



# Why Literacy (and Young Adult Literature) Matters:

A Review of Current Research

In an era of accountability (and in particular, high-stakes testing), discussion is often centered on “what young people know” and very little on “how young people feel.” Lost in the mad rush to satisfy bureaucrats and parents anxious to see students score well on state exams are any real indicators (or discussion) as to what really matters in the lives of young people and, in particular, their own literary needs and desires. Simply, are we forcing children to perform? To read what they are not ready to read? And if so, at what cost?

What follows are a group of relevant and recent research studies that both highlight and question our (and the world’s) fascination with “racing to the top” of the proverbial academic achievement ranking with little or no regard as to what matters most in the lives of young people. As these research studies illustrate, literacy education is more than measuring academic achievement; it is helping young people find good books to read.

## Reading for Pleasure

Young people read for many reasons, one of which is for pure pleasure; as these reviews suggest, reading for pleasure is a noble goal in and of itself. In “Reasons for Reading: Why Literature Matters,” Hodges (2010) suggests that opportunities for children and young people to read for pleasure in school has significantly decreased as a direct result of curriculum mandates and standardized testing. Recent research in England, the author suggests, indicates that there has been a strong emphasis on meeting objectives and managing curriculum to the obvious neglect of why reading matters in the first place. Moreover, the article underscores that no research or policy documentation explicitly states why literature has a clear role to play in English education. Consequently, in England (as elsewhere), young adult literature does not find itself in a prominent place in the school’s curriculum.

Similar arguments for using relevant reading material with adolescents (as well as adults) is underscored in Daisy’s (2010) “Secondary Preservice Teachers Remember Their Favorite Reading Experiences: Insights and Implications for Content Area Instruction.” This cogent article examines secondary preservice teachers’ favorite past reading experiences in light of how their remembrances can improve classroom reading instruction. Using a multilateral qualitative research design, the author examines preservice teachers’ survey results, quotes, drawings, and reflections on several reading strategies to promote content area achievement. Not surprisingly, the researcher finds that preservice teachers’ memories of favorite reading experiences suggest a strong wish for school reading material that is relevant and meaningful to the lives of the young adults they will eventually teach.

Polleck’s “Creating Transformational Spaces: High School Book

Clubs with Inner City Adolescent Females” (2010) is a fascinating read that explores in considerable detail how a high school book club transformed the lives of 12 Latina and African American inner city high school girls. Through their voices and his astute observations, this researcher demonstrates how a single high school book club provides a forum where affective and cognitive development occur simultaneously and results in verifiable evidence of the transformative nature of promoting literacy among adolescents. Using charts, book lists, and recreated dialogue, Pollock demonstrates how dialoguing about teen books can both increase literacy appreciation and meet the social and emotional needs of adolescents.

Continuing in this positive vein, Koss and Teale (2009) underscore how the market for young adult literature has continually grown due to a stronger focus on adolescent literacy; in addition, YA novels are becoming more and more appealing not only to teens, but also to parents and teachers. In their article “What’s Happening in Young Adult Literature? Trends in Books for Young Adolescents,” Koss and Teale compile a list of recent books rated as “high quality” by teachers, selected as favorites by students, and promoted as best sellers by the marketplace. Content analysis reveals that the majority of popular and/or award-winning books are also primarily realistic in content and form and, for the most part, are not multicultural in character or setting. Koss and Teale believe that the focus in YA books—especially those that are popular and best-selling—has shifted from

*social issues* (race, drugs, and social class) to *social conditions* (fitting in, finding oneself, and major life changes) involving teenagers. Also noted is the lack of LGBT characters in popular YA fiction.

In “Peer Influences on Young Teen Readers: An Emerging Taxonomy,” Howard (2010) outlines the results of a research study to determine the role of recreational or pleasure reading in the lives of 12–15-year-old residents of the Halifax Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia, Canada. What the author learns is that the results are mixed, at best. The study finds that teens’ attitudes toward peer influence on their pleasure reading is complex, and is best defined by the reading habits of the teens in question; simply, some were influential, and some were simply not. Moreover, the study shows a clear division between boys and girls, with girls doing far more independent reading than their male counterparts. Finally, the study demonstrates the significance of adult mentoring on influencing teen readers, especially males.

### **Reading for Social Significance**

Besides reading for pleasure, young adults often read to learn about themselves and the issues that matter most to them. The reading for social significance is evidenced by the many research and related studies demonstrating the effectiveness of reading for meaning.

Direct evidence of reading for meaning is found in Ma’ayan’s “Erika’s Stories: Literacy Solutions for a Failing Middle School Student” (2010). In this intriguing read, the

author discusses how she was able to help a struggling middle school student overcome her literacy disengagement through reading young adult historical fiction and magazines. By focusing in on one particular middle school girl, the researcher underscores the importance of using culturally relevant and age-appropriate texts to engage even the most reluctant learners.

In “Moving Beyond the Inclusion of LGBT Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms: Interrogating Heteronormativity and Exploring Intersectionality,” Blackburn and Smith (2010) explore the ever so contentious issue of combating homophobia by using lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or questioning-themed young adult novels and texts. The authors assert that schools enforce the establishment of conventional gender roles or heteronormativity and, in so doing, imply that homosexuality is abnormal. Thus, they examine LGBT-themed literature and its impact on the reading lives of young adults.

Author and critic Cart discusses the prevalence of high-risk-taking behaviors in “A Literature of Risk” (2010a). This smart read explores the pervasive culture of violence among teens in the United States and how this culture permeates not only our nation’s classrooms, but our young adult fiction as well. Cart underlines how bullying and cyberbullying, specifically, are often simply a reflection of media orientation and our excessive exposure to the multimodal contemporary expressions that at least encourage violent behavior in adolescents. Thus, Cart recommends that adolescents, educators, and young adult fiction

writers must treat discussions of violence (and the reading thereof) as gateways to promoting empathy and understanding.

