

Teaching Literary Theory to Middle School Students 1

Using Young Adult Literature and Literary Theory to Teach Middle School Students
How to Read Through Critical Lenses

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Abstract

Middle school students are socially conditioned through an inundation of messages conveyed by various mediums, and language arts teachers are capable of teaching them how to deconstruct messages through exercises in critical literacy. Many language arts teachers are not aware of critical theory and, if they are aware, rely solely on classic literature when teaching critical literacy. Research shows students are responding to young adult literature (YAL) therefore a more effective approach when teaching critical literacy would be to introduce YAL first and then use it as a bridge into classic literature.

A literature review was conducted to examine the exercises currently taught in critical literacy, the history of YAL and the genres of YAL available today. The literature explores ways students can take what they learn in the language arts classroom and practice balanced decision making, become wise consumers, and contribute ethically to the greater good of society.

To expand on the literature review, further research was performed through observation of a course in YAL at Vanderbilt University and interviews with the professor. The class explored critical theory and its application to YAL in the modern day classroom.

Findings centered on the apparent need of the language arts teachers and their ability to create speculative and responsible citizens for society through the application of critical literacy practice. The most effective tool in engaging middle school students in these practices is YAL.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The purpose of my research stems from a love of reading, a desire to influence literary appreciation, and a hope of creating independent, critical thinkers. I have subbed and tutored at the middle school level and enjoy working with students on their book reports and participating in group discussions on literature. I am always intrigued to know what the students choose when granted the license to choose independently, and their thoughts on their selections. Furthermore, in our society and workplaces, it is imperative that people, namely students, arrive equipped with the skills to question ethical business practices, advertisements, and political points of view while maintaining respect for differing opinions.

I began my thesis with the intent of promoting classic literature on middle school students, mostly because I did not have an appreciation for the classic works until I attended college. Upon further inspection, I found out why I experienced this delay in interest. While I realize it is important to carry on the tradition of the classics, I wonder if middle school students are ready for many of the selections. The research shows that many are not mentally prepared, and when classics are forced upon them they, in turn, resist the reading experience as a whole. If the goal is to teach critical thinking skills in the language arts classroom, research shows it is more effective to begin with young adult literature (YAL) and use it as a bridge into the classics.

Statement of Problem

In order to be a fair and balanced 21st century citizen, it is imperative to possess critical thinking skills. Teachers, more specifically language arts teachers, have the responsibility to equip students with these skills in the classroom. We live in a society where social conditioning has become the norm: successful critical thinkers can challenge ideas presented by advertisements, media, and politicians while appreciating differing points of view. Language arts teachers attempt to teach these skills through literature, but the classics are no longer resonating with the students. As a result, students shun the reading experience entirely. The alternative is to introduce YAL, and use it as a bridge into the classics. What is the best approach to instilling these thinking abilities at a middle school level?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this paper is to identify effective methods in teaching critical thinking skills in middle school and to explore YAL as an alternative to classic literature as a means to apply these skills. Since students seem disengaged from reading when presented with classic literature, the purpose is to identify alternatives, specifically YAL, and the best methods of instilling critical thinking skills.

Research Questions

What about YAL generates more interest in reading than classic literature for middle school student? What mediums are responsible for social conditioning? How can we best teach students to identify and deconstruct their messages?

Theoretical Rationale

Many theorists have found language arts teachers hold the keys to the transmission of culture, thoughtful discourse and analytical thought through the critique of the written word and the strategies contributing to the development of such skills (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005). Furthermore, experienced and inexperienced readers many times disengage when presented with classic literature, further alienating them from the reading experience (Crowe, 2000). We can find more friendly books to engage the young reader in such a way that opens their imagination, and young adult novels may be the best texts to hook students on reading (Crowe, 2000). Once engaged in the literature, students can begin to apply critical thinking skills. Sloan (2003) found that literacy and critical literacy develop cumulatively over a life-time. Contemplating literature critically and reflectively can help us to develop the capacity to view with detachment other verbal structures that surround us (Sloan, 2003).

Assumptions

Students are inherently socially conditioned and critical analysis through applied literary theories will guide them in deconstructing messages received not only in books, but also in conversation, media and other channels. Critical thinking skills can be taught by using engaging reading selections, followed by the application of literary deconstruction and class discussion. Research and observation have found that middle school students are not interested in classic literature and would rather engage YAL for a variety of reasons, therefore it is more effective to employ YAL as the medium in teaching critical literacy. Students make a stronger connection with YAL in part because

it addresses issues pertaining to their own lives, therefore they are better able to relate to the subject matter. Critically literate students will be more effective in deconstructing political messages, musical messages, advertisements, and valuing other people's opinions.

Background and Need

Truly literate students know not only how to read, but more importantly how to interpret, analyze and question what they read, not because the teacher is telling them to, but because they want to. We can use literature to develop our ability to interpret the multitude of messages conveyed to us daily, from advertisements, to political speeches and avoid social conditioning (Sloan, 2003). The language arts teacher is responsible for imparting these skills to students through literature and critique of the written word (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005).

The first obstacle is getting the students to engage with the literature. Many U.S. students know how to read, however they have difficulty breaking down the meaning of the text and are therefore reluctant to read. They can comprehend the words but cannot contextualize the meaning in a way that allows them to relate with the subject matter, unable to experience the magic of reading. Insisting that students read known classics will more than likely turn them off of reading even further, possibly making them view books as the enemy (Crowe, 2000). It is possible to introduce "friendlier" books to students who have yet to develop a passion for the written word, and for adolescents this alternative is YAL (Crowe, 2000). If students make a connection with the literature, they

will be more successful when applying critical thinking skills. YAL can be used as a bridge to appreciation of the classics later on.

Since YAL clearly resonates with the middle school student, we must determine how we can integrate it, along with the classics, into the function of critical literacy through the application of literary theories and other critical practices.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to provide information on YAL, the role of student as a 21st century thinker, and strategies used to convey critical thinking skills to middle school students. Identifying the connections between YAL and critical thinking skills is a relatively understudied area, therefore the long-term goal would be to create connections between the two, and become involved in what students read and more importantly, how they read it.

