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Bringing John Green to Schools: Incorporating Young Adult Literature in a Secondary English Language Arts Classroom

Emily Adams

University of Central Florida, eradams@knights.ucf.edu



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**BRINGING JOHN GREEN TO SCHOOLS: INCORPORATING YOUNG
ADULT LITERATURE IN A SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS
CLASSROOM**

by

EMILY ADAMS

**A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English Language Arts Education
in the College of Education and Human Performance
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida**

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Thesis Chair: Jeffrey Kaplan, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

As educators and administrators continue to struggle with the low literacy proficiency rates in this country, a new genre of literature is making its way into the classroom. Young Adult Literature, such as the works of John Green, are becoming a more familiar sight inside the classroom. However, some parents, educators, and members of the school districts are not happy with this new trend. In the last year, alone, young adult books have been challenged hundreds of times in hopes of getting them removed from the classroom and library. I believe that these books need to stay in the schools, though. Through this thesis, I explore the possibility of Young Adult Literature having more of a presence in the secondary English Language Arts classroom in order to increase motivation, engagement, social awareness, and literacy rates.

In this research project, only 13% of 11th and 12th grade English Language Arts students reported enjoying the reading they were currently assigned, despite their statement that they enjoy reading, in general. These books do not lead to motivated and engaged readers. By incorporating Young Adult Literature into the standard curriculum of an English Language Arts classroom, teachers can enhance motivation, engagement, and productivity. Students can continue to learn the same literary concepts and techniques, in addition to being exposed to current social problems. When Young Adult Literature is brought into a classroom, an environment is created in which students can learn what they think, why they think it, and how to respect the differing opinions of others.

DEDICATION

For my parents, Ray and Kim Adams, thank you for giving me every opportunity that has led me to this point. Thank you for being an ongoing source of encouragement, motivation, love, and laughter.

For my not-so-little brother, Nate, you inspired more of this project than you know. Thanks for being my creative springboard and inspiring me with your under-used intelligence and wit.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ostenson and Wadham (2012) stated in their discussion of young adult (YA) literature that, “Some critics have perceived these works as juvenile and not complex enough to be included in mainstream and English classrooms” (p. 5). Although a common viewpoint of YA literature, many people still recognize the benefits that this type of literature can contribute to students’ lives. Ostenson and Wadham (2012) continue on to report, “Others have extolled the potential benefits of YA literature in helping young people develop into literate adults with strong reading skills and an appreciation for literary works” (p. 5).

Some parents, educators, and administrators believe YA literature is not appropriate for students to read in the classroom, due to sexual innuendos, explicit language, violence, and other mature content (Grinberg, 2013), while others believe that students can learn more from “the classics” (Hubbard, 2012). Books such as *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and John Green’s (2005) *Looking for Alaska* are being banned from English Language Arts (ELA) classes as assigned reading, thus discouraging students from reading books that may relate to their real life more than *Julius Caesar* (Shakespeare, 1963) ever could.

John Green is the author of focus throughout this project, but he is only one of the many young adult authors whose books are simultaneously reaching students and being banned from the classroom. *Looking for Alaska* (2005) is currently his most commonly banned book, being banned in several counties in Tennessee and New York because of inappropriate language and

sexual content (Hubbard, 2012). However, the other four YA books that he has written also include controversial material, such as the overarching theme of homosexuality that presents itself in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (Green, 2010). Despite the fact that some educators, parents, and administrators disapprove of these texts (Hubbard, 2012), *Looking for Alaska* (2005) hit the bestsellers list in 2010 (USA Today, 2013). Students are finding ways to read the books that schools are banning, which leads to the question, “Why are we discouraging students from reading?”

If students are interested in a specific book, author, or type of literature, we—as English Language Arts educators—should provide an environment in which they can read these types of books. Rather than telling students to read those books on their own time, perhaps teachers should harness this excitement to read into their lessons. By providing a safe environment based on mutual respect between teacher and students, as well as student to student, these normally controversial texts can be discussed literarily and in relation to students’ daily lives. As Groenke, Maples, and Henderson (2010) stated, “We think 21st century literacy skills must include not only learning how to respectfully articulate and voice opinions, but also how to listen and receive others’ opinions and viewpoints on important issues” (p. 29). The issues present themselves throughout Young Adult Literature, now it is just a matter of ELA teachers using those texts to create an environment which allows students to respectfully discuss.

Statement of the Problem

According to Goldman (2012), high school students' reading performance has not improved since 1971, with only 38% of high school seniors scoring at or above proficient for their grade's reading proficiency level (p. 90). This leaves 62% of high school seniors who are reading below the proficiency level for their grade. With more than half of seniors lacking proficiency, it begs the question, "How much are students reading?" The American Library Association has reported that a majority of their patrons are under the age of 18, but this statement does not seem to coincide with the low literacy rates (Hayn, 2011, p. 176). If students are visiting libraries frequently, should they not be reading and becoming more literate?

The goal of this project was to explore whether or not the amount that students are reading, inside and outside of the classroom may present a problem. Are students reading, but not comprehending the material, or are they simply not reading? What is it that they are reading? Furthermore, this project was also conducted in order to determine if students' motivation and excitement to read assigned texts inside the classroom correlates to the amount that they read in general. Are the students who are excited and motivated to read assigned texts doing so because they are excited about reading, in general, or does the author or genre matter to them?

The concern for most secondary English Language Arts teachers, therefore, becomes finding texts that interest students while simultaneously teaching them the same literary concepts that "the classics" would. The problem that all teachers face is how to engage their students on a higher level; that is, finding the aspects of a particular subject that make students excited to learn

and discuss the material. In the context of an English Language Arts classroom, this problem becomes, more specifically, “How can we engage students in reading to the extent that they are able, and willing, to participate in class discussions about the topics explored in the book?” The problem, quite simply, is disengaged and unmotivated readers in the secondary English Language Arts classroom and the educators who are not motivated enough to attempt to fix the problem.

