*Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts*,
Praxis Strand, Vol. 11 No. 1, Spring/Summer 2024, pp. 14-53
Ubiquity: http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress/
ISSN: 2379-3007

# Pedagogy as Perspective:

# Exploring Purposes and Practices for Young Adult Literature with Teacher Candidates



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**Abstract**

In this article, four English language arts teacher educators share their pedagogical approaches related to using young adult literature in their teacher preparation courses. They outline their course contexts, readings, and assignments based on their unique learning aims for the teacher candidates. While many learning aims differ, the authors also share how their purposes of employing young adult literature converge along purposes related to recognizing and understanding diverse lives, as well as working toward a more equitable and just society.

*Keywords: Teacher education; young adult literature; curriculum; critical literacy*

"What graphic novels are you including in your methods class this semester?" "Did you see that Angeline Boulley has a new book out?" "My teacher candidates (TCs) loved *King and the Dragonflies*; have you worked with it yet?"

Bring a group of English language arts (ELA) teacher educators together and it is likely the topic of young adult literature (YAL) will bubble into the conversation. What have we read recently? What are we teaching now? What are we working with in class? Why? While our considerations of and approaches to YAL are likely to differ, teacher educators have established YAL's place in the educational curriculum and classroom.

In this article, we, four ELA teacher educators, examine the pedagogical purposes guiding our use of YAL. Our contexts and courses differ: Some teach methods classes to undergraduate and graduate preservice teachers, some teach graduate students, some teach in urban areas, others in rural ones. Our instructional styles differ, as well, from an emphasis on student choice to a focus on critical questioning. And we differ in experience, background, and identity. YAL is a common factor in our work, however, and its use offers perspective on the pedagogical choices and beliefs of ELA teacher educators.

Despite the differences we embody and the diverse ways we approach YAL, we are united in our belief that YAL can deepen, expand, and challenge students' perspectives on themselves and the world around them (e.g., Alsup, 2010; Lewis, 2014; Boyd & Dyches, 2017; Glenn 2022; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Wolk, 2013). We consider YAL texts to be windows, mirrors, and doors (Bishop, 1990) for students, offering opportunities to discern themselves in the texts they read while developing understandings of difference. The perspectives and pedagogies that inform our work with YAL allow us to complicate our TCs' understandings of curriculum (e.g., Tennyson-Marsh, 2023), content (e.g., Miskec, 2013), and literacy (e.g.,

Buehler, 2016) while broadening their understandings of adolescence (e.g., Lewis, 2018), developing their pedagogical proficiency (e.g., Witte & Rybakova, 2017) and affirming our commitment to issues of equity (i.e., Toliver, 2021).

In the sections that follow, we take up YAL's potential to support the education of TCs by presenting our perspectives on and pedagogies with YAL. The individually authored sections open with a brief explanation of the teacher educator's professional context and pedagogical beliefs. Within these sections, we each share an overview of one course, guiding concepts of and specific assignments in it, and our use and purposes of YAL. [All specific YAL titles are cited at the end of this paper in the Young Adult Literature References.]

We then come together to consider the meaning of our work in the fields of ELA teacher education and young adult literature. First, we focus on how our different courses align with the 2021 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards for Initial Teacher Preparation of English Language Arts 7-12, recognizing that program faculty around the country are considering how to align courses and assessments to these new standards. Secondly, we address our overarching pedagogical connections and common end goals for the TCs with whom we work to highlight the pedagogical strengths that come from our perspectives on and approaches to YAL.

**Our Positionality as Readers, Teachers, and Scholars**

Understanding our purposes for and practices with YAL requires understanding our positionalities–as authors, scholars, teachers, and readers. We four share many commonalities: all English teacher educators at public institutions, all former secondary ELA teachers, all university academics, all white cisgender, all active in NCTE and the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN), all avid readers of YAL, all engaged in the work of equity and

justice. These shared identities create connections by which we can, and want to, collaboratively examine our pedagogical ideas and actions.

We are not monolithic in our positionalities, however. We live in different regions of the U.S., teach in urban, suburban, and rural locations, and educate teachers for diverse educational and societal contexts. We have different academic obligations and hold various professional positions. Just as we gravitate toward distinct types or works of YAL, we enact distinct pedagogical beliefs and foci in our classrooms. And we engage in the work of equity and justice in differing ways. These differences inform our collaboration, as well, allowing us to draw on our individual strengths to collectively interrogate our inherent limitations.

**Marshall: YAL, Curriculum Planning, and Pedagogy**

I have been a tenure-track/tenured professor of English teacher education for 28 years now and have taught a graduate level course focusing on adolescent/young adult/middle grades literature for 20 of those years at two different institutions, both in an urban context with a majority-minority public school student population, 73% of whom are economically disadvantaged and 14% are learning English as an additional language. Most recently I have had the opportunity to teach a three-credit combined undergraduate and graduate course to initial certification ELA TCs called Teaching Young Adult Literature in our Diverse Society. In our preservice English education program, this course is referred to as Methods 1 in a two-course sequence leading up to student teaching, and it focuses on three major areas: the diverse body of literature known as YAL (content), instructional approaches for teaching that literature in grades 7-12 (pedagogy), and curriculum development (planning for instruction). The first two were the same as the course I taught for the first 15 years of my career; however, curriculum (unit) planning is an addition that I previously taught in a separate methods course. In our current

program, this course provides TCs with their first exposure to unit planning using the backwards planning approach described by Wiggins and McTighe (2005) in *Understanding by Design* (UbD). It is also their initial introduction to assessment of student learning, both formal and informal. So, there is much to explore in this course!

