www.ellmobile.com/products/Apple-ipad-2-wifi-3G>

It portrays a close-up of the iPad 2 from the side, showing how thin the device is. The bottom of the iPad 2 is resting on a white surface and the device is held at a slight angle by a seemingly White, male hand. All the reader can see of the hand is a thumb and a couple fingers. The advertisement reads: “iPad 2 Thinner. Lighter. Faster. FaceTime. Smart Covers. 10-hour battery” (Apple, 2013).

Recent Calvin Klein ads portray a model, singer, or actor wearing some type of Calvin Klein undergarment and the slogan “I _____ in #mycalvins”: “I seduce in #mycalvins;” “I make money in #mycalvins;” “I excel in #mycalvins.” A New York City billboard posted two of these images side by side, one showing a thin, White young woman with long, blonde hair sitting on a couch in front of a window in a gauzy, short white dress hiked up to the tops of her thighs. Through the dress, the reader can see black undergarments. Her legs are spread and her left foot is tucked underneath her right thigh while her right foot is angled behind her. She looks directly at the camera, her mouth closed and in just a hint of a smile. The advertisement reads, “I seduce in my Calvin's Calvin Klein.” Next to this advertisement on the billboard was another one, a close-up of Fetty Wap, an American rapper, singer, and songwriter, looking directly at the camera. His dread-locked hair is hanging around his face, and tattoos on his face are visible. He has a small black beard on his chin and wears a black shirt. The caption reads, “I make money in #mycalvins Calvin Klein” (Reed, 2016). View the billboard advertisements here:

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/calvin-klein-billboard-removed-petition-876784>

When we looked at these advertisements in class, I asked students to consider the explicit and implicit messages of the words and images. Who has power and where does it come from? After discussion in small groups, they shared their analyses. For the Apple advertisement, comments included:

- “The explicit message is that this iPad is better than the first one.”
- “An implicit message could be that you should have the newest version.”
- “That thinner and smaller is better.”
- “The person holding the iPad has the power because he has ownership.”

- “It implies that the person with power is a White male because it’s a White man’s hand holding it.”
- “Power comes from having money and the ability to purchase this item.”
- “Power is being a White man.”

For the Calvin Klein advertisements:

- “An explicit message is that famous people wear Calvin Klein.”
- “Implicit is that Calvin Kleins are sexy.”
- “That someone who buys Calvin Kleins can be successful—like those two things are connected.”
- “In the second image, power is making money. That’s almost explicit.”
- “I think that for the image of the girl, the person behind the camera has the power.”
- “No, I think she has power, but it comes from her sexuality, or her sensuality.”
- “An implicit message is that a woman’s only power comes from her sensuality, whereas a man’s power comes from making money, or maybe working hard for the money he makes.”

This analysis and discussion of ideologies communicated through advertisements was just the beginning for my students and me.

Young adult literature is an excellent vehicle for remixes and mashups. Indeed, young adult literature often already includes mashup elements. The definition I use here of “mashup” is “a creative combination of mixing of content from different sources” (Mashup) and to “remix” is to “mix and re-record the elements of (a musical recording) in a different way” (Remix). As

popular fiction, young adult literature frequently mixes classic literary forms with contemporary genres—film, television, the Internet, social media, etc.

For instance, consider Walter Dean Myers’s mashup of the genres of screenplay and journal entries in *Monster* (1999); pieces that storytell sometimes through images, sometimes words, and sometimes a mashup of these, such as Brian Selznick’s *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007); or young adult graphic novels that frequently mashup word and image to create meaning, such as Vera Brosgol’s *Anya’s Ghost* (2011).

Young adult literature is a popular form for a contemporary audience. Why shouldn’t the study of young adult literature break away from more narrow, traditional forms of reading and response?

In this chapter, I offer snapshots of engaged, meaningful teaching of young adult literature as popular culture.

Discussion Question:

Did you read young adult literature in high school? What assignments were attached to the reading you did for your English classes in high school?

Subvertisements

After our class discussion of *Feed* and of the advertisements (we looked at several more together), students moved into small groups and applied Rob Pope’s strategy of “textual intervention” in order to think and respond critically to these texts. Pope argues that the best way to understand a text and how it “works” is “to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then to try to account for the exact effect of what you have done” (p. 1). “Playing” with a text provides new ways of considering the text; it enables the critical reader to look at it from different perspectives.