Statement of the Purpose

The main purpose of this project was to explore the reading habits, perceptions, engagement, and motivation of secondary English Language Arts students in order to expose educators to the possibilities of implementing Young Adult Literature in secondary ELA classrooms. I provide a strong rationale for how and why John Green’s texts, especially, should be incorporated in a secondary ELA classroom. In order to do this, I must first show the legitimacy of Young Adult Literature as a genre worthy of being included as assigned reading in an English classroom. Secondly, through this project, I will discuss the amount that students read and their perceptions on reading inside and outside the classroom. Lastly, I will briefly explore the correlation between Young Adult Literature and students’ motivation and excitement to read assigned texts. By doing these three things, the results of this project will offer Young Adult Literature, such as John Green’s books, as one alternative to the current curriculum in secondary ELA classrooms .

Significance

Although, many young adult texts, especially those of John Green, have been considered controversial, through this project, I hope to encourage educators to embrace the controversial issues that they may come across. In fact, educators may use John Green's books as a means for relating the characters to students and discussing real-life issues. Due to the fact that Young Adult Literature is usually more contemporary with the issues, times, settings, and themes explored, these texts tend to be more relevant to the students' lives than classical texts do. Through this project, I hope to provide secondary English Language Arts teachers with a strong rationale for how students can still learn from YA literature and be even more engaged in class readings and discussions with the use of it. Hopefully, this will encourage those ELA teachers to implement such texts in their own classrooms.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Despite John Green's recent appearance on the bestsellers list, many people are still uncomfortable with his presence in a secondary classroom. Although John Green did not write any of his books with the intent of promoting sex, drugs, alcohol, or offensive language, parents and educators are claiming these things are too prominent and his books and must be removed from school libraries and classrooms. However, I, along with many other researchers, parents, and educators, would argue that they are wrong. We believe that these books should have a place in the classroom, especially the English Language Arts classroom, because of the level of motivation and engagement they bring to students. Furthermore, these books are relatable to students in a way that helps them feel like they are not alone. Young Adult Literature shows students that they are not the only ones who deal with uncomfortable situations or struggle to find their place sometimes. In fact, these books support students by showing them how some other teenagers dealt with the same situations.

Benefits of Young Adult Literature in the Classroom

Ostenson and Wadham (2012) sum up YA literature in the classroom by saying:

Classic literature has an important place in the ELA classroom, but when decisions are made about which texts to use to support the Common Core, consideration should be given to Rosenblatt's (1995) warnings that readers must

find something familiar to connect with in a text and that too much struggle can alienate them from its meaning. (p. 6)

English Language Arts teachers should consider the connection that a text will have with the students before bringing it into the classroom. Each class will be different, regardless of the grade level, subject, or type of class. Teachers may not be able to use the same texts for both of their ninth grade English classes, simply because the students in the two classes are different. If the readers in a particular class are not able to relate or connect to a text, it may just be the wrong choice for that class. Teachers should not have to struggle extensively with their students in order to get them to open a book, let alone comprehend and discuss it. When we are constantly facing this battle of whether or not students are reading, the entire class will lose sight of the meaning of the text, because after fighting for so long, they simply do not care anymore.

When the text appeals to the students, educators stop having to fight the class about reading and can, instead, focus on engaging them further in the text. Some students may not even be aware that Young Adult Literature is a genre or that they are interested in it. Johnson (2011) says that many students have misconceptions of YA literature. Some believe that it equates to children's literature or even classical literature due to the simplistic idea they have of it. Others do not recognize the depth, quality, and variety of Young Adult Literature (p. 216).

By incorporating Young Adult Literature in the classroom, teachers are opening the learning environment to situations that students may not have been exposed to before. The point of bringing Young Adult Literature into the classroom is to get students more excited and

engaged in reading and participating in class activities. When ELA teachers incorporate books that are familiar or relatable for students, the teens are more willing to read. Groenke, Maples, and Henderson (2010) explained, “We know adolescent engagement with reading and motivation to read increase when adolescents read young adult novels. We know, too, that adolescents choose to read young adult novels over more canonical works when given opportunities to choose” (p. 29).

While getting students engaged in their assigned reading is a start, it is not enough. Students should also be motivated and engaged inside the classroom, as well. Almasi (2002) was quoted by Henderson (2011) as saying, “Discussion is a dialogic classroom event in which students and teachers are cognitively, socially, and affectively engaged in collaborative construction of meaning to arrive at new understandings” (p. 234). In order to engage students, they have to be given the opportunity to share their opinions and listen to others’. The combination of Young Adult Literature and class discussions is a great place to start when attempting to get students to participate and share their opinions.

Henderson (2011) ties these two aspects together perfectly when he says, “Because the themes and content are relevant and interesting to adolescents, YAL stimulates meaningful discussions during which teachers can model what skillful readers do and scaffold students’ construction of comprehension processes” (p. 237). Not only will students be able to participate in a meaningful discussion because of the relevance of the content, but the teacher will also be able to scaffold comprehension strategies at the same time. The teacher will be excited because they are still able to incorporate traditional reading techniques, such as comprehension strategies,

while students are excited about the relativity of the text they are reading and the opportunity to discuss their opinions about certain taboo topics.

Common Core and Young Adult Literature

Most teachers, administrators, and educational personnel would agree that the ultimate goal of education is to develop life-long learners. We take children, who are natural learners, and find what motivates them to learn, in the hope that they will further develop the love of learning on their own. Stroet, Opdenakker, and Minnaert (2013) believe that “It is critical that students become genuinely interested in learning...in such a way that they acquire new knowledge and persist in learning over time” (p. 68). The goal for educators is to motivate students to want to do this on their own, without having to get a grade or being threatened with a consequence. Sometimes this idea of natural, life-long learners gets lost once national standards and high-stakes assessments are included, though.

The pressure that is put on students to pass the test, meet the objectives, and move on to the next grade is overwhelming. The focus for most students nowadays is not on becoming a life-long learner; it is just about learning how to pass the test. John Green actually addressed the idea of “the test” at a TED Talk conference, stating that, “The test will measure whether you are an informed, engaged, and productive citizen of the world” (Brakhage, 2013). Green informs students that “the test” will take place in many different settings with many different people. He says that, “The test will last your entire life, and it will be comprised of the millions of decisions

that, when taken together, will make your life yours. And everything, everything, will be on it” (Brakhage, 2013).