When developing the syllabus, I work hard to integrate all of the pre-established course objectives across the fifteen weeks and to model both effective curricular planning and instructional strategies while exploring the amazing body of literature written for adolescents with our TCs. Following is an overview of the three primary signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) and features of this course as I have taught it: course syllabus as a mentor text; approaches for differentiation by providing student choice in content and assessment; and ongoing opportunities for developing teacher meta-awareness.

***Syllabus as Mentor Text for Unit Planning***

I introduce the course syllabus during the first class as TCs' first required text to read and explain to them the idea of mentor texts, which serve as a model for writers working on something they "may not yet be able to do on their own" (Dorfman & Capelli, 2017, p. 2). I suggest to the TCs that in some ways, a unit plan is a specific writing genre, one they will engage in throughout their teacher preparation program and beyond when they enter the classroom as teachers; thus, aspects of my syllabus can serve as a model for their own unit plans. In my development of the syllabus, I have tried to model multiple aspects of unit planning, with the course divided into three distinct instructional units, all developed and presented in alignment with the UbD framework: Adolescence, Adolescents, Literature, and Teachers; Literature as a Window to the World and a Mirror of the Self; and Genre in Adolescent/Young Adult Literature. The course syllabus explicitly identifies enduring understandings and course objectives for the

entire course. In addition, I include essential questions for each of the three units on the syllabus and guiding questions for each class meeting (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Course Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions for Each Unit of Study*

**Enduring Understandings for this Course**

Adolescent literature has the power to change lives and even save lives.

Literature should be a window to the world as well as a mirror for the soul for all readers.

An effective teacher meets their students where they are, helps them plan for and understand where they want to go, and provides them with the tools and experiences they need to get there.

**Unit 1:** ***Adolescence, Adolescents, Literature, and Teachers: An Introduction***
(Weeks 1-2)

*Essential Questions*

1. What are the benefits of reading, discussing, and studying literature?
2. How can literature written for and about adolescents be utilized in grades 7-12?

**Unit 2:** ***Literature as Window to the World and Mirror of the Self***
(Weeks 3-8)

*Essential Questions*

1. How can literature provide readers with a way to reflect on their own experiences?
2. How can reading and discussing literature allow communities of readers to gain insights into the diverse life experiences of others?
3. How can teachers best plan instruction that uses literature written for and about adolescents?
4. How can literary criticism provide readers with lenses through which to read, analyze, and discuss works of literature?

**Unit 3:** ***Form and Genre in Adolescent/Young Adult Literature***
(Weeks 9-15)

*Essential Questions*

1. How can literature provide readers with a way to reflect on their own experiences?
2. How can reading and discussing literature allow communities of readers to gain insights into the diverse life experiences of others?
3. How can teachers best plan instruction that uses literature written for and about adolescents?

As is expected in course syllabi, I outline the various assignments (assessments); perhaps less common, I also provide an organizer that explicitly shows the alignment between the course objectives and each assessment (see Table 1) In the course calendar, I also try to explicitly articulate how weekly tasks scaffold the course's key assessment, the unit plan. Throughout the semester, we return to the syllabus as a mentor text and unpack how it demonstrates the ideas of backwards design. Each semester, feedback from the TCs informs the next iteration of the course syllabus in an attempt to improve it as a mentor text for unit planning.

**Table 1**

*Alignment of Course Objectives and Assignments*

| Course Objective | Assignment demonstrating you have met the objective |
|---|---|
| Identify, read and respond to a variety of texts written by women, men, non-binary, and other authors including those from various cultures, who write primarily for and about adolescent readers | Multimodal/Multigenre Response Journal |
| Read, analyze, evaluate, and recommend appropriate adolescent literature from a wide variety of genres including fiction, nonfiction, short stories, graphic novels (sequential art), and poetry | Book Talks and Video Trailer |
| Develop a standards-based ELA thematic unit that promotes social justice and critical engagement with complex issues related to maintaining a diverse, inclusive, equitable society | Unit Plan (entire project) |
| Develop a variety of instructional strategies including a thematic unit and individualized, small group, and whole class reading response activities | Unit Plan (Weekly/Daily Calendar) |
| Design or knowledgeably select appropriate reading assessments that inform instruction by providing data about student interests, reading proficiencies, and reading processes | Unit Plan (Assessment Plan) |
| Become a contributive member of an educational community that reads, writes, and engages in discussions collaboratively | Book Clubs and Literature Circles; Weekly Participation |

### *Student Choice and Voice in Course Content and Assessment*

Another signature feature of my YAL course is the amount of student voice and choice (Daniels, 2002) offered. While we read three or four whole class texts together (and this changes every time I teach it), TCs also read twelve additional books. During three of the weeks, for participation in book clubs (Polleck, 2022; Raphael et al., 2002) or literature circles (Daniels, 2002), they select from a curated list of texts created around a genre (i.e., realistic fiction, graphic novels, memoirs, science fiction, fantasy, horror), a topical theme (i.e., poverty across the globe; gender identities), and books depicting a time in history (i.e., WWII) from many different perspectives. For the remaining weeks, the course focuses on themes (i.e., physical, emotional, cognitive differences; privilege and inequities), topics (i.e., sports, creative arts), or populations (i.e., LGBTQIA+ youth; immigrants) and TCs have free choice of texts that align with the focus of the week as long as the book meets our definition of YAL. I provide extensive lists of potential texts for those weeks, but TCs can and do go beyond my lists, often introducing me to texts with which I have been unfamiliar. They are required to go to a public library and consult with a librarian at least once during the semester in their search for titles.