Historical Context

YAL has undergone an extensive growth process over many years, so it comes as no surprise literary critics, educators, and enthusiasts have a wide definition of the category. One of the few constants is the proposal of the year 1967 as the turning point, or as some maintain, the launching point of YAL as a genre. While there is no succinct definition of YAL, many subject matter experts have offered their own. Crowe (1998) defines YAL as “all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed to young adults” and a ‘young adult’ as “a person old enough to be in junior high or high school, usually grades seven through twelve” (p. 121). Cart (1996) refers to Mertz and England’s definition, stating YAL is “that realistic and contemporary American fiction which young adults as well as more mature and critical readers can find aesthetically and thematically satisfying and which is, implicitly or explicitly, written for adolescents” (p. 8).

Herz and Gallo (1996) highlight the attributes of YAL as seen since 1967:

In addition to the usual literary elements of adult literature-plot, setting, point of view, characterization, dialogue, style, and theme-most YAL now include the following characteristics: the main character is a teenager; the story is often narrated by a teenager, creating an intimate contact between reader and writer; the story is about a problem or concern with which teenage readers can identify; the first page or two demands readers' attention, enticing them to read on; the book is not too long (usually about 200 pages) (Herz & Gallo, 1996, p. xvi).

It is possible the difficulty defining YAL is tied to the ambiguous nature of the expression "young adult," since there is not a generally agreed upon age range with a clear beginning and end. Furthermore, the terms "adolescent," "young adult," and "teenager" are used interchangeably.

It was not until after World War II when librarians began discussions on this age group and deemed it necessary to present age appropriate literature to them. In 1963, Kenneth Shaffer, the director of the School of Library Science at Simmons College recalled the "excitement of nearly a quarter of a century ago when we made the professional discovery of the adolescent-the 'young adult'- as a special kind of library client whose needs could no longer be adequately met, served either as a child or as an adult reader" (Cart, 1996, p.6). However, it was not made official until nearly two decades later in 1958, when leadership was formally established in the Young Adult Services Division, now known as the Young Adult Library Services Association, or YALSA. The organization still serves as the category's primary institution today (Cart, 1996).

Many books written between the 1920s and 1950s were "squeaky clean," written about white middle class teenagers, and managed to avoid controversial topics, and by

default avoided the true nature of the typical adolescent life (Herz & Gallo, 1996, p. 8).

As previously mentioned, the turning point for YAL came in 1967 and this is attributed to the publication of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. While some educators include novels such as *Little Women*, *Seventeenth Summer*, *Hot Rod*, *A Catcher in the Rye* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* under the YAL umbrella, Crowe (1998) does not include anything published before *The Outsiders* and claims it “clearly established the realistic novel for the teenage book market” (p. 121).

S.E. Hinton was a teenager living in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when she wrote the novel, *The Outsiders* and addressed topics of survival, gangs, poverty and orphan hood. Hinton was quoted as saying, “The world is changing yet the authors of books for teenagers are still 15 years behind the times. In the fiction they write, romance is still the most popular theme, with a horse-and-the-girl-who-loved-it coming in a close second” (Cart, 1996, p. 45). As Cart and Peck put it, “there was something about *The Outsiders* that captured the imagination of its readers and spawned a new kind of literature, ‘books,’ about young people parents thought their children didn’t know, or more probably, wished they didn’t know” (Cart, 1996, p. 45).

There is also the case of the “crossover” novel where, through the years, an author intentionally writes a book for adults but the primary reader is a young adult, for instance, J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (Herz & Gallo, 1996). This label is sometimes applied, much to the dismay of the author. *The Iron Duke* author John R. Tunis was quoted saying, “That odious term juvenile is the product of a merchandising age” (Cart,

1996, p. 17). Other crossover titles include *The Lord of the Flies*, *A Separate Peace*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Ordinary People*.

There are many observers who believe “if any classics of the young adult novel have been produced, they are likely to have been published during the seventies” (Cart, 1996, p. 76). Further evidence of this claim is supported through the results of the 1994 meeting of YALSA to determine the “best of the best” young adult books published between 1967 and 1992.

Similar gatherings had been held in 1975, 1983 and 1988, and there were only five books that earned the distinction of appearing on all four lists: Maya Angelou *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), Rosa Guy *The Friends* (1973), Sylvia Plath *The Bell Jar* (1971), Glendon Swarthout *Bless the Beast and Children* (1970), and Robb White *Deathwatch* (1972). Many classroom educators of the 1970s refused to teach YAL and did not view the genre as true literature but “inferior reading material suitable only for remedial readers who were unable to handle the required classics” (Gallo, 2010, p.9). Although similar views are far less common today, they survive due to the unease many educators have of sensitive material frequently addressed in YAL (Gallo, 2010).

While the 1970s proved to be a turning point in YAL, many universities teaching courses on the subject were at a loss for a textbook that adequately provided a history and definitions. Many professors used journal articles written about YAL until 1972 when Kenneth Donelson, editor for the *Arizona English Journal*, published “Adolescent Literature, Adolescent Reading, and the English Class” and it became the informal guide to YAL in the university classroom. In 1980, a “major event in YAL history” took place

when the first textbook was published by Nilsen and Donelson, serving as a comprehensive compilation of YAL subject matter (Soter, Faust & Rogers, 2008, p.17). The eighth edition was recently published and the textbook is still considered “the bible of YAL” (Soter et al., 2008, p.17).

The 1980s saw a focus on suspense, horror, and mystery novels with major contributions from R.L. Stein and Joan Lowry. Fantasy novels grew steadily through the 1990s until exploding more recently with the popularity of the J.K. Rowling *Harry Potter* and Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series. Another recent contribution to YAL is the graphic novel, covering subject matter from science fiction to Shakespearean tragedy (Gallo, 2010, p. 8).

Much of YAL written during the 1970s to 1990s was targeted at the middle school age group, while more recently authors have begun writing for the older teenage set, possibly attributed to the conception of the prestigious Michael L. Printz Award given by the American Library Association (Gallo, 2010, p. 9). The Printz award recognizes a book that exemplifies literary excellence in YAL. Another prestigious award, the Alex Award awarded by ALA, annually selects the top ten books written for adults but appeal to the young adult age group. Another coveted industry accolade is the ALAN Award, honoring those who have made major contributions to the field of adolescent literature (Skillen, 2010).