Although life is the true test, there are still standardized tests that students need to pass in order to graduate, and standards that teachers must follow when preparing students for these tests. Any time a teacher has to develop a lesson plan, a new, time-consuming event takes place, but when this lesson needs to be planned around a completely new genre of literature, the task becomes even more difficult. Because teaching YAL in the English Language Arts classroom is still a fairly new trend, there are not as many ideas about how to implement it as there are for other genres. This should not deter teachers though, as there are many options for including Young Adult Literature lessons that align with Common Core standards.

Fortunately, the developers of the Common Core standards for English Language Arts did not make them so specific that they can only apply to one genre of literature. In Florida, 11th and 12th grade English Language Arts students have a total of nine standards for reading literature, six standards for language, six standards for speaking and listening, and ten standards for writing (CPalms, 2010). By adapting these lesson plans to focus on YAL instead of classic literature, teachers are still accomplishing the same standards, just in reference to a different genre of literature.

When implementing more Young Adult Literature in the classroom, in place of classic literature, the atmosphere of the learning environment changes. Although teachers still need to ensure that their students are meeting the required objectives and standards, the classroom will

most likely become more discussion and project based. This is because the teachers who are choosing to implement this type of literature tend to have an alternate focus than those teachers who focus on classic literature. The teacher may give the illusion that there is less pressure being put on meeting the objectives in order to pass the test, but, when implemented correctly, the students will still meet all standards and pass the test, without even knowing it. However, they will also be learning much more than that.

Introduction to John Green

John Green is the sole author of four YA texts and one collaborative YA text. These books include the most commonly banned book, *Looking for Alaska* (2005), the bestselling *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), as well as *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006), *Paper Towns* (2008), and *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (2010). He has also been awarded the Michael L. Printz Award, Edgar Award, and has twice been a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize (Penguin Group). Despite the fact that he is a YA author, he is still recognized and respected in the literary community as a best-selling writer.

Green is very clear about his intentions as an author. When asked whether or not he would be interested in writing for adults, he responded by saying, “No, I have no interest in it at all. That whole world strikes me as very unappealing” (Rosen, 2013). He continues on to say that in the instances that his books do attract adult readers, it is completely accidental, but it excites him to hear from those adult readers just as much (Rosen, 2013).

John Green is an interesting author because he places very little emphasis on literary techniques, although, they always present themselves. Green also does not intend for the teens in his books to ever sound like real teens. He says, “My interest as a writer is not in reflecting actual human speech...My interest is in trying to reflect the reality of experience—how we feel when we talk to each other, how we feel when we’re engaging with questions that interest us” (Rosen, 2013). Green’s focus is on the experiences that the characters and the readers have individually, as well as together, not how realistic or correct their speech is. Because he places so little emphasis on perfecting his dialogue, teens are actually forced to dig deeper into the meaning of the story in order to find out what the point of the whole experience is. Teens become so involved in the experience and trying to figure out the underlying point that they continue reading. This is the point at which students will ultimately struggle when reading on their own. By bringing students and teachers together to read these texts, they are able to combine their knowledge and discuss many more aspects than the teacher or students could do alone.

In the midst of one of the challenges to get John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* (2005) banned from an English Language Arts classroom in New York, Green posted a video on his Youtube channel titled “I Am Not a Pornographer.” In this video, Green details the situation taking place in New York, but then begins to explain and defend his book. There are several reasons that this book is challenged, but in this scenario, the book was being challenged due to “inappropriate sexual content.” The sexual content is actually only about 800 words over two pages and, in comparison to some other forms of media, is not very descriptive.

In Green's Youtube defense, he describes this scene as, "un-fun, disastrous, and holy un-erotic" (Vlogbrothers, 2008). Furthermore, he explains that:

The whole reason that scene exists is because I wanted to draw contrast between that scene, where there's a lot of physical intimacy, but it's ultimately very emotionally empty, and the scene that immediately follows it, when there's not a series of physical intimacy, but there's this intense emotional connection. The argument here is that physical intimacy can never stand in for emotional closeness, and that when teenagers try to conflate these ideas, it ultimately fails (Vlogbrothers, 2008).

John Green is very intentional with every word he writes. In response to the wording used during the sex scene of *Looking for Alaska* (2005), he says it "is extremely clinical and distant and unsensual. The word 'penis' is used...The adverbs and adjectives that appear in that scene include weird, nervous, and quizzically" (Green, n.d., question 48). Green intentionally chooses awkward words to show that this was not an exciting or arousing situation. It was uncomfortable and weird, just like real life. He understands that he is writing for teenagers and that they are impressionable. However, he also believes that the adults who are trying to ban his books because of scenes like this are "condescending to teenagers" (Vlogbrothers, 2008). Unlike the adults advocating the banning of *Looking for Alaska* (2005), Green realizes that students can think critically. They are able to recognize the purpose of a specific scene in a book. Furthermore, they can analyze that scene, both literarily and in regards to real life, and understand that this was not John Green advocating sex, but emotional closeness in relationships.

The way in which John Green goes about depicting scenes like this is exactly the reason why I believe he should be a prominent author in English Language Arts classrooms. Not only are his books applicable because they deal with relationships, similar to the ones teens frequently experience, but because they deal with awkward relationships. His characters are not perfect; in fact, they are far from it. Miles, the main male character in *Looking for Alaska* (2005), is actually incredibly awkward and uncomfortable when it comes to relationships.

Therefore, students are not only able to relate to the situations, but they are also able to see themselves in many of the characters, as well. As Bach, Hensley, and Parker (2011) said, “One of the reasons YAL is so popular and important to students is that they can often relate to the experiences of its characters....These authentic representations of students’ experiences can help readers gain insight into the lives of contemporary young adults” (p. 199). Young Adult Literature shows students that the experiences they have had, and the awkward situations they have gone through, are normal, unlike the images they see from some other sources of media. These books give teens examples of the strange, unpredictable, and sometimes cruel real life that all of us have to experience.

Challenges to Young Adult Literature

There is an irony surrounding young adult books’ presence in English Language Arts classrooms. These books are simultaneously earning spots on the bestsellers list and the most challenged books list. In 2011, Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010) took second, fifth, and seventh place on USA Today’s bestsellers list (USA Today, 2013) while

concurrently being the third most challenged book of the year (ALA, 2013). Additionally, John Green faced a similar situation in 2012 when his book *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) placed 65th on the bestseller list while *Looking for Alaska* (2005) became the 7th most challenged book of the year (ALA, 2013).