The two major assignments in the course also allow for a great deal of choice. While there are parameters and guidelines for the unit plan, TCs choose the grade level, the focus of the unit, the text(s) they utilize, the instructional strategies, and the assessments they create within the unit.

The other major assignment focuses on their own response to and interactions with the texts they read during the semester. Each week they submit a response to their reading, with numerous options as to format, modality, and audience: one-minute booktalks, diary entries, letters to or from a character, astrological maps for characters, college application essays, poems,

songs, news articles, TikTok posts, social media posts, music playlists. The one requirement is that they create a video trailer for one of their self-selected texts to share with their classmates (and eventual students, hopefully). While I give them a list of possibilities, I also share the oldie-goldie article from *English Journal*, "Fifty Alternatives to the Book Report" (Mitchell, 1998). Thus, throughout the semester, they have the opportunity to select the content that they read as well as how they will demonstrate their understanding of and interaction with the texts they read.

***Pedagogy Pauses***

Finally, every week at various points during our class meeting, I call a "pedagogy pause" during which I ask TCs to think about the instructional moves that I utilize and reflect on things that worked well, things that did not, and things that were okay but could be tweaked for improvement. During these pauses, they have the opportunity to ask me questions about my instructional decisions, consider why particular strategies worked for some and not others, and consider how these strategies could be useful with young people in their own clinical contexts. I tell the TCs that much of what we do as teachers is invisible and these pauses allow us to make them visible for a few moments. It is so important for teachers to have metacognitive awareness (Stewart et al., 2007) of why they make curricular and pedagogical decisions. I also encourage them to do the same with the high school and middle school students they teach, letting them in on their thinking and making explicit the purpose of the learning activities they are engaged in.

**Melanie: YAL as Content Area Curriculum**

I recently flipped through the trusty blue Squibb's Lesson Plan Book No. 4PD from my first year of teaching. As I was enjoying the entertainment value of my early curriculum planning, a title caught my eye in the column for my 9th grade English class. There, sandwiched

between Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Homer's *Odyssey*, was *The Contender* (Lipsyte, 1967), my choice for a three-week unit on "the novel."

Before seeing the evidence in my own scribble, I would have sworn YAL was nowhere to be found in my high school classroom. Obviously, it existed in the departmental bookroom that first year–likely how I made the decision to teach that particular text–but it took up little space in my secondary curriculum (or, evidently, my memory). As an ELA teacher, I was not wedded to canonical literature or textbook offerings; I regularly included different texts in my classroom–and in 1997, song lyrics, film clips, music, and art were different in comparison to works from the canon–to teach concepts, clarify terms, and simply keep my adolescent students interested. However, YAL did not intentionally factor into my curriculum planning until I became a teacher educator.

During graduate school, I saw YAL in the classroom when I supervised student teachers and learned about it through presentations at NCTE. I read about it as I studied curriculum and instruction. I presented it to my nieces and nephews every birthday and Christmas–and I picked up on the fact that YAL is an integral component of ELA. Since that epiphany, YAL has been a constant in my university curriculum. At my current institution–a mid-sized, semi-rural university in the southern U.S. with a majority white student population–I integrate YAL into multiple courses in different ways.

In my methods classes, for example, ELA TCs study YAL to support their learning of concepts, such as adolescent engagement, lesson planning, and multimodality, while exploring issues of text selection (e.g., Bishop, 1990; Ervin, 2021), identity development (e.g., Cramer, 2018; Eisenbach et al., 2018), responsive instruction (e.g., Germán, 2021; Suender & Piazza, 2021), and equity (e.g., Jackson, 2022; Pérez, 2022). They choose their novels from a curated list

of recently published middle grades YAL representing different formats, authors, and issues, such as those listed in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*YAL Used in Middle Grades Methods over Four Semesters*

| Semester | Middle Grades YAL |
|---|---|
| Fall 2021 | *The Girl and The Ghost* (Alkaf)<br>*The Next Great Paulie Fink* (Benjamin)<br>*Marcus Vega Doesn't Speak Spanish* (Cartaya)<br>*Shouting at the Rain* (Hunt)<br>*Show Me a Sign* (LeZotte)<br>*A Game of Fox & Squirrels* (Reese) |
| Spring 2022 | *Amari and the Night Brothers* (Alston)<br>*Dress Coded* (Firestone)<br>*Fast Pitch* (Stone)<br>*Other Words for Home* (Warga) |
| Fall 2022 | *Rez Dogs* (Bruchac)<br>*King and the Dragonflies* (Callender)<br>*The Sky at Our Feet* (Hashimi) |
| Spring 2023 | *Red, White, and Whole* (LaRocca)<br>*Free Lunch* (Ogle)<br>*Drama* (Telgemeier) |

My Reading Resistance literature course also includes diverse YAL, such as the free verse *Blood Water Paint* (McCullough, 2019), graphic novel *The Prince and the Dressmaker* (Wang, 2018), and modern-day *Hollow Fires* (Ahmed, 2022). Undergraduates, who are taking this course for general education credit, examine "traditional" concepts of textual form, literary devices, reader engagement, and authorial voice through their study of these "nontraditional" texts.