If YAL is met with some resistance from certain groups today, the teenage set is devouring what is available and recent publishing numbers speak for themselves. There is without a doubt a market for YAL and reports show it is only growing. “Targeting the

12-and-up age group, the segment's (young adult books) sales are up 23% since 1999, according to estimates by industry analyst Albert Greco, a Fordham University marketing professor. Last year, even without a new "Potter" book, overall revenue in the young-adult segment increased to \$410 million, estimates Mr. Greco. In all, there were more than 21,000 new kids' titles released in 2004 -- double the number in 2002" (Beatty, 2005). YAL expert Dr. Melanie Hundley adds, "Young adults love books in a series and they want to move into the story and stay awhile. They want more than the book. They want fan books, games, multi-media. They want to talk online with other kids around the world about their favorite book" (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, July, 2, 2010).

Social Conditioning and the Role of the Critical Thinker

Chorzempa and Lapidus (2009) quoted Aristotle, "True knowledge exists in knowing that you know nothing. And in knowing that you know nothing, that makes you the smartest of all. To find yourself, think for yourself" (Aristotle, as cited in Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009). In our society, we often do not connect literacy competency with the overall function of education, and the application of what a student learns in the classroom to the improvement of society as a whole (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005).

We use our imagination in every aspect of our daily lives, including our interpersonal communication, and relations, evaluating entertainment and advertising messages, and when analyzing politics, politicians, and the news (Sloan, 2003). Literature has the capacity to develop our imaginations and how we perceive the human experience. A well-developed imagination, when taught through literature, can shield itself from "social conditioning" (Sloan, 2003, p14). It has been demonstrated over time misuse (or

absence) of literacy skills have contributed to spectacular breakdowns of critical thinking: see WorldCom, Enron and Arthur Andersen. Critical thinking skills will ensure our students will use sustainable decision making processes, become wiser consumers, successfully sift through the masses of information, communicate clearly, and contribute ethically to the greater good of society (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005).

The Role of the Language Arts Teacher

Mantle-Bromley and Foster (2005) have found that reading is the primary gateway to the world of knowledge and connections, and teachers are instrumental in defining what constitutes an educated population. Mantle-Bromley and Foster (2005) also report when teachers acknowledge and encourage student voice and responsibility they help to prepare students for engaged citizenry. Through critical thinking exercises students become accustomed to "trusting each other, listen with care and empathy, disagree respectfully, and use feedback to refine and improve their work" (p. 72).

Mantle-Bromley and Foster emphasize the following:

Quality literature is a powerful tool in the hands of quality teachers. Teachers guide students through controversial material, unfamiliar texts, difficult vocabulary, and a range of writing patterns. Teachers prod and push students to think about multiple points of view, search for the reasons behind actions, understand the characters and their circumstances, look beyond the surface text and, ultimately, learn about themselves and others. (Mantle-Bromley and Foster, 2005, p. 73)

Sloan (2003) believes that teachers are responsible for maintaining a climate of mutual respect particularly in literary studies, where genuine reflection and critical thinking are exercised, and as a result, there aren't "right" or "wrong" answers. The teacher's role is critical in providing the opportunity for students to express their ideas,

test their notions in relation to others, and to “engage in convergent and divergent thinking” (p. 152).

Young Adult Literature and a Love of Reading

Crowe (2000) reports on the importance of instilling a love of reading and contends, “Without an appreciation of the magic of reading, our students will never, never gain a love of literature” (p. 138). Crowe (2000) concludes that YAL is potentially the best option available to “hook students on stories and reading” (p. 139). They have the ability to hold the young, and often-inexperienced readers’ attention, whereas many classic novels cannot. Crowe (2000) goes on to quote B.F. Skinner in his article stating, “We shouldn’t teach great books; we should teach a love of reading,” and further modifies this quote into his own words by stating, “We shouldn’t teach great books *until* we have taught a love of reading” ensuring he emphasizes the importance of classic literature as well (p. 140).

In another article addressing the definitions and parameters of YAL, Crowe (1998), contributes his own personal definition of YAL as “all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed for young adults” (p. 121). Crowe (1998) further maintains there is much confusion and ambiguity around YAL, and are often mistaken for solely book series, movie tie-in novels, even classic literature. In addition, teachers can use YAL as a “milk before meat” approach and connect the students with relatable, engaging novels and then use them as a bridge to the classics later on (p. 121).

Former Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) president, Michael

Cart (1998), puts YAL in the following context:

The term “young adult literature” is inherently amorphous, for its constituent terms “young adult” and “literature” are dynamic, changing as culture and society — which provide their context — change. When the term first found common usage in the late 1960’s, it referred to realistic fiction that was set in the real (as opposed to imagined), contemporary world and addressed problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to young readers aged approximately 12-18 (p. 1)

Cart (2008) further articulates that while much of that still remains true to present day, to accommodate the expanding population, the YAL terms have broadened to age groups up to 25 years of age. While formerly perceived as problem-solving and romance novels, modern YAL is regarded as “literature that welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking” (p. 1). Cart (2008) stresses the importance of promoting relevant reading to young adults particularly after The Alliance for Excellent Education has declared a “literacy crisis among middle and high school students” based on research performed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress stating 65 percent of graduating high school seniors and 71 percent of America’s eighth graders are reading below grade level (p. 1).

Historically, teachers have made the text selections for their students, sometimes basing the selection on student need, other times adhering to a state or school curriculum standards. These selections can affect student learning and reading engagement for years to come (Friese et al., 2008). Some teachers look at book selection as an opportunity to introduce classic literature or modern literature, or differentiate instruction, and several

factors influence their selection, including their personal knowledge of text, their access to books, or even institutional constraints on teacher selection (Friese et al., 2008).

Middle school students are thought to have insular lifestyles and are often consumed by their immediate social surroundings, with little exposure or association with life beyond their immediate environment, namely events occurring in classic literature or history (Athanases, 2003). Another perspective promotes YAL as a stimulating way to get young adolescents reading because they contain themes, plot, language, and characters relevant to their own lives. As previously mentioned, they can also serve as a segue into introduction of the traditional canon, or classic literature. But just like the canon, introducing YAL will be met with resistance and routine challenges from parents, librarians and teachers (Stallworth, 2006).

Furthermore, without teacher involvement in relating these themes, students will lose engagement. Literature can serve either as a “mirror reflecting experience” or a “window on to difference,” meaning the teachers can make selections with the sole purpose of identifying with the students’ experience, or they can make selections in order to shed light on new subjects, opening their eyes to the world around them (Athanases, 2003, p. 113). This interaction with the students allows the teachers to provide scaffolding when appropriate, or abstract a theme, then link it to various literary works while integrating background knowledge and as a result, displaying how themes can arise from various directions (Athanases, 2003).