Despite the fact that these books are being placed on the bestsellers list, many people still do not consider Young Adult Literature to be a legitimate genre. Educators, administrators, and librarians may fight to keep these texts out of schools; however, parents make up 49% of the formal challenges to have books removed from schools (Grinberg, 2013). The two most common reasons that parents attempt to have books removed are because of offensive language or a sexually explicit scene (Grinberg, 2013).

Just because parents attempt to have a book removed does not mean it is, though. Books that are thought to be offensive must first be challenged. The Office for Intellectual Freedom states that a challenge is a “formal, written complaint filed with a library or school requesting that a book or other material be restricted or removed because of its content or appropriateness” (Italie, 2014). After a book is challenged, it must go through a process of being reviewed before it can officially be banned. It is not very common that a book is banned, despite the high number of challenges that are presented throughout the year.

The library association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom actually believes the number of challenged books should be much higher, though. The office stated their belief that “for every complaint registered, four to five go unreported by libraries and that some librarians may restrict

access in anticipation of objections” (Italie, 2014). Furthermore, Barbara Jones, the director of this office said that the numbers of challenged books are declining and she would like to believe it is “because people finally understand that pulling a book from their shelves isn’t going to solve the problem they’re worried about” (Italie, 2014). Books are still being challenged because of the same controversial topics that have always been a problem, such as racism, homosexuality, drugs, language, and sex; it is just occurring less often nowadays. People are still trying to get *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) banned for racism and offensive language, just as they were decades ago.

Although not all of the 464 formal complaints in 2012 led to books being banned or removed from schools, some do (Grinberg, 2013). Some banned books may only be banned from the school’s library, while others may only be banned as an assigned text within a classroom. However, *Looking for Alaska* (2005) has been banned as required reading in two school counties in Tennessee due to “inappropriate language” (Marshall, 2013). A school in Depew, New York also challenged the book for its “graphic language and sexual content,” but the text was retained in the 11th grade classroom, after a letter was sent asking parents’ permission (Marshall, 2013).

Jeremy Johnson, a school spokesman for one of the counties in Tennessee which banned Green’s book, stated that classic books are banned less often because of the value of the author. In regards to the *Looking for Alaska* (2005) ban that took place in 2012, Johnson reportedly said, “You take somebody like Hemingway or a John Steinbeck and there can be some language or description that may make parents uncomfortable, but the value of a writer like that outweighs

what controversy may be in the individual book” (Hubbard, 2012). However, Johnson does not believe that John Green has enough value yet to make parents comfortable with the content he includes in his books.

The Works of John Green

Looking for Alaska (2005).

As previously stated, this book is John Green’s most challenged book. *Alaska* (2005), as it is commonly called, does speak of some more sensitive subjects, but all are within a reasonable context. This story follows Miles as he begins his final high schools years at a boarding school in Alabama. Miles’ roommate, Chip, who wants to be addressed as “the Colonel,” introduces him to his group of friends, including a girl named Alaska.

Alaska remains a mystery to everyone, including the reader, throughout the entire story. She is obviously an intelligent and educated girl, but she consistently makes poor choices. Alaska breaks into other students’ rooms to play pranks on them, drinks, smokes, and is sexually active. Meanwhile, her family remains somewhat of a mystery, as well. Alaska is frequently depressed or upset, although she usually tries to hide this so she can retain her image as the fun-spirited, easygoing, lovable girl. However, Alaska eventually reveals that her mother died and she believes it is her fault.

Alaska and Miles flirt with each other throughout the entire book, but Alaska has a boyfriend at another school and Miles is kind-of dating another one of their friends. Miles and Alaska have several scenes where they are alone in a bedroom, which eventually leads to their

curiosity taking over. In this two page scene revealing some sexual intimacy, Miles realizes that the physical aspect of a relationship was not what he wanted with Alaska.

A little more than halfway through the book, the gang celebrates a prank they had recently pulled off by drinking. In the middle of getting drunk, Alaska decides she needs to leave. Alaska was driving drunk when she hit a police car stopped on the side of the road. She was killed instantly, with a bouquet of white tulips in the back seat. As a child, Alaska's parents used to put white tulips in her hair. Chip and Miles spend the remainder of the book trying to determine if Alaska's death was a legitimate drunk driving accident or if she committed suicide.

Miles and Alaska had spent many weeks analyzing what the meaning of life was. They spoke about life and death and what it meant to live and die. No one was convinced that Alaska didn't want to die, and although they hoped it was just an accident, they would never know for sure. The remaining pages of the book are spent with Chip, Miles, and the gang dealing with life, death, guilt, and fear. Everyone feels that they had a part in her death, especially Miles, who knows that he allowed her to drive drunk without saying anything to stop her. Just as Alaska felt the guilt for not preventing her mom's death, Miles feels the same guilt for not preventing Alaska's death, if he even could have.

While drugs, alcohol, sexual relationships, and offensive language do occur throughout the story, the overarching theme of this book is life and death. All of the characters struggle with what it means to live and die, at some point or another. Everyone feels guilty for someone's death, whether it is Alaska's or Alaska for her mom. No one knows what the meaning of life is

and no one can understand why someone so beautiful could die so quickly. The characters struggle to find their place in life and to create a meaning for their world, just as all people do.

An Abundance of Katherines (2006).

This story tells of two intelligent best friends who take a road trip to a small, rural town and end up meeting people they could have never imagined. Colin is an atheist who believes that there is a theorem for everything in the world, including relationships, while his best friend, Hassan, trusts in God instead. Colin has previously had 19 girlfriends, all named Katherine, but all of the relationships ended. This led Colin to believe that there was a theorem to relationships and if he was able to perfect it, he would be able to predict every time a girl was going to break up with him.

While Colin deals with his theorem, Hassan is forced to listen to Colin complain about all of his problems. Colin tells Hassan of his flaws in the theorem, his relationship issues, and any other minuscule worry that may arise. Hassan does not mind listening, since he is a good friend, but he quickly gets frustrated with Colin for never caring about his problems in return. As the story continues, the boys learn what it means to care about your friends, regardless of if times are good or bad.