### *YAL as Content in Curriculum Theory*

YAL fits easily into these courses, but it may seem odd in a course focused on theories of curriculum. Yet, secondary ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies TCs also read YAL

when I teach the graduate-level course, Curriculum Theory in a Diverse Society. This course, taken in the summer or fall of our one-year MAT program, is required for TCs pursuing certification in a secondary content area. Curriculum Theory is a stand-alone course, requiring only entry into the program versus completion of specific classes, so professors have a degree of latitude that is not always available with other course offerings, as I explain in the course description in my syllabus (see Figure 2):

**Figure 2**

*Course Description for Curriculum Theory Course*

## Course description

Your un/conscious understandings of and decisions about curriculum are guided by many different issues, influences, and experiences. How you make sense of these factors influences both what and how you teach adolescents in our diverse (and often contentious) society.

MSSE 607 explores various historical, societal, cultural, current, and personal constructs of 'curriculum' that shape education in the United States. This critical consideration of curriculum includes issues of subject matter, adolescent learners, and educational equity. By considering different theories, goals and philosophies that shape curricular constructs, this course offers different lenses by which to examine the creation, purposes, and outcomes of curriculum, generally and in the content areas.

Those lenses range from multicultural curriculum (Banks, 1991), the banking model (Freire, 1970), and liberatory curriculum (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010) to deficit and grit ideologies (Gorski, 2016), critical race theory (Teitelbaum, 2022), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012)—all of which engage TCs with different perspectives on and entry into issues of equity.

As TCs explore different constructs of curriculum, they also examine specific YAL– likely a non-traditional text in social studies and a non-existent one in math and science –and consider its potential as curriculum in their future classrooms. These texts are recently published novels suited to high school adolescents and written by authors representing diverse identities. The key element, however, is the novels' clear connection to math, science, and social studies (luckily, ELA casts a wide net). For example, one semester, all TCs read *Firekeeper's Daughter* (Boulley, 2021); the novel's inclusion of literary symbolism, statistics and logic, environmental knowledge, and Indigenous history made it a strong communal text. Another semester, however, each TC read a different content-specific novel:

- social studies: *Dreamland Burning* (Latham, 2018); *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020)
- mathematics: *All of the Above* (Pearsall, 2017), *With the Fire on High* (Acevedo, 2019)
- ELA: *Patron Saints of Nothing* (Ribay, 2020); *On the Come Up* (Thomas, 2019)
- science: *Dry* (Shusterman & Shusterman, 2018)

TCs typically complete three assignments focused on the YAL under consideration for the semester. In the opening Novel Curriculum assignment, they evaluate their specific text's content area connections by identifying three to five subjects, concepts, topics, and/or issues that relate to their specific curricular topic (for example, a character's use of proportions and measurement while cooking in Acevedo's *With the Fire on High* for mathematics) They then share these connections, drawing on specific material from the novel and articulated content (such as that found in the state standards), through some form of graphic organizer (e.g., mind map, Venn diagram) to visualize connections and illustrate relationships.

In the next assignment, Analyzing Curriculum, TCs consider their novel's potential as curriculum through different curricular definitions (e.g., Moore, 2015), purposes (e.g., Labaree, 1997), and issues (e.g., Hirsch, 1987) studied in the course so far (e.g., rap as an example of Hirsch's cultural literacy in Thomas's *On the Come Up*). They must also consider how their novel does/does not exemplify and respond to issues of equity (for example, how water is accessed by diverse populations in Shusterman's *Dry* for Science). This paper is submitted after class discussions on and collaborative work with the YAL so TCs have time and space to formulate their ideas and learn from their classmates.

Creating Curriculum, the final YAL assignment, requires TCs to determine how their novel might function as meaningful curriculum in their future classroom. First, they create an assignment that uses their novel in some way, including the directions and assessment criteria as provided to future students. They then provide a rationale for their work that identifies and explains the philosophies, ideologies, and/or concepts that guided the development of the curriculum. In working with Boulley's *Firekeeper's Daughter*, for example, TCs offered assignments addressing Indigenous knowledge of plants (science) and Native Americans' forced assimilation through boarding schools (social studies).

My introduction of YAL as a course text on the first day of class is usually met with some understandable skepticism; the TCs appreciate having something "fun" to read but question why they are reading novels written for adolescents in a graduate-level theory course. I simply smile enigmatically and keep going. While no curricular decision is an unqualified success, the decision to work with YAL offers TCs' concrete application of course concepts while complicating even further their understandings of content, curriculum and equity. And while some TCs no doubt remain skeptical at the conclusion of the course, I find that most echo the

sentiment shared by one: "*Firekeeper's Daughter* was my favorite reading this semester. It was SO good and applicable!"

**Mark: YAL as Testimony, Teacher Candidates as Witness**

My first year as a classroom teacher was in 2000, in a junior high school that acted like a middle school set in a rural-becoming-suburban area outside of Phoenix, Arizona. I taught "regular" English language arts and English as a second language (without any teaching English as a second language training). An early lesson I learned was that middle school students loved reading, as long as they got to choose what to read. And they almost always chose YAL. And they almost always chose stories that reflected their own diverse lives. This realization started slowly, but became stark when one of my students, who I considered a "reluctant reader," entered my classroom with one of the Harry Potter tomes and voraciously finished it in a few days. So, I shed my literary merit biases created by my college English professors and started reading YAL too. I have not stopped and teaching "literature for teachers" courses is one of the best aspects of my job as a teacher educator.