In interviews performed by Steven Athanases at a middle school in Nashville, Tennessee, teacher sentiment focused on the importance of making life-long readers of

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their students. Without specific attention to comprehension support, their students would not be motivated to read. The goal of these teachers was to link the students' out-of-school knowledge to the themes in their literature selections, and most importantly to "be on fire."

Eighth grade language arts teacher, Lucinda, adds:

It broadens their worlds to see theme played out in different times, cultures, and voices. Teachers take this for granted. But when it works, it gives the kids a context for their learning. It also can get the teacher more enthused, which gets the kids more enthused. And teachers need to be on fire. (Athanases, 2003, p. 107)

Athanases stresses the importance of prospective teachers' knowledge of a wide range of engaging, age-appropriate literature, as well as cross-curricular literature evocative of historical periods. Without these pieces, teachers will be ill-prepared to engage students, and more importantly give them the structure for intellectual challenge, coupled with pleasure, that creates the life-long reader (Athanases, 2003). YAL could serve as an intellectual challenge, and many believe it deserves a prominent place on the bookshelves of our school libraries (Stallworth, 2006).

It is imperative for classroom teachers to supply an extensive YAL library in their classrooms because not all libraries house extensive collections or resources exploring selections. Now most schools of library and information science offer at least one course in young adult resources and/or services, and many offer multiple courses but not all librarians have been educated on the area.

A search of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) membership directory reveals that approximately 13% of ALISE members identify "young adult services" as one of their teaching and/or research areas (ALISE,

2007). There are over 30 million teenagers currently in the United States, the largest generation since the Baby Boomers, and, according to a 2007 survey of young people conducted by a Harris Poll for the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), 78% of these teen respondents have library cards. Sixteen percent of all public libraries shelve young adult materials in the children's section (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). Only 12% of public libraries offer young adult book discussion groups, 33% offer presentations and workshops on topics of interest to teenagers, and 74% offer young adult reading lists (NCES, 2010). Libraries with a young adult or youth services specialist were more than twice as likely to offer presentations and workshops of interest to young adults (52 percent compared to 21 percent) (NCES, 2010).

School libraries can be rich resources for YAL readers especially when librarians are effective in presenting what is available and guide the reader in making appropriate selections. According to The Harris Youth Poll, participants surveyed were ages 8-18, 31% reported visiting their school library a couple of times a week, 29% reported a couple of times a month, 60% reported they visited their school library to borrow books and other materials for own personal use and 33% said they would visit their school library more often if there was more interesting material to borrow (NCES, 2010).

Strategies to Teach Critical Thinking through Young Adult Literature

Teachers should not approach literature as an imposition of personal moral preaching through book choice, but recognize their responsibility to teach students how to be critical and independent readers. As the saying goes, “knowledge is power” and

teachers have the facility to empower students on how to make informed book selections and can do so through guided literary selection and instruction (Whitney, 2007).

Theorists have identified a variety of ways to teach critical thinking skills to middle school students, including dialectical journals (Edwards, 1992), QAR and “Marking the Text and Holding Thinking” (Meyer, 2010, p. 501), “Essential Questions” (Brown, 2009), and “The Socratic Method” (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009). A very effective and respected approach to teaching critical thinking is through the application of literary theory and use of critical lenses (Appleman, 2000). Critical literacy and theory are discussed in greater detail below.

Chorzempa and Lapidus (2009) describe Socratic seminars as probing and scholarly exchanges of conversation around a text, and are meant to mimic Socrates’ “instruction-through-questioning” method (p. 55). Chorzempa and Lapidus (2009) further describe these exchanges as “student-centered” in order to promote “authentic engagement and to prompt ideas to occur” (p.55).

In “Marking the Text and Holding Thinking,” teachers speak extemporaneously while reading text in an effort to display their thought processes to the students. During the reading the students can make predictions, ask questions, and make associations with the text (Meyer, 2010). Furthermore, it involves thorough engagement on the students’ part as they are required to “generate inquiry” through proposing “burning questions” (p. 501).

Brown (2009) stresses the importance of placing questions from both teacher and student at the forefront of discussions. “Essential questions” are created as open-ended

questions that do not imply apparent answers, and could possibly change over time depending on the students' experiences and evolving knowledge of a topic. These questions are presented to a group so the students have various responses to consider before formulating their own personal opinions or positions on a topic. The questions encourage students to prepare cohesive and comprehensive responses, and more importantly affords them the opportunity to work with peers, from whom they tend to learn the most (Brown, 2009).

Edwards (1992) presents dialectical journals as a means of practicing students' thinking skills, specifically through student response to a "sequential instructional plan" which elicits a specific kind of thinking in response to written or orally presented material (p.313). Through these journals students apply literal-level and comprehension-level thinking by simply keeping track of information presented to them. An example of one type of dialectical journal would be students filling in columns addressing the following questions: "What it (the idea) says," "What it means," "What it means to me," and "What it means to the world" (p. 314).

Defining Critical Literacy and Literary Theory

Critical literacy is historically vague, with many theorists stressing the importance of their own theory. However, one piece of critical literacy is definitive: critical literacy stems from ideology. Ideology influences how we think, how we act, and forms who we are as a person, as a community, and as a society. Robert Scholes, literary theorist, explains "the relationship between the text and the world is not simply a fascinating problem for textual theory. It is above all others, the problems that makes textual theory

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necessary” (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010). Students develop critical literacy through the application of literary theories, also known as critical lenses, of which there are several types, often overlapping. As defined by Apol (1998), “literary theory is a tool we can use to help us determine the ideology- the cultural assumptions and unexamined messages- contained in a text...and examine the relationship between the author, the text, the reader and the world; they contain systematic approaches to texts and provide methods for studying and evaluation the things we read” (p. 35).

Throughout the last few decades, critical theory has established a presence in college and university literature classes, and is a respected and widely used approach to making connections to literature (Appleman, 2000). After World War II, the world saw the fruition of post-structuralism, and with it came a multitude of critical perspectives, or lenses, vastly expanding on critical practice from its earlier state of closed analysis. Post-structural theories took into consideration not only the role of the author, but also the reader, the text and socio-cultural contexts of the text (Soter et al, 2008, p. 7).