One example from popular culture of textual intervention is “subvertising.” Subvertising is a form of culture jamming which subverts media culture and critiques mainstream corporate advertising. Once students had the opportunity to critique *Feed* and the advertisements in class, through reading, discussing, and writing, I shared some examples of subvertisements with them. One appropriate to teach with *Feed* is a mashup published on the Adbusters website (www.adbusters.org) in which a seemingly white adult hand is holding an iPad out so that the reader can see the long edge of it, how thin it is. This is similar to the first Apple ad (for the iPad 2) I had shown my students, and to many Apple ads touting the thinness of their products. The text reads “Thinner than ever.” And on the other side of the iPad is an image of a starving Black child naked from the waist up, reaching out toward the iPad. There is evidence of malnutrition in his thin body—clearly showing his ribs—and in his thin arm, hair, and face (Campbell, 2011). View the subvertisement here: <http://www.adbusters.org/spoofads/ad-game>

Our discussion considered realities that advertising excludes, and what questions might be raised when things that are excluded are brought into the picture. My students talked about consumerism and consumer values, and about the social and economic profile targeted by advertisers. Suddenly the race depicted in the image—only a well-manicured white person’s hand—mattered. The subvertisement changed the context in which the advertisement was “read,” and critical social issues that were invisible came into view. The subvertisement promoted the thought that there might be a relationship between the manufacture and consumption of iPads and Third World poverty. Sweat shops, allocation of global resources, national borders, inequality, hunger—all became topics that the “textual intervention” of the subvertisement opened up for inquiry.

After carefully examining this subvertisement example, my students researched and looked up their own examples, several of which we also discussed. As students shared what they had found with the class, they quickly noted the irony in subvertising, and they were eager to try it out themselves.

My students created their own mashups, taking popular ads and “intervening.” Pope recommends that students play with the texts in small groups first, aiming at creating two interventions: “one subtle; the other outrageous” (p. 4). Students worked on this in their small groups during class. They then discussed why they made the interventions they did, as I asked what “preferences” the change(s) implied or asserted (p. 5).

After “playing around” with these texts in groups during class, students chose their own advertisements, analyzed them individually, and subverted them by addressing issues important to them. They used meme generators, such as www.memegenerator.net, created their own subvertisements, and posted them on their class blogs. Finally, students presented their chosen advertisements, analyses of the advertisements, changes they had made in order to subvert the advertisements, and their intended messages. Students then discussed how well the intended messages were communicated.

One of my students, Maria, subverted a Canada Goose ad. This advertisement displays a person bundled up in a Canada Goose coat while walking through the snow away from a helicopter (suggesting the person is in a remote place). There are mountains in the background. The person has sunglasses on and their hands in the pockets of the coat, and the text reads: “OUTDOOR Performance” (Canada Goose). View the advertisement here:

<https://plus.google.com/100545093241991830061/posts/d2xRyjYkPev>

Maria discussed that the advertisement was promoting the warmth and durability of the outerwear garments the company sells. However, as a vegan who conscientiously researches into how companies use and treat animals in the making of their products, Maria knew that companies like Canada Goose will pluck the feathers from geese while they are living, allow the feathers to grow back, and then pluck them again in a vicious cycle of abuse for the animals. Thus, she created this subvertisement, speaking back to the ad.

She chose to use similar language: where the Canada Goose ad said “OUTDOOR Performance,” Maria changed the language to “INDOOR Performance,” drawing attention to what goes on inside the factory as well as what is inside the garment that Canada Goose is selling.

The image is completely different: where the advertisement displays someone wearing a coat outside, in a snowy terrain, with a helicopter in the background, Maria’s image is of a person’s legs wearing shorts—indicating that the person is indoors—splayed on either side of a goose, with one hand holding the goose by the neck and the other pulling feathers off the body, half of which has been plucked naked already. In this way, causing the reader to look into the making of the garment by juxtaposing her image with the original ad, Maria applies irony, as she and her classmates had discussed in class. Here is Maria’s subvertisement:



Figure 9: A Subvertisement Created by a Student

A critical inquiry approach to teaching young adult literature not only brings an important critical aspect to the study of these texts, but it also provides a means of student engagement with the texts, one another, and the wider world. As I have discussed in previous chapters, critical inquiry asks questions about social power structures, justice, and inequity. Examining popular culture is an excellent way to raise awareness of power structures within society. Connections between young adult literature and popular culture are easily made. Students may be able to grasp these connections quickly, yet inquiring into the messages they relate may take a bit more effort. And thinking critically about how to respond to those messages requires more effort still.