Phillion's compelling academic research on what young adults are reading, "The Age of ?: Using Young Adult Literature to Make Sense of the Contemporary World" (2009), discusses the author's project of using young adult literature as a methodology to understand contemporary adolescent social mores and attitudes. By reading 40 young adult novels garnered from the 2006–2007 lists generated by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), Phillion was able to discern four themes in the YA books he read—fear, diversity, exceptionality, and creativity; these themes underscore the world in which young adults live and perceive. Each theme, this researcher contends, demonstrates an "evocative idea of the current era and predominant ideal of thought" (p. 49) preoccupied by young people and the age in which they live. The author's thesis is that young adult literature is the window to the contemporary world.

Equally compelling, Sturm and Karin present an intriguing look at why young adults are drawn to problem novels in "The Structure of Power in Young Adult Problem Novels" (2009). Problem novels, as defined by Sturm and Karin, are stories realistic in content and style that discuss common problems associated with adolescence—insecurity, loneliness, vulnerability, peer pressure, and anger management issues, among others. Teenagers are often drawn to problem novels for several reasons, most prominently because not only can the

readers identify with the elements of the story—those characters and events that resemble their own lives or lives of people they know—they can also "identify with the feelings of chaos and exaggeration that the structure of these books creates within us" (p. 42). These researchers believe that the feelings generated by problem novels—through short paragraphs; accessible sentences; blunt language; overt sexuality; anti-authoritarian spirit; and sarcastic, often gallows, humor—lead to an easy attraction for teens who are seeking an outlet for their own emotional uneasiness with who they are and what they represent.

In "Reading for a Better World: Teaching for Social Responsibility with Young Adult Literature" (2009), Wolk outlines how young adult books are a natural fit for teaching adolescents about social responsibility. Using Paul Volponi's young adult novel *Black and White* (2005), Wolk describes a curriculum that stresses instilling social awareness, intellectual curiosity, and active citizenship. What is most intriguing about this engaging read is Wolk's extensive research of actual teens to whom he simply asks, "Why do you read in school?" Unfortunately, Wolk writes that the majority respond, "to get the assignment done." Wolk implores teachers to extend their students' reading beyond routine school work and calls for social renewal and justice through inquiry-based learning, critical self-reflection, and service-learning experiences.

Finally, reading for social significance also includes reading for identity, as Yokota explores in "Asian Americans in Literature

for Children and Young Adults" (2009), an intriguing look at how Asian Americans are portrayed in children's and young adult books. Since the 1990s, the author claims that the representation of Asians and Asian Americans in literature has grown substantially. Moreover, Yokota writes, the range and complexity of Asian characters has matured as well—stereotypes are giving way to more roundly developed characters. Thus, reading matters for young people, especially the often-forgotten Asian American minority, who are slowly but surely beginning to see themselves in young adult fiction.

## Reading for Literary Merit

In addition to reading for pleasure and social significance, students do read for literary merit, although they might not know it. Their first instinct is to read when they find something "wonderful to read," and these pieces reveal how important it is that teachers and students know that reading for literary merit on the one hand and the direction that popular reading finds itself in the 21st century on the other are often at odds.

In "A New Literature for a New Millennium? The First Decade of the Printz Awards" (2010), Cart addresses how the young adult books are selected for the Printz prize (the winner and three honorable mentions) and their impact, if any, on young adults and their reading habits. Noting that the Printz award is solely for literary merit—not popularity—Cart remarks that not every Printz choice (as of 2010, 10 winners and 38 honorable mentions) is universally popular with

booksellers, media specialists, and librarians who are concerned more about accessibility and interest to teen readers. Hence, these good books—fiction, nonfiction, and all other genres and types—often go unnoticed by both adolescents and adults looking for good books to read.

Questioning popularity is the theme of Johnston's "Consuming Desires: Consumption, Romance, and Sexuality in Best-Selling Teen Romance Novels" (2010). This engaging study raises the question, "Yes, kids are reading, but what are they reading and why?" and then examines popular brand names among best-selling young adult romance series, such as Gossip Girl, A-List, and Clique. Johnston underlines the direct connection between this romantic popular fiction and overt marketing promotions. The researcher's contention is that these ever-popular books promote romantic and sexual desirability, but offer a limited understanding of femininity—in other words, characteristics that benefit publishers and retailers rather than adolescent readers.

Finally, of interest to our readers is a compelling new volume of essays in the journal *Studies in the Novel* (2010) about young adult literature and its impact on the publishing industry and media in general. In the edition's introduction, "Kicking It Up beyond the Casual: Fresh Perspectives in Young Adult Literature," Cappella describes 11 essays that discuss with considerable detail and insight significant new trends and developments toward reconsidering and reconceptualizing young adult literature as a genre. In the first section of the issue, five essays focus on contemporary, realistic YA

novels. The second section includes three provocative essays exploring young adult novels set in the realm of fantasy and/or science fiction. Finally, the third section examines the genre of young adult literature as it appeared in England during the Victorian Era and in America during the 1930s. By discussing historical young adult books, the authors of these intriguing essays demonstrate how contemporary theoretical perspectives can cast new light on young adult books; how social morays can affect the subject of young adult literature; and most important, why reading young adult literature by young adults has always mattered.

## Conclusion

All in all, these studies indicate that adolescents do read—when given something worthwhile to read—and that even in the age of competing conflicts (the lure of technology and the bane of high-stakes testing), young people are still drawn to good stories for the same reasons as adolescents before them; they want to read for fun, for meaning, and for the joy of language itself. If only our politicians would take this to heart.

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