Hassan and Colin also meet several new friends, including two attractive girls, in the small town. Hassan begins dating one of the girls, but Colin seems to show little interest in the other girl since he is still thinking of K-19 (Katherine #19). Eventually, Colin is forced to decide

if he wants to try again with the same Katherine that he has already broken up with or if he wants to rid himself of the Katherines for good and begin dating Lindsey.

Green deals with a very different type of character in this book by creating Colin. Although Colin does struggle with his friendship with Hassan, as well as his identity due to the fact that he left home for a temporary life in this new town, his biggest problem is analyzing everything. Colin does not know how to live in the moment, but attempts to figure out the future before it happens to him. He tries to perfect his theorem in order to predict when all girls will break up with him. However, he soon learns that some girls will ruin his theorem and he may never be able to predict what will happen in life; he simply has to live in the moment and be able to enjoy that.

Paper Towns (2008).

In this book, high school students struggle to find where they belong. No one is quite sure of what their place is and everyone is trying to help each other figure it out. Quentin and Margo are the main characters of this book, with Quentin's friends playing a major role, as well. Quentin is a member of the band who spends most of his time with band friends and no one else. Quentin has become complacent living this role, but if he were to be given an opportunity to move up in the social classes of high school, he would take it. Meanwhile, Margo is a member of the popular clique, despite the fact that she hates it.

Margo is similar to Alaska in that she has what most others envy, but she is secretly longing for something more exciting. Margo, just like Alaska, plays anonymous pranks on

people in the popular clique in order to vent her anger and frustration, but maintains her popular identity during the day. As Margo's neighbor, Quentin eventually comes in contact with Margo and joins her in her games against the elite group. While Margo exposes Quentin to the popular life, in all its glory, Quentin tells Margo how it feels to be in his shoes.

The two spend many hours secretly playing pranks and talking, but once the school day begins, they act as if they no longer know each other. Their lives continue, as they have to in the world of high school, without any distraction from the created cliques. Despite the amount of time Margo and Quentin spend together, he is never prepared for her biggest prank of all.

Margo, one day, decides to disappear, and although this is not an unusual occurrence, she never returns. Quentin believes it is his mission to use all that he knows about her in order to find her and bring her home. Although Margo leaves some intentional, and some unintentional, clues lying around her favorite spots, she never intended for anyone to find her.

In this text, Quentin is forced to come to terms with the realities of different high school cliques. He realizes that the popular group is not all that it seems to be, but his band friends are what they say they are. Meanwhile, Margo learns what it means to have true friends who will scour the bedroom you left in order to find any clue of your current location. Both Margo and Quentin struggle with identity and finding their place in a messy world. Furthermore, they both have to learn that sometimes the image you have of an ideal world is nothing like reality.

Will Grayson, Will Grayson (2010).

The main themes throughout this book, as stated above, are homosexuality and friendship. Two boys, both named Will Grayson, meet, in the strangest of circumstances, and their lives are suddenly melded together. One Will Grayson is homosexual, while the other Will Grayson's best friend is also homosexual. When the Wills meet, their friends meet as well, and other Will Grayson suddenly has to deal with what it means to have your homosexual best friend in an unusual relationship. The relationship is unusual for the ironically named Tiny, because he is not usually able to date anyone long enough that he truly comes to care about them. Meanwhile, other Will Grayson has his own problems to deal with with one of his good friends, Maura.

Tiny is a large boy with a large voice and a love of theatre. He uses his passions to create a play based on his life which depicts, in part, his homosexuality. Unlike his kind-of boyfriend, Will, Tiny is not ashamed of his homosexuality and wants to share the beauty of it with everyone in the entire school. The straight Will Grayson is ashamed of Tiny's vibrant personality and openness, though.

In this book, both Will Graysons have to determine who they are, as well as what it means to be a good friend. The Wills learn that, even though they share a name, they are very different people. Furthermore, Tiny is forced to learn how a friendship with both Wills works. The Will Grayson that is Tiny's best friend must also learn to accept people as they are and support them, regardless of how loud or shamelessly open they may be. The boys come to terms

with the fact that everyone is going to have a different reaction to homosexuality, but each person has to learn how big of a part those opinions play in their lives.

The Fault in Our Stars (2012).

In John Green's most renowned book, Augustus and Hazel meet in a cancer survivors group. Although Augustus no longer has cancer, Hazel is still battling the disease. The two become good friends, and eventually develop a relationship, despite the fact that they have very different outlooks on life and death. Hazel hardly speaks seriously about cancer, only using it as a sarcastic comment when her mom asks what's wrong, and pretends to ignore its presence in this world. Meanwhile, Augustus openly speaks about his cancer and recognizes that it plays a major part in his life and the lives of his friends and family. For the most part, Hazel lost her social life when diagnosed, but, since Augustus has been dealing with the disease a little while longer, he has learned to keep his true friends.

Although Hazel and Augustus are still teenagers, Hazel has chosen not to date anyone since her diagnosis, whereas Augustus had a previous girlfriend with cancer who passed away. Augustus has dealt with the realities of life, death, and the effects of cancer more than Hazel has, but together they discover more of life than they ever thought possible. The two are incredibly intelligent and love to read, so they use this as a basis for their relationship and it becomes a strong, personal bond between them. One of their favorite authors, Mr. Van Houten, lives in the Netherlands and Hazel and Augustus dream of visiting him to ask the reasoning for one of his books. The two plan the trip together, in hopes of one day being well enough to go.

As soon as Hazel gets well enough that Make-A-Wish will allow her to travel, the two travel with Hazel's mom to the Netherlands. Through their trip, they become closer than they have ever been, mainly because they have to deal with grumpy Mr. Van Houten who refuses to answer their questions and shows no empathy towards them. However, Hazel and Augustus enjoy the remainder of their trip and eventually get an answer to their questions.