And yet, when students apply that effort like they did in my class, it may not feel like effort to them at all. My students enjoyed critically inquiring into advertisements—once I provided them with questions that asked them to look for inequality and power structures, they were excited to do the work of analysis.

While we read *Feed* for this project, there are other young adult texts that lend themselves to examining corporate advertising, such as *Uglies* (2006) or *So Yesterday* (2005) by

Scott Westerfeld, or even the young reader *Bink and Gollie* by Kate DiCamillo and Alison McGhee (2010): “Don’t you need a new pair of socks?” There are also nonfiction texts like *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser (2001), *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* by Naomi Klein (1999), or the PBS Frontline program *Merchants of Cool*—which reports on “the creators and marketers of popular culture for teenagers” (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/>)—that would complement a young adult text in a thematic unit, offering other ideas and perspectives on consumerism for students to explore.

Subvertising and textual intervention are not only for young adult works that have media or advertising themes. These powerful tools can be used with most any text. Students can rewrite or add material to the work of classics or contemporary young adult literature in order to reveal perspectives and experiences that are excluded; explore social norms, such as gender or class; and/or reveal hidden biases implicit in characters, settings, historical moments, and intended readership.

For example, students reading *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton (1967) might “play around” with the text by rewriting scenes to add a transgender character, make the time period more contemporary, change the racial dynamics, or include cell phones or social media. As they explore the changes they propose, students can discuss and present on what they learn about the original source text—its limitations and biases—as well as what they learn about the issue they are explicitly exploring.

Discussion Question and Activity:

- 1) What are some other activities and/or assignments students could do intervene or “play around” with text?
- 2) In small groups, choose a book and brainstorm ideas for assignments that intervene with the text in some creative, critical inquiry way.

Mashups and Remixes

In Chapter Three, we considered a critical inquiry approach to teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960). During this unit, my students and I examined social issues by bringing various texts and media together with the novel. This could be called “mashup,” as we brought these separate pieces together in order to make new meaning. Although the issues we examined were clearly present in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the mashup we engaged in provided fuller, more complex views of the issues. As a final project, my students created a written piece as well as a mashup or remix that they presented to the class. Dan researched into America’s criminal justice system, finding further evidence of racial discrimination. For his presentation, he remixed a commercial for a prominent lawyer in his state, dubbing portions of it with his own satirical recordings that addressed disparities between legal representation for white people and for people of color, especially those who cannot afford to pay for legal representation.

In this chapter I want to argue that students can deepen their reading and enrich and complicate their writing about young adult literature by using popular, media, Internet, and new technologies that many of them already have some familiarity with. Media/technology literacy is essential for all 21st Century students, especially students who have less access to the tools. Dan edited his piece on iMovie, but there are several other technological tools that can perform similar functions, such as Animoto. Animoto is a website where students can create 30-second videos for free. An educator can get a free subscription which would allow them to register up to 50 students who can create videos of any length. If a teacher wanted more than 50 students to have access, there is an annual fee of \$30 (www.animoto.com).

During the portion of this unit focused on lynching and racial discrimination, I showed my students postcards with images of lynching in America that collector James Allen has compiled into a book, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000). I also showed them Depression-era photographs when we were discussing poverty within the novel's timeframe. Another possible assignment for students would be to create mashups with some of these photographs and modern-day photographs, creating a piece that is saying something new.

As I mention in Chapter Three, Hope created a mashup with her poem—written about poverty in America—set to Depression-era photographs, and set the slide show to music, effectively creating the desired mood for her piece (posted on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3euOVmtjik>). Poverty is an underlying issue in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but through her project and presentation, Hope drew it out in insightful ways. While her piece was powerful, I think that if a student were to create something like this again, I would suggest that they mash it up with some contemporary images of poverty along with those from the 1930s. A piece like this would communicate a different message, moving the audience toward thinking about history in conjunction with the present day.