While there have been many critical perspectives throughout time, two prominent pre-structuralism critical perspectives are traditional historical criticism and new criticism. Post-structuralism saw the rise of many critical perspectives still in use today, including deconstruction, feminist, psychoanalytic, new historicism, archetypal, Marxist, cultural and reader response to name a few (Soter, 1999, p. 8). “Structuralism heralded the end of the kind of formalist criticism that asserted literary text and language as distinct from ordinary language...texts subsequently would come to be perceived social and cultural constructs, rather than absolutes” (Soter, 1999, p.9).

Definitions

The following are definitions of the selected critical theories:

New criticism: “The typical focus is on describing the features of the literary text such as setting, conflict, theme, character, symbolism, literary techniques, and plot in general. We typically ask students to describe these and assume that, in practicing this kind of analysis, we will find common meaning and interpretations of the text” (Soter, 2008, p. 245).

Deconstruction: “Deconstruction is, by far, the most difficult critical theory for people to understand” (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010). “It works to find ‘truths’ in texts by breaking apart patterns and continually asking why each exists in a text” (Soter, 2008, p. 243).

Feminist: “A feminist critic sees cultural and economic disabilities in a “patriarchal” society which have hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities and women’s cultural identification is as a merely negative object, or ‘other’ to man as the defining and dominating ‘Subject’ (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010).

Psychoanalytic: “Psychological criticism deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. The assumption of psychoanalytic critics is that a work of literature is correlated with its author’s mental traits:

- Reference to the author’s personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work.
- Reference to literary works is made in order to establish, biographically, the personality of the author.

- The mode of reading a literary work itself is a way of experiencing the distinctive subjectivity or consciousness of its author.

Historicism: “Using this theory requires that you apply to a text specific historical information about the time during which an author wrote. History, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and/or intellectual climate of the time” (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010).

Archetypal: “In criticism ‘archetype’ signifies narrative designs, character types, or images which are said to be identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even ritualized modes of social behavior” (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010). Also commonly referred to as a psychoanalytic lens.

Marxist: “Marxist Criticism examines literature as a product and a text that reflects the ideals of social order and hierarchy. Marxist criticism is often grouped with new historicism” (Soter, 2008, p. 243)

Cultural: “These critics see texts, writers, and readers embedded in cultural contexts that frame their creation and interpretation. Reading literary texts depends on the cultural and literary conventions and practices we have acquired and, in essence, is a co-construction of those texts” (Soter, 1999, p.8).

Reader response: “This type of criticism does not designate any one critical theory, but focuses on the activity of reading a work of literature” (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010). “The goal is to make connections between the world of the text and the world of the reader in the quest for meaning” (Soter, 2008, p. 243)

Soter (1999) suggests we take all the critical theories currently available and “approach a literary text from one of four dimensions or perspectives: view relative to the reader, view relative to context, view relative to text, and view relative to author” (p.3). When using a critical lens relative to the reader, one could consider using psychological, cultural or feminist perspective, for example. For the view relative to the context, the reader could use a lens such as Marxist criticism, or a cultural perspective. When applying a view relative to the text, it is suggested one use pre-structuralism approaches not previously mentioned, including New Criticism, Russian formalism, and Neo-Aristotelian criticism (Soter, 1999, p. 5). All of these utilize close scrutiny of textual elements. Lastly, when viewing text relative to the author, we can view envision the text as autobiographical and seek evidence of stances on morality, ethics, politics, culture or social issues (Soter, 1999, p. 6).

Rationale for Teaching Critical Literacy to Middle School Students

Applebee (1993) found that 72% of the literature teachers he surveyed had little or no familiarity with contemporary literary theory. Applebee (1993) conducted a national survey where teachers were asked to comment on the influence of critical literacy in their respective classrooms. They were asked to rate each in terms of its importance. Fifty percent of the teachers said New Criticism, 67% reported reader-response, 8% reported feminism, and 4% said other literary theories (e.g., deconstruction, structuralism). These statistics allow us to see how there is awareness around critical literacy, however the emphasis placed on classroom inclusion has much room for growth.

Appleman (2000) states, “We all try to construct a frame or worldview to help us make sense of the seemingly disconnected events that confront us” (p. 146). While we may not always be alert to our own ideologies or able to identify our theories, these are what guide us in understanding the world around us and more importantly perceptions other than our own. Oppressive ideologies, whether in text, in schools or workplaces, aren’t easily identifiable, but critical reasoning through literary theory will guide us as we “find our place in the texts we read and the lives we lead” (Appleman, 2000, p. 147).

What are our purposes for including literature in our curriculum to begin with?

Langer (1995) argues:

It is productive to acknowledge the different purposes involved in reading literature and that in school settings these purposes often merge. First, we have our students read to develop sophisticated reading practices. Second, we want our students to read to discover the pleasures of reading. Third, we might use literature as a vehicle for social change (Soter, 1999, p.7)

Peter Hollindale (1998) questioned what criticisms have to do with the students and have categorized teachers who “emphasize the text” as “book people,” and teachers who “emphasize the reader” as “child people” (Apol, 1998, p. 32). “We are caught straddling worlds, one foot planted in the English departments, the other in colleges of education, negotiating a tricky balance between theory and practice, between texts and readers, between being ‘book people’ and ‘child people’” (Apol, 1998, p. 32).

Reader response has been utilized as a primary method of theory in many classrooms, and while beneficial because it asks the reader to involve their personal experiences, this does not allow them to exercise a multitude of lenses where they could apply experiences outside of their own (Appleman, 2000) The goal is not to turn all

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students into critical theorists, but to make them comfortable applying various lenses and value the act of viewing literature, and the world, from a variety of perspectives (Appleman, 2000, p. 9). The application of literary theory can make classrooms “sites of constructive and transactive activity where students approach texts with curiosity, authority, and initiative” (Appleman, 2000, p.9).

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. paints a picture through metaphor on the use of theory and its varying angles:

Literary theory functions in my education as a prism, which I could turn to refract different spectral patterns of language used in a text, as one does daylight. Turn the prism this way, and one pattern emerges; turn it that way, and another pattern configures (Appleman, 2000, p.141).

Young Adult Literature and Critical Literacy

Wolk (2009) maintains that “we are living in the enlightenment of young adult literature. Never before have teachers had so many remarkable books to bring to life in their classrooms and use to teach social responsibility” (p. 665). While there are endless opportunities for enlightenment in YAL, not all students show up to class ready and willing to read in order to “shape political, moral, or cultural identities” (Wolk, 2009, p.664). When taught correctly, YAL can be an effective tool in first, engaging readers, and second instilling the tools necessary to becoming critically literate.