I currently teach in a semi-rural area in the U.S. South and a large majority of the TCs in my university's program are white women. All secondary ELA TCs are required to take a course in YAL that I often have the luxury of teaching. In this YAL course, my aims are multiple. I want the TCs to learn about the history of YAL and read three selections that are widely considered as establishing YAL as an independent category of literature: *The Contender* (Lipsyte, 1967), *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), and *The Pigman* (Zindel, 1968). I also want them to become familiar with contemporary trends, such as the proliferation of sequential art (i.e., comics, graphic novels, illustrated texts) and novels-in-verse, and popular titles published in the last decade. In addition, I feel the need to further establish the English TCs' understanding of

critical literary theory, as in my experience many undergraduates are not familiar with this type of literary knowledge, and how to use such theory to inform their future curricular and instructional decisions. Particularly, I consider the stories we read to serve as fictional testimonies to the socially and culturally diverse lives represented across characters and authors. Then, I ask TCs to serve as critical witnesses, or intentionally attending to differences and connections (Dutro, 2019), with those diverse stories through employing their own backgrounds and experiences, along with critical literary perspectives, to understand the diverse lives throughout the stories they read. I attempt to meet these aims in two primary ways.

***Pedagogical Practices***

First, I divide my classes into random book clubs in which they read five young adult selections over ten weeks. The bi-weekly selections are threaded across the book clubs, so while each individual club is reading a different selection, all the selections are connected through theme or genre. For example, in one semester I had all the book clubs read a novel-in-verse, a graphic novel, a setting-focused selection, a speculative fiction selection, and a sports-related selection (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Book Club Reading Selections*

| Theme/Genre | Book Club A | Book Club B | Book Club C |
|---|---|---|---|
| sports-related | *Furia* (Méndez) | *The New David Espinoza* (Aceves) | *Here to Stay* (Farizan) |
| novel-in-verse | *Long Way Down* (Reynolds) | *Chlorine Sky* (Browne) | *Blood Water Paint* (McCullough) |
| speculative fiction | *The Marrow Thieves* (Dimaline) | *The Ghosts of Heaven* (Sedgwick) | *Warcross* (Lu) |
| graphic novel | *The Well* (Wyatt & Choo) | *The Prince and the Dressmaker* (Wang) | *The Legend of Auntie Po* (Khor) |
| setting-focused | *In the Wild Light* (Zentner) | *The Last True Poets of the Sea* (Drake) | *How It Went Down* (Magoon) |

Each week, the clubs meet during class to talk about their assigned selections. One or two members wear the mantle of "discussion leader" and are responsible for creating a lesson plan to direct the conversation by employing a particular critical literary lens. To support their understanding of critical literary theory, we read several scholars engaging in such work with children's and YA literature, such as Botelho and Rudman's (2009) critical multicultural analysis, Renga and Lewis's (2018) archetypal analysis, Parson's (2021) feminist analysis, Bokelman's (2018) exploration of novels-in-verse, and Sarigianides et al.'s (2017) youth lens analysis. The discussion leaders are also required to ask the group to create an artifact in response to the story. These artifacts should be grounded in tasks they would ask secondary students to create. For example, one book club recently read *The Marrow Thieves* (Dimaline, 2017) and the discussion leader asked the group to create the homepage of a news website with headlines and images that represented how an Indigenous lens (e.g., Grant, 1990) might perceive the events of the story. In this way, the artifact prompted book club members to demonstrate comprehension of plot events and interpret those events through a critical perspective.

Second, the TCs organize a text set of four selections around a topic of their choice. The syllabus lists these possibilities to spark their thinking: historical fiction, living in the city, time travel, religious experiences, bullies and bullying, international settings, LGBTQIA+ experiences, romance, teacher-student relationships, bad parenting, race relations. Their text sets have to include at least one middle school selection, one high school selection, and one graphic novel. The grade-level decisions must be based on a professional review, such as from *Kirkus* or *Booklist.* Each selection has to also be considered "highly recommended or award-winning," meaning that it has earned a starred review, been honored with an award, or included on an American Library Association "best of" list. After reviewing their four choices, the TCs collect

scholarship on their topic within the field of YAL, identify thematic messages communicated to readers across their selections, and present their findings in a roundtable session at the end of the semester.

***Reflection on Diversity within YAL, within Lived Experiences***

As TCs read assigned and self-selected YAL selections, talk about stories with their classmates, and read critical literary theory and scholarship, my hope is they experience and reflect upon the broad diversity present in the pages and in their own lives. Following the understanding of narrative as both epistemological and transformative (Jackson, 1995), I ask TCs to embrace the idea that reading narrative fiction, or engaging with the stories of socially and culturally diverse characters, is to serve as a witness to the testimonies of those diverse lives. This process relies on an understanding of testimony as assuring the veracity of the testifier's experiences through the expression of storytelling. As witnesses, the TCs not only recognize the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the characters, but also grapple with the notion that those backgrounds and experiences might be generalizable to diverse social, cultural, and political groups (cf. Krämer, 2017). In other words, it is the ethical responsibility of readers to acknowledge diverse lives *and* to understand what those lives entail (cf. Schmidt, 2017). To be clear, this process is not meant to reduce large groups to the solitary experience of one character in one YA book, yet it is meant to broaden the worldviews of TCs to include perspectives of people who are not like themselves. In this way, the YAL, both the texts I assign and the ones they self-select, helps TCs develop an epistemology of diverse youths' lives and, hopefully, transform how they might view the divergent backgrounds and experiences of their future students.