Hope created her presentation on Windows Movie Maker, but students could also use technology like Voicethread to create similar presentations. Voicethread allows users to create slides with pictures, video, graphics, and web links, and students can add their own voices to the presentation (www.voicethread.com). Thus, a presentation can play on its own with the narrative power of the creator's voice. If a school has iPads for student use, an app with similar features is Shadow Puppet (available through iTunes). This app provides opportunity for students to combine photos and video clips with their own voice recording and any song. Students can also draw on the screen, add emojis, zoom in, and pan out for effect (www.get-puppet.co/).

If English language arts teachers wanted to further explore poverty, they could pair *To Kill a Mockingbird* with a beautiful young adult novel that addresses childhood poverty: Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park* (2013). Set in the 1980s, it focuses on that decade's pop culture, especially music. Park and Eleanor meet on the school bus on her first day at a new school, bond through music and comics, and eventually fall in love. The contrast between Park's home life and Eleanor's is stark. Park's parents love each other, and they live in a nice, middle-class home. Eleanor's mother, due at least in part to her economic situation, lives with an abusive man, and Eleanor and all her brothers and sisters—who have to share one small bedroom—live in fear of him. Eleanor has few things she can call her own, and she works hard every day to put together an outfit to wear to school.

Focusing on Eleanor's situation, students in my class explored the issue of childhood poverty. I first asked students to research into childhood poverty. Students came to class with statistics like this: in 2000, 16.1% of U.S. children lived in poverty. In 2008, that number grew to 18.9%. That is 14 million children (Wight, Chau, Thampi, & Aratani, 2010). Students shared their research, and then we discussed questions like: What does it mean for a child to live in poverty? What kind of control do they have over their lives?

English teachers might continue this examination of poverty and show photographs of childhood poverty in the world today, connecting them to the photographs examined while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Then, after students read and thought critically, discussed, questioned, and researched into this issue, they could create mashups modeled after the *Without Sanctuary* postcards, possibly using images of sweatshops, or of absurdly rich mansions mashed up with images of children in poverty. They could add satirical comments, like "Wish you were

here!” or “Having fun!” and even make these into broader campaigns around the school and community, promoting awareness.

Music Mashups

When I taught *Eleanor & Park*, we also focused on music, as many students love to listen to music and share their music interests with others. In class, we discussed music mashups and watched clips from the young adult television series *Glee*. This series aired from 2009 to 2015 and centers on a high school glee club and their director, Mr. Schuester. The characters often choose songs to sing in class that connect to a theme or an artist Mr. Schuester chooses, and the songs they sing reflect social issues the students are dealing with, like relationships, race, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, and bullying. Many times they create mashups out of two songs.

In class we watched some of these mashups and discussed how the two songs separately held different messages than the mashup communicated. For example, on Season One (2009), Mr. Schuester sings a mashup of “Young Girl” by Gary Puckett and the Union Gap (1968) and “Don’t Stand So Close to Me” by the Police (1980) to his star student, Rachel Berry, and the school counselor, Emma Pillsbury. We watched this mashup in class. I then projected the lyrics of “Don’t Stand So Close to Me” onto the screen and asked students to write about what they thought the song was communicating.

After writing, we discussed the song’s message. Students generally conferred that the speaker was a male teacher, had been tempted by a female student and tried to resist the temptation, but eventually gave in and had a sexual encounter with her. We then listened to the mashup again, and students wrote their thoughts on how mashing up “Don’t Stand So Close to

Me” with “Young Girl” changed the song’s message, especially as they considered the audience and the singer of the song.

During discussion, students noted that Mr. Schuester seemed to be telling Rachel that she was too young and her attraction to him was wrong. This was similar to the first part of “Don’t Stand So Close to Me,” as the speaker keeps telling the student not to come near him. But when the lyrics of “Young Girl” are mashed in, he says, “You better run, girl” and “Your love for me is way out of line,” which makes it seem as though he is fighting any temptation he may have. Students noted that what especially changed the message of the song were the lyrics that were left out. The part of “Don’t Stand So Close to Me” where the speaker mentions that “he starts to shake and cough,/ Just like the old man in that book by Nabokov” is not included in the mashup, so there is no evidence that the speaker acted upon any temptation. My students pointed out that this mashup has a completely different message than the original songs.