This book is an obvious struggle between the meaning of life and death. The characters grapple with the idea of an afterlife and all have to come to terms with the possibility of death in the near future. Hazel and Augustus search and argue for what they believe about life and death. Furthermore, they have to experience the death of friends around them at such a young age, from such a terrible disease. Not only do these characters deal with the usual high school relationships, but they struggle with so much more than that. They learn to develop their own identity, regardless of having hair or a real leg, and they show just how strong teenagers can be.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This purpose of this survey was to determine the amount that students read inside and outside of the classroom, with a particular emphasis on how they feel about assigned literature in a secondary English Language Arts classroom. The goal was to compare how students feel about the classical literature, such as *Julius Caesar* (1965), *Les Miserables* (1862), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), traditionally found in a secondary English Language Arts classroom, and Young Adult Literature. Furthermore, through this survey, I sought to find any possible patterns between students' feelings about these two genres and the amount that they read. By assessing the amount that they read, as well as how they feel about the texts, I hoped to find connections between students' preferences in literature and their motivation to participate in an English Language Arts classroom.

Population

The population of students in this study included 11th and 12th grade students from a small, private school in south Florida. Twenty-eight current high school juniors and seniors participated in this study. Eighteen of these students are juniors who take English Language Arts during one period, and the remaining ten seniors take the same curriculum during another class period. Of these students, 36% do not speak English as their first language. These students are still able to speak English fluently and are not considered to be in need of any remediation as

English Language Learners. Several students are not United States citizens, but simply studying in the United States for a short period of time through an athletic program or study abroad program. These students come from countries such as Germany, Italy, and Mexico, as well as several other countries.

Thirty-two percent of the students have attended this school for more than ten years, 12% have attended between six and eight years, 16% have attended for three or four years, and 40% have attended the school for two years or less (see Appendix B). The majority of the “foreign exchange” students are those who have been attending for less than two years; although, there are several who have attended for three years or four years.

In addition, ten college sophomores and juniors also participated in this study, equaling a total of 38 participants. These ten students attended this private school and participated in the same English Language Arts classes with the same teacher and the same curriculum throughout their high school career. Of these ten students, all students spoke English as their first language and are United States citizens. Eighty percent of these college students attended the private school for more than eight years, 10% attended between five and eight years, and only 10% attended for fewer than five years.

Curriculum

While attending this school, the students have taken numerous different literature courses using a variety of private school curriculums, such as ABeka and Bob Jones. At this point in their high school career, these 11th and 12th grade students are now taking a dual enrollment

English Composition 1 course from a private university. Because the private university regulates the curriculum used at the high school, the teachers and administrators are not able to alter the curriculum in any significant way. The current textbooks in this course include a writing and grammar handbook, a book of short story collections, and a book of poetry which they memorize and discuss.

Instruments

Participants in this study were given a survey created by myself, with the assistance of the thesis chair. The survey was divided into three parts, each consisting of 8 to 10 questions. The first section dealt with students' reading habits inside and outside of the classroom. The second section asked each student about books that had been assigned in their high school English Language Arts classroom. These questions were similar to quiz questions and tested their knowledge and memory of the given book. The intention of using quiz-like questions to test the students was to determine how well students remembered information similar to the factual questions they would see on a graded assignment. Students, in this class, usually prepare for quizzes and tests by remembering more factual information, whereas papers and projects are dedicated to overarching themes of a text. The third section of the survey dealt with some of the most popular young adult books of the past few years. Once again, students were given quiz-like questions that tested their knowledge and memory of the books. By keeping the similar style of questioning, the analysis of the students' answers was fairer.

The questions that participants were asked about their reading habits were created by myself and are as follows (see Appendix D for exact survey):

- On a scale of 1-10, 1 meaning “not at all” and 10 meaning “love to read,” how much do you enjoy reading?
- How much of your assigned reading do you read?
- How often do you read books that are not assigned?
- On a scale of 1-10, 1 meaning “not at all” and 10 meaning “I enjoy it all,” how much do you enjoy the reading assigned to you?
- Why do you do the assigned reading (if and when you do it)?
- Name three things that have been assigned to you to read in English class this year.
- On a scale of 1-10, 1 meaning “not at all” and 10 meaning “absolutely,” do you feel like you have learned anything from the assigned readings?

The multiple-choice questions that participants were asked about common young adult books were adapted from Spark Notes and Shmoop. The complete list of questions is as follows (see Appendix E for exact survey, including multiple-choice options):

- In *The Hunger Games*, how did Katniss’ father die?
- In *The Hunger Games*, what is tesserae?

- In *Looking for Alaska*, what does the gang do to honor Alaska?
- In *The Fault in Our Stars*, why do Hazel and Augustus go to Amsterdam?
- In *Divergent*, who warns Beatrice to keep her Divergent identity a secret first?
- In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, houses are determined by what?
- In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, who has the ring before Bilbo?
- In *The Hobbit*, the Arkenstone is a symbol of what to Thorin?
- In *The Book Thief*, what does Death have a fascination with?

Some of multiple-choice questions that participants were asked about their assigned readings were adapted from Spark Notes and Shmoop. The complete list of questions is as follows (see Appendix F for exact survey, including multiple-choice options):

- In *The Lord of the Flies*, what is the monster Sam n' Eric talk about?
- In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who is not a member of the Finch family?
- In *A Wrinkle in Time*, Mrs. Who speaks most often using what?
- In *The Hiding Place*, what is the last physical tie between Betsie and Corrie?
- In *Julius Caesar*, what does Antony urge the people of Rome to do?

- In *Romeo and Juliet*, what does the nurse bring Romeo as a sign of Juliet's love for him?
- In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, who pays for Edmund's treachery?
- In *Les Misérables*, why does Fantine lose her factory job?

CHAPTER FOUR: SURVEY RESEARCH RESULTS

Through the Literature Review portion of this project, I aimed to show the legitimacy of YA literature as a genre worthy of being considered within a secondary ELA classroom.

Through the Reading Habits section of the survey, I researched the amount that students read, as well as their perceptions of certain texts, in order to analyze how perceptions impact reading in the ELA classroom. Additionally, using the results of the Reading Habits, Assigned Reading, and Young Adult Reading surveys, I analyzed any possible correlations between students' motivation to read and information retained while reading.