**Ashley: Critical Literacies and Social Action through YAL**

My secondary teaching took place in a southern state in a rural area, and I now find myself in an English department in the Pacific Northwest at a rural, land grant institution. Of the 15,578 undergraduate student population on my campus, 29.1% are labeled as minority with Latino or Hispanic as the largest minority group and 33.8% first generation. Over the decade that I have taught preservice teachers, I have noticed a shift from a reflection of the mostly white teaching population in my classes to a more diverse set of individuals. One constant in my teaching career, however, has been the responses I have witnessed from all readers of YAL. I have seen YAL change perspectives, reflect experiences, and truly inspire.

My current Young Adult Literature class is one of four required pedagogy courses for our ELA certification, with our additional courses addressing grammar, writing, and methods. This provides me the unique position to strictly focus on both the content of YAL and the pedagogies for teaching texts written for youth. My personal and professional commitments to addressing social inequities are infused throughout all of my courses, especially in my YAL course. I believe that inviting students' critical literacies (Luke, 2012), their capacities for reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and discerning issues of power, oppression, and privilege in society are crucial in educational spaces. However, over my years as an educator, I have learned that simply working with students to develop their critical capacities is not enough; we must also provide them avenues for acting on the injustices we invite them to name. And, if we hope to develop professionals who can lead change, we must scaffold these skills in our teacher education classrooms. My hope then, is to support TCs' social awareness and agency through YAL-based readings and assignments.

My YAL course is structured around contemporary novels that each address an area of social justice, such as police brutality, the gender spectrum and stigma, and food insecurity. As we read, we focus on the topic, its representation, and possible pedagogical approaches for teaching it. For instance, when we read *Heart in a Body in the World* (Caletti, 2018), we discuss issues of consent and women's rights and we research legislation around gun control and mental health. We talk about the culture of silence that expects women to go along with behavior that they find unsettling. TCs locate and share compelling stories of current individuals who run for a cause, some over many, many miles, like the character in the book. We assess this as a strategy for raising awareness of an issue and brainstorm other actions that could have been taken in the book to avoid its central tragedy.

Beyond these conversations and activities, and as an introduction to the field, TCs complete an I-Search paper (Macrorie, 1998) in which they research a critical topic in the field of YAL (e.g., censorship, representation) and report on the story of their search as well as their findings. Their submissions are powerful pieces in which TCs often share their connection to selected topics such as eating disorders or discrimination. This first assignment sets the tone for the angle I take on YAL in the course. We continue to read one book per week, sometimes reading the same text as a class, sometimes reading their choice of texts. For example, I offer options when we read books with transgender protagonists in an effort to work against a monolithic narrative of individuals who identify on the gender spectrum (Boyd & Bereiter, 2017). I also offer options for historical fiction graphic novels, allowing TCs to delve deeper into an area in which they are most interested. TCs also craft "Connections Posts" throughout the course, implement a co-developed lesson plan, and complete a multimedia project (see Table 4 for overview of major assignments).

**Table 4**

*Overview of Major Course Assignments*

| Assignment | Overview |
|---|---|
| I-Search Paper | Select and research an area of the field of YAL; tell the story of your search and determine your perspective on the area |
| Connections Posts (ongoing) | Respond by relating to relate to the text for the week; Suggestions include connecting to the modern day, teaching, personal experience, history, or media |
| Lesson Design and Implementation | Select an assigned text from the syllabus and design a lesson plan for your peers; submit for feedback and revise prior to teaching day |
| Multimedia Choice Project | Expand on a text assigned this semester; Options (or have your own approved) include artistically responding to a text through a re-imagined book cover, composing a song based on a book, or creating a digital book trailer |
| Social Action Project | Based on a social issue in a text studied this semester, identify a justice-related problem and develop and implement an action to address the problem |

Halfway through the semester, I introduce TCs to the social action project assignment (Esptein, 2010) which serves as the final assessment for the course. This experience engages both their knowledge and reading of YAL as well as their putting into action the practices we discussed as we read. I begin with a Qualtrics survey of TCs' interest in topics and provide over 15 that are all related to texts we have read or will read (e.g., foster care, mental health, racism). TCs determine their top three choices, and then I place them in groups based on their selections, attempting to give each their first choice or checking in with them to ensure a placement with an issue about which they are passionate.

Over several weeks, TCs complete a series of steps. First, they narrow from the topic the group chose to a problem, making sure to hone to a tangible entity they can address. I ask them to brainstorm at least three problems associated with their topic, such as moving from "mental health" to "knowledge about and access to mental health supports" so that again, they have an

explicit area to tackle. Once they have several problems, they consider each fully, what they might do for it, and then finally select one on which to conduct their project. I have found a local focus on our campus/community as well as the narrowing down of topic to problem crucial to their efficacy. For instance, in my first iteration of the project, a group chose "genocide" without fully stating a problem, and they did not feel as successful (Boyd & Darragh, 2019). Another group, however, narrowed to providing supplies for refugees fleeing genocide who had relocated to our area, and they reported more of a sense of impact. This prompted my revision of this step of the project and TCs in recent semesters have shared positive feedback about their experiences.