While creating actual mashup songs like the ones from *Glee* might be difficult for students, they could take the lyrics of songs and remix them to create something new in playful ways in order to critically inquire into messages of songs and create something that might speak back to accepted ways of thinking, like the subvertisements we had created. Their projects could analyze social relations and inequalities, and their mashups might reveal and subvert those existing ideas. Students should present their music mashups to the class: share their analyses of the original songs, their mashups, and the messages they were hoping to communicate. Writing reflections on their process deepens the inquiry.

Another project I might assign is to create a “mixed tape” like Park makes for Eleanor in the novel. While students might be more familiar with a playlist of digital music, I would invite them to create cover art (something a playlist on a phone would not include) and a title for their mixed tape, as these would contribute to the message their tape communicates. As students critically inquire into an issue that matters to them, they could gather song titles that might represent aspects of that issue. They could then mash up the titles and lyrics on a mixed tape label that communicates something they deem important. Of course, along with the project they create, I would ask students to present their mixed tape to the class in which they discuss why they made the choices they did—including the order of songs—and what they were hoping to communicate. I would also ask them to write a reflection of their process.

Discussion Question:

What are some other remix or mashup assignments students could do with music?

Wikis

Thus far in this chapter I have painted a playful portrait of critical inquiry in my own classroom, but this approach to teaching can take shape in many different forms. I am advocating that the best teaching allows students to draw on multiple texts—literature, informational text, film, popular culture, news articles, social media—both to pose their questions and to search for answers. Students pose questions based on what they are reading and consuming from all the sources available to them, and when they find answers to their questions, these answers can pose further questions, encouraging students to continue to explore (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2016, p. 6). Inquiry is recursive.

Through critical inquiry circles, Katie creates a “participatory culture” in her classroom (Jenkins, 2006). Henry Jenkins defines “participatory culture” as one in which students are allowed to express themselves artistically, discuss important issues with one another, share their creations, and engage in “informal mentorship” (2006). A participatory culture in the classroom is really a mashup of student perspectives and ideas, as students share their learning with one another and write collaboratively.

Katie’s 8th grade English language arts students finish their critical inquiry circles by creating mash up presentations complete with images, video, and audio components on Google Docs. The culminating piece of this unit is the group presentation.

Our educational system too often emphasizes individual and competitive reading, writing, learning, testing, and grading. Engaging in critical inquiry through collaborative writing, however, creates space for students to research, think critically, discuss, create, mentor, connect, and teach with each other—and they often go farther, learn more, and produce better products than they would working independently. A social approach to learning is a better fit with the 21st Century “real world” where workers are often in teams, rapidly sharing and developing ideas using multiple mediums and collaborating with others. Collaborative writing is an important activity to teach in English classrooms, and remixes and mashups invite student collaboration.

Jenny and Jamie also create participatory cultures in their classrooms. As I introduced in Chapter Two, these 7th grade teachers team up for a unit on World War II. Jenny teaches English language arts; Jamie, social studies. Throughout this unit, students read critically, inquire into issues in their novels, research and write collaboratively, create multimodal presentations, and

teach their peers. Additionally, these students publish their work beyond the classroom: on Wikipedia.

A wiki (the platform that Wikipedia uses) is a space where people can write, share ideas, revise others' writing, add digital images, and link other resources available on the Internet. Like remixes and mashups, wikis often combine different forms of text written by different authors to create meaning. While some instructors ask students to avoid Wikipedia in their research because anyone can publish there, Jenny and Jamie utilize the site's unique platform. Students learn in class about the Holocaust and many other aspects of World War II through reading informational text, viewing documentary and film clips, and learning about actual people who were imprisoned in concentration camps.

Wikis are a great space for collaborative writing, as are Google Docs and many other Web 2.0 tools. Every wiki page has a history of all edits made to it and can be reverted to previous versions. Every wiki page also has a discussion page where collaborating authors can discuss the content, approach, and changes that might be made to the page. Wikipedia, the best-known wiki, is a rich place for student reading and writing, but there are other wikis, many of them with free access, that students can use. These include WikiHow, where students could compose "how-to" manuals; LyricWiki, where users list lyrics by album; Travellerspoint, which shares information and recommendations for traveling; The TV IV, which provides information on television shows; WikiAnswers, where users pose and answer questions; and Encyclopedia Dramatica, which provides satire of internet memes. Depending on students' interests or the issues they are exploring, they could utilize any one of these wikis for reading and/or writing.