The purpose of using these particular questions for the survey was to determine how much of the information from the texts students were able to correctly recall. The answers from the Assigned Reading survey were compared with the Young Adult Reading survey, in order to analyze which genre of literature students were able to accurately recall more of. Furthermore, the Reading Habits survey was used to determine how much students report enjoying reading versus how engaged they seem to be with the texts. Because these surveys were given to two different groups of students, current and previous high school students, two groupings of data are initially presented, followed by a combined set of data. However, some of the data actually overlap between the two groups of students.

According to these current high school students, they actually do enjoy reading. Seventy-one percent reported that, in general, they really enjoy reading. For the analysis of these results, "really enjoying reading" has been classified as any answer that is a "6" or higher on the 1 to 10

rating scale. The remaining 29% of students reported reading once a year or less, outside of the classroom. Using the same scale, only 11% reported really enjoying their assigned reading. However, 32% of students stated that, as a result of the assigned reading they did do, they felt they had learned something. Thus, despite the fact that these students did not report enjoying the assigned reading, they were able to acknowledge that they are learning something from it.

Within the 71% of students that reported really enjoying reading, in general, there is a unique group of students. Thirty-six percent of the 71% who reported really enjoying general reading simultaneously reported that they “rarely” or “never do assigned reading,” however, they read at least once a month outside of school. This particular group of students loves to read outside of the classroom, but does not even do their assigned reading because they dislike it so much. Zero percent of these students reported enjoying the assigned reading, yet 30% of them admitted that they still learned something from the assigned texts.

High school students reported reading similar amounts of both their required reading and young adult reading. When asked about specific assigned texts, the high school students read an average of 46.5% of the books that were assigned in their classroom. However, when asked to answer questions about the same texts they reported reading, the average number of questions answered correctly was only 44.6%. Students reported similar numbers when it came to how much they read outside of the classroom, with 43.7% having read the YA texts they were surveyed about. Although, the students are reading a similar amount of YA and assigned books, they recalled much more about the outside reading. When asked specific questions from YA literature, students averaged a 70% correctness rate.

The current college students who previously participated in this curriculum reported different numbers, though. Unlike the current high school students who read a similar amount of YA and assigned literature, the previous high school students reported reading more assigned literature than YA literature. An average of 60% of previous high school students read the texts that were assigned in the classroom, but only read an average of 29% of the YA texts that they were surveyed about. However, for those students who did read outside of the classroom, they recalled an average of 60% of the information questioned about. Meanwhile, this same group of students could only recall an average of 41% of the information from assigned texts. Although the average amount of reading that occurred with both genres differed between the current and previous high school students, there is a consistently higher amount of information retained when reading YAL compared to assigned literature.

The previous high school students felt similarly to the current high school students in regards to how much they felt they learned from the assigned material. When the previous high school students were asked how much they felt they had learned from the assigned texts, 50% reported a “6” or higher on the 1 to 10 scale. Unfortunately, 40% still reported that they learned absolutely nothing from these texts, with the remaining 10% reporting a “3” on the 1 to 10 scale. Similar to the current high school students, only 20% of previous high school students reported actually enjoying the assigned reading. Most of these students stated that they only did as much of the assigned reading as they did because of the combined pressure of getting good grades and appeasing their parents by doing their schoolwork. These students did not seem to enjoy the work they were doing, but simply viewed it as a requirement.

When the data from both groups of students are combined, there were even more surprising results. Overall, the students that were surveyed because they have all gone through the same 11th and 12th grade English Language Arts class agreed that the reading assigned to them is not enjoyable. Only 13.2% of all students surveyed reported really enjoying the assigned reading in this curriculum. Not only did only 13.2% really enjoy the reading, but 34.2% actually reported not enjoying it at all. The remaining 52.6% of students fell somewhere in between with a rating between 2 and 5 on the scale of 1 to 10.

However, once again, students reported still learning something from the assigned reading. Thirty-six point eight percent of all students surveyed rated themselves a 6 or higher, on the scale of 1 to 10, in terms of how much they had learned from assigned readings. Simultaneously, 18.4% reported learning absolutely nothing, while the remaining 44.8% rated themselves between a 2 and 5 on the 1 to 10 scale.

Of all the books that students were surveyed about, *Romeo and Juliet* (1967) was the most read, overall. Eighty-nine point two percent of students reported having read this book as assigned reading. However, when asked a question regarding the text, only 18.2% were able to answer the question correctly. Shakespeare was not completely forgotten to these students though. When asked about *Julius Caesar* (1963), while only 60.5% had read the book, 69.6% of those who had read it were able to recall the answer to the question surveyed about.

Of the eight assigned texts these students were surveyed about, seven of them have been assigned in the secondary English Language Arts at this school in the last eight years. Since

more than half of the students surveyed have attended this school for that amount of time, they have been assigned these texts at one point or another. The remaining one book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), has never officially been assigned to these students, but has been discussed in multiple classes and is a commonly assigned book in ELA classrooms. Therefore, the fact that only 50.1% of the students surveyed had read these eight texts is a little surprising. Although, a little less than half of these students have not attended this school long enough in order to be assigned all of these books, these are still commonly assigned books throughout the United States. Furthermore, of the 50.1% who stated that they had read these specific texts, only 42.8% answered the questions correctly.

The statistics on Young Adult Literature are much different though. Only 39.2% of students had read the YA books they were questioned about. The most commonly read book from the YA reading section was, not surprisingly, *The Hunger Games* (2008), with an average rating of 67.6% of students having read it. Furthermore, 92% of students knew how Katniss' father died, although only 56.5% could recall what tesserae was. In addition, of the 23.7% of students who had read *Divergent* (2011), 100% were able to answer the question correctly, and of the 55.3% of students who had read Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), 90.5% knew who had the ring before Bilbo. Overall, although only students only read an average of 39.2% of the books surveyed about, they recalled 71% of the information questioned about.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

As previously stated, the goal of this project was to show that Young Adult Literature, in particular, the work of John Green, can be used as a means of engaging English Language Arts students further in their assigned texts. Students have stated that, in general, they do enjoy reading, but when it comes time to read texts that are assigned, students seem to lose all interest in reading. Is it because of the overemphasis of lower level questioning and having to remember specific names, places, and facts in order to later receive a grade that may determine their future college plans? Or is it simply that teachers are choosing the books that students have no interest in? Or, could it possibly be that students actually do not enjoy reading as much as they say they do?