***Implementing Social Action Projects***

Once TCs have agreed upon their problem, they then work through a model I call *COAR* (Boyd, 2017). They *contextualize*: researching the problem, any related legislation, key players, and associated history. This includes the context from the YA novel they used as a springboard and drawing connections to the protagonist and the issue. Then they *organize:* determining their action, collecting resources, and contacting campus partners as needed. For example, many of my TCs have worked with our campus library to craft displays and raise awareness on a topic, such as trauma and coping; others have collaborated with our LGBTQIA+ Center to host film screenings and informative events. Next, TCs *act,* implementing their plans, and finally, they *reflect* individually and as a group, noting successes, challenges, and next steps so as to ensure they see change as an ongoing process. These steps are documented in a portfolio for which I provide instructions/handouts for each and ask for evidence of action (e.g., emails, photos) as well as the research and reflections conducted (see Table 5 for example steps, activities, and assignments).

**Table 5**

*Example COAR Timeline, Activities, and Assessments*

| Steps | Activity | Assessment Due |
|---|---|---|
| 1: Brainstorm | • Brainstorm topics for social action<br>• Create a group folder on Google drive | • Brainstorming Google Form |
| 2: Select problem | • Determine problem to address<br>• Begin research<br>• Create a group "Sources Page" (Google doc for putting links to sources you find in your research) | • Submit topic on Google Form |
| 3: Contextualize | • Continue research on topic<br>• Use research guidelines and fulfill components | • Group conferences with teachers<br>• Individual research reports and group Sources Page |
| 4: Organize | • Brainstorm how to address injustice<br>• Determine path for addressing injustice<br>• Organize steps for addressing injustice<br>• Implement steps for solution (e.g., write emails, seek permissions, make contacts, generate materials or advertisements) | • Brainstorming action Google Form<br>• Submit action on Google Form<br>• Organizing Report<br>• Group conference with teacher<br>• Evidences of organization portfolio |
| 5: Act | • Implement action (monitor action) | • Evidences of action portfolio |
| 6: Reflect | • Group and individual reflection on action<br>• Determine next steps<br>• Class project share | • Group reflection Google Form<br>• Personal reflection<br>• Continuing action plan |

YAL serves as the springboard for these projects, and I constantly remind TCs to return to the text as they work: What would the protagonist do? How was the issue represented in the text? How did the author shape our understanding of the topic? What actions needed to be taken in the text, or what was done with regard to the injustice? In this way, the books come to life for TCs and the ways their critical literacies were engaged while reading take on new life through

acting on them. At the conclusion of the semester, TCs share their projects with the class and invited guests. In the past, they have designed websites amalgamating local resources for mental health, filmed public service announcements concerning consent and sexual assault on campus, and interviewed local police about bias training, amongst other actions.

TCs' reflections include not only how they would possibly teach the text and topic in their related book to future students but also how they might incorporate social action projects as a pedagogy in their future courses as well. Although youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), critical service learning (Butin, 2014), and other similar efforts are often included in English methods courses, what I hope for is to have TCs fully immerse themselves in the projects as *participants* and as *readers* rather than as teachers so they can experience them firsthand and make their own revisions.

Placing future teachers in the position of agents of social change themselves I hope can also cultivate their leadership skills and confidence to partner with future campus resources for student support. I often find new teachers hesitant to make waves in their schools or communities and this project gives them insight into how to go about advocating for a cause. The project also shows them how such critical conversations and actions can be *text-based,* an aspect essential to the ELA classroom. Social action projects also meet literacy standards across research, writing, listening, and speaking (Boyd, 2017).

**Pedagogical Alignment with Professional Standards**

Our work with YAL supports our efforts to prepare TCs who have strong knowledge in both content and pedagogy as they enter their first years in the secondary classroom. Our work aligns, too, with our objective as teacher educators to foster ELA teachers who can demonstrate

and apply that knowledge of content and pedagogy to create dynamic learning experiences for secondary-aged learners.

Like our candidates, we must also meet professional standards through our curriculum and instruction; specifically, we orient our work to NCTE's 2021 Standards for the Initial Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts 7-12. The purpose of these standards is to provide guidance to college and university programs that educate ELA teachers, some of which may be seeking national recognition of the program as part of the accreditation process, others who are simply committed to designing and aligning their programs with the core values of NCTE and the "research and scholarship from the fields of English education, language and literacy education, teacher education, developmental and educational psychology, and inclusive multicultural education" (George et al., 2021, p. 60). For at least the past four iterations of the standards, literature for adolescents and young adults has been explicitly named, indicating that programs should either have a course focusing specifically on YAL or embed it in a significant way in other required methods or content courses

Although some of us are not required to address the NCTE standards in our coursework, as we do not submit Specialty Professional Association (SPA) reports for accreditation, all of us are committed to the outcomes identified by those standards–to wit, to develop effective equity-oriented educators who possess and apply the necessary knowledge of both content and pedagogy to successfully teach the diversity of adolescents found in today's classrooms. The courses we have described above clearly align with the objectives of the 2021 standards in varied and meaningful ways and, by extension, support our TCs' pedagogical and professional development (see Table 6). While we do not necessarily view standards as primary driving forces for our course development, we do recognize their importance to the larger project of

teacher candidate education and preparation, and we encourage others to consider how their YAL course activities and assessments align with the NCTE Standards, as we have attempted to do.