In Jenny's classroom, students also read young adult texts in critical inquiry circles, choosing from Jenny's classroom library. In one group, Macie (pseudonym) and her peers read *Projekt 1065: A Novel of World War II* by Alan Gratz (2016) and decided to research further into Hitler Youth. The main character, Michael O'Shaughnessey, lives with his parents in Germany, but they are Irish. Michael joins Hitler Youth in order to gather information, though the organization stands for everything he and his family despises and are secretly fighting against.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What might be some benefits of collaborative writing?
- 2) How would you assess collaborative writing? What are some ways to ensure that each student is contributing?
- 3) Brainstorm ideas for a collaborative writing assignment that extends critical inquiry in reading.
- 4) Choose one collaborative writing assignment and imagine an authentic audience students could write for. How might they "publish" this piece?

Macie and her group were intrigued by this story of Michael and the power Adolf Hitler had over the people of Germany. Macie was especially disgusted that "if students didn't join Hitler Youth, then their teachers were allowed to bully them in school. That's so wrong! Teachers shaming and beating students?" Macie and her classmates' outrage at adults berating students for not supporting their ideology drove her critical inquiry circle to research further into the Hitler Youth program.

As they researched in their group, students were encouraged to look up videos and information online. Macie's group watched the HBO film *Heil Hitler! Confessions of a Hitler Youth* on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJ6umV7CVY8> as well as other short documentaries, read informational texts on the expectations of Hitler Youth and how boys would move through the program, and accounts of what actual children endured. Macie was shocked that, at age 13, some boys were shooting at planes during air raids: "They were only one year

older than me!” In Macie’s critical inquiry group, they asked the research questions: “What could students do if they didn’t want to join Hitler Youth?” and “Why didn’t adults protect students who chose not to join?” These students were questioning power structures in World War II Germany while also relating what they were learning to their own experiences and their own lives. As they learned, shared ideas, and researched together, they were contributing to the participatory culture in their classroom.

Once students finished researching their topics, they published their findings on Wikipedia. Students wrote collaboratively on this wiki, including links to resources they had found on the Internet through their research. (I discuss critical inquiry circles in more detail in Chapter Two.) Thus, not only were students mashing up their words and ideas within their critical inquiry circle, but they were also publishing on a widely-used platform, adding their voices to those who had published there before.

Multimodal Presentations

Finally, students created remixes and mashups in multimodal presentations, teaching their classmates about what they had learned. Multimodal presentations are exciting ways for students to share their learning with peers in their classrooms, but they could also share these with a wider audience. Glogster is one tool teachers can use with their students that makes creating presentations and digital storytelling simple. With Glogster (or eduGlogster for educators), students can arrange pictures, videos, text, clip art, and web links into a digital “poster” in order to present their story or research project to the class. Thus, Glogster is an excellent tool for remix and mashup projects.

These posters are creative ways to display information, and when students present, they can move through each element on their poster, guiding their audience in the order they would like them to go. The poster provides an attractive, condensed space to contain information, and each text box has a scroll bar, so there could be more information within that textbox than what is immediately visible. If a teacher would like students to publish to a wider audience than their classroom, students can make their posters public on the Glogster website (www.edu.glogster.com).

Another exciting multimodal presentation is a “book trailer.” Rather than having students give book talks of books they have read (Kittle, 2013), teachers could have them create book trailers to share with their peers (think movie trailers, only about books rather than films). After my students had read their own chosen independent reading book, I asked them to create book trailers to share with the class.

A simple online search provides many examples of book trailers and helpful websites for creating them. Many examples are produced by book publishers and include actors in “film clips,” or short pieces that look like they might be taken from a film (though in actuality they are created just for the book trailer), mashed up with instrumental music, voiceover, and words on the screen that might include quotes from the book and from reviews of the book.