Middle school and high school students can easily relate to the protagonists in YAL not only because these characters are in their age group, but also because their life experiences are comparable. “YA novels, particularly realistic fiction, also offer their

readers vicarious experience with the ways in which others deal with issues, challenges, and problems common in the lives of young people” (Soter, 2008, p.7).

Apol (1998) offers an explanation regarding the impact YAL, and children’s literature as a whole, have on students:

Children’s literature is a form of education and socialization, an indication of a society’s deepest hopes and fears, expectations and demands. It presents to children the values approved by adult society and (overtly and covertly) attempts to explain, justify, and even impose on its audience what could be considered ‘correct’ patterns of behavior and belief. Whether deliberate or not, children’s literature functions as a form of social power, for adults control most, if not all, of a child’s reading (p.34).

While some students may arrive to class ready to take on adult classics, many students need to be given the opportunity to develop an appreciation for reading and YAL can be used to instill “critical appreciation of literature” (Soter, 1999, p.2). YAL can be used as supplements to the classic novels or even as a bridge into classic novels (Soter, 1999). Currently, many teachers are actively using YAL in the classroom, or as recommended reading, but few are using them for “serious literary study” (Soter, 1999, p.2). More importantly, many students feel they are failing to “get what the teacher wants, “and unable to relate to the ideologies of the adults represented in the novels read since they reflect experiences from an adult world” (Grossman as cited in Soter, 1999).

Glenn (2008) examines the popularity of YAL dealing with “privilege and power” and how initially, one may think these books are despicable, teens are inevitably going to read them and this provides us a perfect “opportunity to engage adolescents in discussions about critical reading” (p. 34). “In the hands of students who have not been taught to be critical readers, these novels might engender or reinforce belief systems contradictory to those grounded in democratic values of equity and social justice” (Glenn,

2008, p.35). Although we cannot control what our students are reading, we can teach them how to read this material critically, knowing it is not the quality of literature we would select for them. These controversial topics can be safely and critically examined in the privacy of the school classroom.

For her article, Glenn (2008) examines the three popular titles *Gossip Girl*, *The Insiders* and *The A-List*, and deems it appropriate to apply the Marxist lens when interpreting the ideologies of the worlds depicted here. She finds common themes throughout all three texts including entitlement, disparity of class and race, empty relationships and conspicuous consumption.

Glenn (2008) offers sample questions used to critically examine YAL:

Are our individual realities evident in the texts? Whose voices are represented? Missing? What are the requisite skills, behaviors, attitudes etc., necessary to achieve success in this world? What is the definition of success held by those who live in this world? How is this aligned or misaligned with our own definition? Are the authors making fun of this world? Are we supposed to relate to these characters? Despise them? Envy them? How do these texts make us feel about ourselves? Why might we be drawn to them? Are they entertaining? Thought-provoking? Hopeful? Terrifying? (p. 41)

Applying these exercises and other critical lenses will provide students with the ability to understand the meanings behind texts and “that they, as critical readers (and consumers), are empowered in their responses to a work of literature” (Glenn, 2008, p. 42).

Soter (1999) reminds us to revisit the number one priority in teaching reading, creating engaged readers. There are often natural or obvious selections for theories to be applied to the variety of YAL available, and there is always a “main question” she brings her students back to depending on the lesson (p.13). For herself, she consistently revisits

the query, “*What do I want my students to learn from this experience?*” (Soter, 1999, p. 13).

Wolk (2009) stresses the importance of the language arts teacher in teaching social inquiry and that through YAL not only can we better understand ourselves and the world around us, but we can also learn the life path we wish to follow. “And in that process we create, individually and collectively, a more caring and thoughtful and democratic society. It all starts with a book” (Wolk, 2009, p.672).

Teacher Guide for Instruction in Linking Text, Author, Reader

Literary theorist Professor Laura Apol outlines an introduction teachers may use to guide students in exploring “the relationship between the text, the author, the reader and the world” (Apol, 1998, p. 38).

1. What does this text ask of you as a reader?
 - How does it position you?
 - What does it assume about your beliefs, values, and/or experiences?
 - Are you as a reader willing to go along with those assumptions?
 - Are there aspects of the text you wish or feel compelled to resist or refuse?
2. What happens if various elements of the text are transposed (i.e., race, gender, economic class, sexuality)?
 - Think in terms of patterns of dominance and submission in the text-what if these patterns were reversed? How would the story or its message change?
3. Consider the ending. How does the ending relate to the rest of the book? What kind of reading does the ending support?
 - Does it reify values that otherwise have been questioned? Does it undermine values that have not been examined?
4. Try to identify the overt message of the text, its surface ideology- the “lesson” to be learned.

- Then try to determine the text's unspoken, underlying message- the passive ideology of the author or the times, the assumptions on which the text depends.
 - How do these messages interact? Are the text's "official" ideas contradicted by unconscious assumptions? If they are, what might that mean?
5. Think not only about what the text says, but about what it does not say as well. Who are the people who "do not exist" in the story?
- Whose voices are given prominence?
 - Whose voices are not heard?
 - What might the silent or silenced voices say?
6. Which parts of the story seem absolutely "obvious" or "natural" to you-so much a part of "the way things are" that you may have difficulty identifying them at all?
- Since all literature constructs a version of reality, why do you think these ideas seem so convincingly realistic?
7. How might this text be read by readers from another time or place- readers from a hundred years in the past? Readers from a hundred years in the future? Readers from another geographic area or culture?
- What would those readers find strange? What would they find "normal"? What would they find inspiring, shocking, or offensive?
8. How else might this text be read?
- Are there other viable interpretations that could be made?
 - Are there radical or subversive interpretations you can defend?
 - What do the multiple readings have in common? Where do they diverge?
9. What patterns do you see in this text repeated within the text itself or echoing from other texts you've read? How does this text "speak" to other literature?
- Which texts is it like or unlike?
10. Which of your own experiences, assumptions, or beliefs do you feel most strongly when you interact with this literature? Do you feel defensive, vindicated, or ambivalent?
- How can an awareness of your own cultural background impact the way you read this text?

Chapter 3 Method

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to identify effective methods in teaching critical thinking skills in middle school and to explore YAL as an alternative to classic literature as a means to apply these skills. What about YAL generates more interest in reading than classic literature for middle school student? What mediums are responsible for social conditioning? How can we best teach students to identify and deconstruct their messages?