**Table 6**

*Alignment of Activities and Assessments with NCTE Standards*

| NCTE Standards | Marshall Activities & Assessments | Melanie Activities & Assessments | Mark Activities & Assessments | Ashley Activities & Assessments |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1: Learners and Learning | - Student Interest Inventory | - Analyzing Curriculum<br>- Creating Curriculum | - Book Clubs<br>- Thematic Text Sets | - Connections Posts<br>- Peer Teaching |
| 2: Content Knowledge | - Multimodal / Multigenre Response Journal | - Novel Curriculum<br>- Analyzing Curriculum | - Book Clubs<br>- Thematic Text Sets | - I Search Papers<br>- Multimedia Choice Projects |
| 3: Planning for Instruction | - Unit Plan | - Creating Curriculum | | - Peer Teaching<br>- Multimedia Choice Projects |
| 4: Implementing Instruction | - Book Talks / Video Trailers | | | - Peer Teaching |
| 5: Professional Responsibility | - Book Clubs<br>- Literature Circle Participation | - Analyzing Curriculum | - Book Clubs<br>- Thematic Text Sets | - Social Action Projects |

All four authors describe courses and assignments that align with Standard 1: Learners and Learning in ELA, and Standard 2: ELA Content Knowledge, in which component 2.1 specifically mentions young adult texts. Mark and Ashley clearly require their TCs to "apply and demonstrate knowledge and theoretical perspectives pertaining to texts." Similarly, antiracist/bias ELA, which is foundational in all five standards, is at the center of all four authors' courses, in particular that of Ashley.

The focus of Marshall and Melanie's courses directly aligns with NCTE Standards 3 and 4: Planning and Implementing Instruction in ELA. Marshall's unit plan assignment is carefully aligned with the components of Standard 3, requiring TCs to "plan coherent, relevant, standards-aligned, antiracist/bias, and differentiated instruction" utilizing YA or middle grades literature. Likewise, the unit plans require TCs to utilize "a variety of resources and technologies" in their planning (4.1) and identify or create "formative and summative assessments that reflect ELA research, align with intended learning outcomes, and engage learners in monitoring their progress towards established goals" (4.2).

The course foci and activities described by Melanie and Mark are aligned with multiple standards; however, they are particularly in sync with Standard 1: Learners and Learning, Standard 2: ELA Content Knowledge, and Standard 5, which asks TCs to reflect on their identities and experiences as well as how they frame their teaching of ELA. The learning experiences highlighted by Ashley are linked to numerous standards and provide a strong example of assessments that asks TCs to "demonstrate readiness for leadership, professional learning, and advocacy for learners" (5.4).

**Differing Pedagogies, Common Goals**

While our pedagogies differ in many ways, there are common threads among them. Our work with YAL supports our efforts to prepare TCs who have strong knowledge in both content and pedagogy as they enter their first years in the secondary classroom. Our work aligns, too, with our objective as teacher educators to foster ELA teachers who can demonstrate and apply that knowledge of content and pedagogy to create dynamic learning experiences for secondary-aged learners. Most, if not all, of the texts our TCs interact with in our courses are well-aligned

with our common goal of promoting justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in our society, as well.

Student choice is a cornerstone of our pedagogies although choice looks different in our different classrooms. Mark offers choice in the texts read, for example, with TCs self-selecting books they wish to read under a particular theme, while Ashley offers choice in assignments, with candidates selecting the direction of a project. We stress to our TCs that choice matters to secondary students–for heightening interest, strengthening engagement, supporting autonomy, and recognizing individuality. These outcomes apply to our TCs, as well, allowing us to model choice as a pedagogical decision while supporting our candidates' learning.

Our work also evinces an emphasis on equity, from the perspectives guiding our pedagogical decisions to the assignments engaging TCs with YAL. We all rely on YAL to develop TCs' perspectives on themselves and understandings of others who might be different from them. For example, Marshall and Melanie provide opportunities for TCs to respond to and reflect on the works of YAL they read in multiple ways; Mark explicitly asks TCs to serve as critical witnesses as they read, and Ashley encourages TCs to constantly build connections to texts.

Our course assignments also encourage our TCs to work toward social and educational justice by directly naming and addressing inequities they discern as central to their own lives and communities or expanding awareness of lived experiences that differ from their own. As our TCs will engage daily with adolescents, conceptualizing the texts they read as windows and doors into the lives and stories of those adolescents encourages awareness that those narratives and experiences are extremely diverse.

## Conclusion

In the sections above, we have detailed our myriad approaches in courses spanning those solely focused on texts written for youth to methods courses including multiple disciplines. The vast array of areas in which we employ YAL illustrates its potential as an avenue for planning instruction, seeing the world anew, connecting to subjects outside of traditional ELA, reflecting on identities, witnessing others' stories, and creating social change. Our approaches serve both to validate YAL's potential for achieving academic goals as well as its adaptability beyond conventional uses while realizing YAL's capacities for soliciting student engagement and building connections amongst readers, texts, and society**.** Some of our approaches are outside of traditional literature pedagogies in ELA classrooms that center textual analysis and focus wholly on form, criticism, or literary devices. Instead, we use texts as a means to build social worlds, be those in classrooms or on college campuses. Our pedagogies incorporate YAL because they are grounded in recognizing and understanding characters, teachers, and students as people. Part of that recognition is preparing TCs to enact the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of their chosen profession, both those articulated by the NCTE standards and those we individually determine.

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