Book trailers created by students tend to have more still pictures (as creating “film clip” scenes can be difficult and time-consuming) that are also remixed with music, voiceover (often the student’s voice recording), and words on the screen. Students can create book trailers with technology I have shared earlier in this chapter, such as iMovie, Animoto, Voicethread, and Shadow Puppet. One wiki site, developed by a librarian, publishes dozens of student-made book

trailers. It even provides a step-by-step “how-to” video for students who would like to create their own book trailers: <http://www.booktrailersforreaders.com>.

Creating and presenting book trailers develops excitement surrounding young adult literature. Not only are students excited to create their book trailers, further inquiring into and exploring their young adult novel, but they are also eager to watch their classmates’ book trailers. Many teachers ask their students to take note of books that look particularly interesting from their peers’ book trailers so they will have a list of possible books to read in future.

When I ask my students to create book trailers about young adult literature, I give them specific guidelines. In order to communicate how they thought critically about their book while reading, I ask that they include one or two critical questions they asked about a social issue within the text along with an introduction to the characters, plot, and conflict of the book. I also ask them to share some of their research on the issue.

For example, one student in my class read *The Scorch Trials* by James Dashner (2010), the second book in *The Maze Runner* series. In this post-apocalyptic book, Thomas, the main character, and his friends have been infected with “The Flare”—which makes human beings into zombie-like creatures—and must find a cure for themselves. They travel across a large section of the Earth that has been scorched in order to find this cure. As my student read this young adult novel, she was interested in what might cause the Earth to become scorched like this, and so she researched into climate change. In her book trailer, she shared her introduction to the characters, plot, and conflict of the book (without revealing too much—no spoilers!) and shared some of her research about climate change, including what will happen to our world if we don’t work for change.

Before I ask my students to create book trailers, we view other professional and student-made book trailers during class to determine the conventions of the genre. After we watch a trailer, we discuss common conventions (voice-over talking, introductions to main characters, a brief description of the conflict, questions about how the conflict will be resolved, quotes from the text, quotes from reviews of the book, images or videos that connect to what the voice-over is describing, etc.). As the students become more familiar with the conventions of a book trailer, we begin to analyze how well the example executes the conventions. Students are quickly able to discern which book trailers are well made and which ones are not.

As students begin to create their own book trailers, I give them time during class to create them on the school laptops. Students also work on these assignments outside of class. For those students who don't have access to technology at home, I provide laptops for them during Study Hall. If teachers do not have access to technology at all, they could ask students to give book talks and add in the critical inquiry aspect, of course, or they could ask students to create a story board to go with their book talks, adding a visual dimension in which students can mash up images and words on poster board. Students could even choose background music for their talks and play it while they share their story boards with the class.

In my classroom, students are allowed to work individually or in small groups, and they often help one another with the technology they are utilizing—promoting a participatory culture. When they finish, we celebrate with a “Book Trailer Viewing Day” when we watch all their book trailers. On this day, I ask students to take notes in their notebooks of which books look the most intriguing to them.

Another critical inquiry approach teachers could take with book trailers is to critique existing book trailers as well as the genre itself.

While teachers certainly want to create excitement in their students about reading, and one of their goals is to have students choose books from school and classroom libraries to read, publishing

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What might be some benefits to students creating book trailers?
- 2) Brainstorm other ways you or your students could use book trailers in your classroom.

companies create book trailers to advertise, and ultimately sell, their books. Students could view publishers' book trailers with this in mind, critiquing this form of "advertisement" like my students did with clothing and technology ads. How might images or scenes in the book trailer raise questions? What are the implicit messages in these images and the words from the text? Then, when students create their own book trailers, they could do so with these thoughts in mind, using images in their own trailers that might challenge the audience or the book's assumptions. This is another way that students can speak back to ideologies they're critiquing in what they are reading.

While students can share their book trailers with the class and the teacher, they can also publish them to a wider audience, posting them on the teacher's or school's website, websites created to showcase student book trailers, or even on YouTube where anyone can see them.

Making a Difference

By intervening with iconic advertisements or images, mashing up well-known texts, developing wikis, or posting writings, projects, and presentations in public spaces, students are creating for an audience much wider than just the teacher or even their own classroom peers. My students have posted projects on their own blogs, my website, and YouTube. Other teachers

have asked students to publish on the school's website and even Wikipedia. Having a real-world audience is likely to prompt students to carefully plan and execute their projects, paying close attention to the finishing touches before posting them in public or online.