Data Collection

The data collection method for this research was qualitative and came from a variety of sources compiled while observing a course on Literature, Pop Culture and New Media at Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The information gathered from the instructor in this study contains content from discussions, interviews, lectures and other data collected during the course of the semester. In an effort to achieve the maximum impact of these stories the researcher has contextualized the information in a narrative design based on an interview with professor and observations made during the class lectures.

Sample and Site

A convenience sample of Professor Melanie Hundley's course was the base in this study. She was selected because she provided beneficial and accurate depictions of her own experiences researching and teaching YAL. The site was in room 105 Payne Hall on

Peabody campus and took place for two hours each day over a four week period during a summer session. The class is a requirement for English Education master's candidates at Vanderbilt University.

Access and Permissions

The professor that participated in this study was given a consent form approved by Dominican University of California's institutional review board that clearly stated the goals and purpose of this study. Dr. Hundley gave permission to use her name.

Data Gathering Strategies

The researcher purposefully selected the subject for the interview process of this study because she is an expert in YAL. The researcher conducted a series of interviews in Payne Hall at Peabody College campus. Professor Hundley is an expert in YAL, hypertext, narrative, media and technology in teacher education. The researcher also used in-class observations and class discussions as part of the data collection.

Data Analysis Approach

All data and information collected was categorized by source. Categories included the following; student/class discussions, professor lectures and comments as well as my own observations. Data were sorted into themes and reported in a narrative format.

Ethical Standards

All procedures met relevant local, state, and federal regulations regarding use of human subjects in research. The study adhered to the ethical principles in the conduct of research with human subjects as set forth by the Dominican University of California IRBPHS Handbook. The research proposal was reviewed by my university advisor, and approved.

The purpose of this research is to identify effective methods in teaching critical thinking skills in middle school and to explore YAL as an alternative to classic literature as a means to apply these skills. What about YAL generates more interest in reading than classic literature for middle school student? What mediums are responsible for social conditioning? How can we best teach students to identify and deconstruct their messages?

Through an introduction from a librarian at the Peabody library, I met Dr. Melanie Hundley and was invited to survey her course addressing YAL for the 2010 four- week summer session. Dr. Hundley is an Assistant Professor of the Practice at Peabody and joined the staff in 2007. Prior to obtaining her Ph.D. in Language and Literacy at the University of Georgia, she taught in high schools and middle schools in rural and suburban Georgia. Dr. Hundley is currently an editor for the *ALAN Review* and has published many articles on her areas of expertise, including YAL, new media literacy, digital fiction, reading and writing in digital environments, gender studies and English teacher education. Among other publications, she contributed the chapter on hypertext and YAL in the book *Interpretive play: Extending literate thinking through literary theories and young adult literature* by A. O. Soter, T. Rogers, & M. Faust.

The data collection method for this research was qualitative and came from a variety of sources compiled while observing a course on Literature, Pop Culture and New Media at Peabody College at Vanderbilt University. The class is made up of English Education master's candidates and centers around the YAL they will teach in their respective classrooms. Other topics approached are canonical literature, poetry, film,

other literacy forms, and “new literacy” practices. The following questions are addressed in the class in order to expand the participants’ knowledge when teaching literature:

“How YAL might be related to ‘the classics’? How do we choose appropriate books for adolescent readers? How might we promote critical thinking? What place does literary theory have in the secondary classroom? What about censorship? How might new forms of reading and writing be integrated with traditional school practices?”

The goals of the course are to explore literary theories and how to apply them to canonical and YAL, keeping in mind how personal experiences of adolescents greatly impact their book selection, interest and interpretation. These experiences are often cognitively, socially and emotionally directed on the behalf of the student. The hope of applying literary theory is to guide students in being critical of the world around them and read into messages around cultural norms including race, gender, sexuality and class.

Class members are required to participate in a number of activities in and outside of the classroom throughout the course. Students are assigned 1-3 YAL books each day and rotate through three different assigned literature circles. The format for the literary circle can be used in their respective classrooms in the future.

Literature circle groups meet for the first thirty minutes of class and discuss the books read for that particular day and they also contribute from the role they have chosen to represent for the session. Roles include the following: discussion leader, scribe, devil’s advocate, advertiser or quote master. After meeting with the literature circle, students share discussions with the entire class and address important themes from the selections.

The design of the individual read followed by the small group discussion, followed by the entire class discussion is very effective in middle school classroom literary circles. It encourages students to formulate thoughts independently and then share them in the comfort of a small group discussion, versus diving directly into a class conversation.

As an extension on these discussions, students participate in a YAL blog and Professor Hundley prompts them with questions concerning the text. Students respond through discussion and comment, much like they will with students in their middle and high school classrooms. Blogging within social networks is commonly used among this age group, therefore it is a relevant discussion tool to apply to the curriculum.

Another ongoing project is titled “Image, Text, World, Self Project” where students contribute a series of digital photographs and creative writings from both the student and book characters’ points of view. The contributions are compiled into a class anthology and the idea can be applied to students’ classrooms in the future. Another assignment is to work with a partner to create a book trailer using PowerPoint, iMovie or Movie Maker depicting a brief plot summary of a book assigned for the course.

For the final project, students write a book review for YAL published in 2010. Selected reviews are published in The ALAN Review literary journal. They are also expected to apply a critical lens to the book they reviewed, written in either traditional essay format or digital format.

Throughout the course, students examine critical literacy, the canon, non-traditional narratives, and literary appropriations. Issues such as race, class, gender,

sexuality and teen issues, are examined, including how these issues are represented in YAL.

Students explore the latest, and often innovative, creations of modern YAL authors and why they are writing in non-traditional narratives. This occurs in part to generate interest in today's adolescent reader and incorporate elements of modern pop culture.

Hundley mentions the difficulty maintaining a balance trying to keep the reading of text relevant with pop culture and furthermore, text is not only books anymore. "You're teaching in a time of transition where people are holding onto 'what was' and as leaders, you have to find a balance of both. Used to be when you were reading, you referring to 'text' but now it's film, it's media, it's someone's face and you must teach them to bring along a certain lens. Many think nostalgically and believe kids will just be better off if they learn in the same manner we did" (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010). When asked when or if modern YAL will be accepted into the literary canon, Dr. Hundley believes there are books that are quietly part of it now such as *Little Brother*, *Speak*, *Watsons go to Birmingham*, *Mississippi Trial*, *Uglies*, to name a few.