If students are creating a campaign, advocating for themselves or others, and supporting a cause, they could develop their own website or a page on the teacher's website, or use social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat. When students are working for a cause important to them, the desire to create polished, effective pieces is further enhanced.

An exciting way to end any unit would be to have students organize service learning projects where they are working to make a difference in their community, others' communities, the nation, or even the world. When students are passionate about a cause, they are motivated to learn how they can make a difference. As I write this chapter, people are marching all over the United States for stricter gun legislation: March for Our Lives, a student-led demonstration. Student survivors from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida—the site of a mass shooting on February 14, 2018 in which 17 people were killed and 17 more wounded—created an organization called Never Again MSD on social media using the hashtag #NeverAgain. One of the group's goals is to impact elections in 2018, and they have used their voices in social media, news media, and public protests to affect change in Florida and across the United States. In fact, in an editorial, *The Washington Post* credits Never Again MSD with Florida's new gun legislation, "raising the legal age to purchase all firearms to 21, banning bump stocks, closing a loophole that allowed gun purchases without completed background checks and establishing a 'red-flag' process to remove guns from those seen as a danger" (A rarity, 2018).

While this advocacy began in response to a traumatic event in the students' lives, what students learn through reading young adult literature with a critical inquiry approach can also prompt student advocacy. I share in Chapter Four about Renee' Wilmot's students and how they came together as a class to advocate for protestors of the Dakota Access Pipeline, raising money to purchase supplies and collaboratively writing a letter of support to the protestors. Students' inquiries will guide students to explore many different issues, like my student explored climate change through reading *The Scorch Trials*. After researching important questions about climate change and learning how it will impact their generation as well as those to follow, they may become impassioned to make a difference. Thus, students could work together to inform and educate the public. They could also join with other organizations to advocate for stricter policy to protect our natural resources and to restrict emissions.

Teachers and students have so many resources available for making their voices heard and for making a difference in their communities and in our world. Social media is an excellent tool for education and advocacy, as are wiki sites, blogs, and websites. Critically creating remixes and mashups of informative text, memoir, documentary, film, web links, music, and images is a powerful means for sharing learning and speaking back to dominant ideologies. When students engage in this kind of work, their projects are meaningful and impacting for them, and they are learning to become citizens in their communities and the wider world.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Throughout this book I argue that critical inquiry, including cultural studies and critical youth studies, is an exciting and effective approach to teaching young adult literature. Applying a critical inquiry approach to young adult literature provides many opportunities for creative and critical teaching and learning. As students experience the freedom of developing their own curriculum along with their teacher and classmates, they engage in materials through issues that matter to them; inquire into those issues through reading, writing, researching, discussing, and creating; and ultimately share their learning through publishing, teaching, and advocating for themselves and others. This is the basis of good English language arts teaching.

While I have applied a critical inquiry approach to the teaching of young adult literature and discussed the importance of teaching this literature in middle and secondary classrooms, this approach can be applied to the teaching of any literature. I believe this book can empower preservice and in-service English language arts teachers to implement a critical inquiry approach to teaching young adult literature in their own classrooms. Throughout this book I have provided many examples of what this teaching might look like, but of course teachers are free to shape approaches to fit their own teaching styles, students, and classroom contexts.

This book may also benefit middle and high school administration, as they might encourage critical inquiry approaches in their teachers' classrooms as well as understand the importance of providing reading materials for students. Creating space in the budget to purchase books for school and classroom libraries benefits all students.

In future, I hope to further explore how in-service teachers are applying critical inquiry approaches in their classrooms, and I am especially interested in those applying critical youth studies to the teaching of young adult literature. I foresee myself researching and publishing articles—maybe even a book—about the teaching of critical youth studies in middle and secondary schools, and I am excited to bring this research to preservice teachers in my English methods courses.

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Appendix A - HSIRB Approval Letter

Date: May 11, 2016

To: Allen Webb, Principal Investigator
Steffany Maher, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 16-04-23

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Contemporary Methods of Teaching Young Adult Literature" has been **approved** under the **exempt** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., ***you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study."*** Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination:

May 10, 2017

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