Examples of non-traditional narratives are texts written in diary/journal format, instant message, screenplay, cartoon (graphic novels), or online hypertext. These non-traditional texts often present more of a cognitive challenge for the reader, although they are often misinterpreted as "easy reading" for engaging the reluctant reader.

A few popular examples of non-traditional narrative through various media formats are the use of instant message in Lauren Myracle's *ttyl*, journal entry in Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and movie script format in *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers. Many graphic novels have multiple, complex storylines, revolving around themes of culture and personal identity, and illustrations of these can be found in Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Both explore coming of age themes with struggles in personal, and more specifically cultural, identity. Hypertext fiction, also known as interactive fiction, is another phenomenon represented in YAL and this is non-linear storytelling done in various chronological orders so the reader has a new experience with each read, and it is done entirely online.

Another current approach to YAL is appropriation and literary retellings. "Appropriation in the literary arts means to adopt, borrow, reframe, reimagine, or recast a work of literature" (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010). Appropriations began in visual arts and bled over to literature. The authors of these texts often model the stories from the classics, oftentimes Shakespeare, making canonical stories play out in more familiar ways, and currently there are hundreds of them. They will frequently change the gender of the main character or tell the story from another character's point of view and place the story in a modern day setting. The function of the appropriation is to make a cultural or political statement, pay homage to the classics and draw new audiences into classic texts (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010). Examples of popular appropriations are Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* which mirrors Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Jessica Verday's *The Hollow* that appropriates *The*

Legend of Sleepy Hollow, and *Ophelia* by Lisa Klein, and written from the perspective of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

The literary retellings are written based on traditional story themes, often fairytales like Cinderella and Beauty and the Beast, and place less emphasis on matching specific similarities in characters. Retellings typically maintain the same storyline and characters, but change or expand on components of the plot.

When asked about students' attitudes towards critical literacy activities, Dr. Hundley explains how she does so many different activities so they do not always realize they are participating in a critical literacy exercise. She often keeps them in disguise depending on the age group. Some of her adult students in her university classes do not take YAL seriously unless they are told explicitly what they are studying in theory. She frontloads theory when teaching students out of the high school age group. "When you assign something to a student you can't assume they'll do what you expect them to do. You have to put in the time as a teacher to model it for them and provide the scaffolding. Don't assume they know what the color gold signifies in *The Great Gatsby*. You have to tell them" (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010).

Teachers' attitudes towards YAL have improved, however school boards have not kept pace. There is a definite movement around YAL and it is appearing on summer reading lists, if not used in the classroom specifically.

Dr. Hundley writes a rationale for all the YAL selections she chooses and uses it with parents and principals, because people will naturally challenge and complain about particular selections. She is extremely cautious before using a book in her curriculum and

reads all of the commentary, articles, and blogs addressing the book and makes an informed decision. Some books end up on the classroom checkout shelf, and parents sign a permission slip at the start of the year validating the type of material they wish their children to read, so they are fully aware of the subject matter contained in the books available for checkout. Certain books are found on the checkout shelf due to their controversial subject matter and others she simply does not have time to include in the curriculum.

Current YAL “activists” and thought leaders are Chris Crowe, Deborah Appleman, Anna Soter, and more recently John Moore. Becky Carter, Paul Gallo and Virginia Monseau. When asked if their efforts have helped or hindered the plight of the YAL community, Dr. Hundley believes the sentiment is mixed. English teachers are elitist, they love the classics and they often forget that before they loved to read the classics, they simply loved to read. “You need to come willingly to these classic and YAL texts. There are transactional properties that come along with that reading. Arguments will still address if YAL is quality literature or not” (M.K. Hundley, personal communication, June 18, 2010). Dr. Hundley is currently working with fellow industry experts Anna Soter and Michael Moore on a journal article defining a quality piece of literature and how to make ties. The article will appear in the ALAN Review in the winter of 2011.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

The purpose of this research is to identify effective methods in teaching critical thinking skills in middle school and to explore YAL as an alternative to classic literature as a means to apply these skills. What about YAL generates more interest in reading than classic literature for middle school student? What mediums are responsible for social conditioning? How can we best teach students to identify and deconstruct their messages?

After an extensive review of the literature and classroom observation, it is apparent that language arts teachers have a prime opportunity to create speculative and responsible citizens for society through the application of critical literacy practice. The most effective tool in engaging middle school students in these practices is YAL and furthermore, allowing them to have an active role in their book selection and subsequent exercises.

The critical perspectives and theories applied to literature since the period of post-structuralism are a successful tool when paired with YAL in the middle school classroom. Students can apply various lenses corresponding with the critical theories and step into another point of view. These practices will be carried over into other areas of life and create a better informed and culturally aware citizen out of students. Students will realize that different people employ different ideologies, and while no belief systems is better than the next, it is important to be aware and respectful of what these beliefs bring to bear.

YAL is available in a variety of genres and will appeal to the reluctant reader as well as the avid reader. In recent years, the market has demanded increasingly more from YAL therefore students have endless choices to pull from. While not all YAL selections are literary masterpieces, one is always able to apply a critical lens and explore the potential intentions behind the author's choice of themes. Once students become literary critics, they can carry these practices forward into life situations as informed and analytical students of critical theory.

Limitations/Gaps in the Literature and Implications for Future Research

There are slight limitations in the literature directly examining the explicit use of critical theory and YAL. Currently there are only a couple of relatively recent texts published correlating the two areas, therefore it is an understudied area. Studies have not been performed to examine the outcomes of critical theories as applied in the middle school classroom alongside YAL. In addition, many language arts teachers are unfamiliar with critical literacy as learned through the critical theory practices. Future studies could examine teacher education on critical literacy practices and promoting its use in classrooms. Studies could also look into student attitudes towards critical theory as applied to YAL.

Overall Significance of the Literature

The world of YAL has seen extension growth since its inception and more recently is in extremely high demand. What started out as innocent, single dimensional characters and plotlines has developed into an exploration of class, race, gender, sexuality

with multiple storylines addressing timely issues. YAL resonates with these readers because they can relate to the storylines and characters, and adolescents make deep connections with them. Authors are responding to this need by creating entire worlds around stories, by making books into a series and through various multi-media extensions.

Lastly, once YAL and critical theory find more of a presence in universities and college settings, teachers will feel better equipped to introduce the practice into their classrooms. While it may appear as a seemingly simple idea, books do not only hold the key to the creation of a more thoughtful society, they guide us individually in understanding the world around us and our place in it.

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