From the 38 students surveyed, 26 reported really enjoying reading, in general (see Appendix C). Therefore, 68.4% of these students say that they really enjoy the idea of reading as an activity. However, when these students were questioned about specific works, they only reported reading 45% of the best-selling books in question. These results lead to several questions. If students supposedly enjoy reading so much, is it just that they are reading books other than the ones in question? Could it be that they report enjoying reading, but do not actually spend much time reading? At what point do the students' feelings and the students' actions detach?

It seems that students are open-minded to the idea of reading. With almost 70% rating their enjoyment of reading as a "6" or higher, this is obviously an activity that they are willing to

associate with. These students want to read and they want to enjoy their reading. However, the students lose interest in reading when it becomes about something they do not understand or do not care about. When they feel that they are learning something from the reading, and are interested in it, they are more excited to read. Therefore, educators need to keep in mind that their students are not opposed to the idea of reading. The 38% literacy proficiency rate Goldman (2012) reported for high school juniors and seniors (p. 90) is not a problem because students have no interest in reading. There is another problem taking place in English Language Arts classrooms that are leading to literacy rates which have not improved in more than 40 years (Goldman, 2012, p. 90).

Could the problem be the literature that students are being assigned? Of all the students surveyed, only 13.2% reported really enjoying the assigned reading. Meanwhile, 34.2% reported finding absolutely no enjoyment in the assigned readings. These numbers are frighteningly low, even when we include the part that perception could play on these reports. Some students may have reported enjoying less of the assigned reading simply because it was assigned to them, but this does not account for such incredibly low ratings, overall.

The students were able to be objective in their ratings, though. Despite only 13% enjoying the assigned reading, 36.8% still reported learning something worthwhile from these books. Once again, the students are not being close-minded in regards to their assignments. These students are trying to find something to learn from their English Language Arts class, and, occasionally, they are able to find it. However, it is not nearly enough. Most educators choose the field of education because they want students to learn something; they want to be able to

prepare students for life by exposing them to some aspect of life that they previously knew nothing about. If only 36% can say that they have learned something from the assignments given to them, and, furthermore, only 13% of them enjoyed it, it would seem that we, as educators, have more work to do.

However, I do not believe that the blame should be put completely on educators. Although teachers, administrators, and school districts may be choosing books that are not enjoyable to students, these students are still teenagers. The perceptions and attitudes of the teenagers should not be discounted in response to the survey results. It is possible that students, especially those that have almost completed high school and are looking forward to graduation, are not going to report enjoying anything about the school environment. They may not read simply because someone told them they had to. They may not say that they enjoy something because they do not want to give authorities a feeling of success. Regardless of students' attitudes and perceptions though, the fact that only 13% of students reported enjoying their ELA class is unacceptable.

When students do not feel that they are learning from a particular class, they begin to enjoy the class less and less. Once students are no longer enjoying themselves in a class, they begin to lose interest in all aspects of the class, whether that is the teacher, the discussions taking place, the assignments given, or even the grade being assigned. This may lead to students skipping the class, misbehaving, or not putting effort into assignments and assessments. Therefore, ELA educators need to bring the interest and the applicability of books back to the classroom. Regardless of the text, if students are interested, they will find something to learn

from it. However, if teachers can make all assignments interesting and applicable, students might begin to enjoy English Language Arts class once again.

This is why I am an advocate of using Young Adult Literature in the classroom, despite the controversies that sometimes surround it. When students were asked which assigned and outside reading texts they had read, students had read more of the assigned literature. Fifty percent of students reported reading the books surveyed about. Thirty-nine percent of students reported reading the Young Adult Literature books they were surveyed about, though. Despite the fact that neither of these percentages is particularly high, it would make more sense that students read more of what is assigned. Not all students enjoy reading and some students do not have time to read for fun. However, when the students were questioned, 42.8% answered questions about the assigned literature they had read correctly, while 71% could answer questions about YAL correctly.

When students do read outside of school, they are more aware and engaged with the books, despite being tested on the assigned literature. Discussions about assigned literature, assignments and assessments regarding the more classic literature are not helping students retain information about the books they are reading. These students were able to answer almost double the number of questions correctly when it came to YAL, but they have never been tested on these books. Yet students spend weeks at a time focusing on Shakespeare and English Literature and only 18% of students could answer the questions correctly. The students are able to learn from a book without a teacher, tests, or assignments; they are natural learners who simply need guidance through the learning process.

English Language Arts educators need to learn how to harness that natural excitement for learning, the one that presents itself when students read outside of the classroom, and make it the focus for inside the classroom. By finding books that bring out that natural excitement for students, teachers will only have to facilitate the learning, instead of forcing learning to occur. Although there will still be resistance from some students, regardless of the text, teachers should make the focus of their classroom natural learning. Students are obviously engaging themselves in these particular books when they are reading them outside the classroom, now ELA teachers just need to allow them to do it inside the classroom, as well.

Groenke described YAL as a genre that “provides a medium through which adolescents and their teachers can confront and grapple with the social contradictions and complexities that comprise adolescents’ lives” (2010, p. 29). When students and teachers work through these complex books, they are working through life together. The entire classroom develops a bond through which they fight against natural forces, injustice, ignorance, and confusion. The students and teacher are exposed to the problems together and must determine where they stand on the issues and what they want to do about it. Meanwhile, students in this setting must learn to respect each other and the differing opinions that may present themselves. Not only can YAL engage and motivate students, when used correctly, but it can also teach literary techniques and themes, and provide an environment for discussion through which students learn about other cultures, beliefs, values, and opinions.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I ultimately believe that Professor Melanie Hundley of Vanderbilt University said it best when she stated, “I do think that young adult authors are writing about issues that are affecting young adults. I think parents absolutely have the right to have the final say on what their children read” (Hubbard, 2012). Young adult authors, such as John Green, are accurately depicting the lives of young adults, which usually consist of some frightening and unfortunate events. Not only do these authors do an outstanding job of depicting the events, but they also deal with the circumstances in realistic and positive manners. Ultimately, I do believe that parents have the right to decide what type of media their child comes in contact with. However, I hope that parents will be more realistic when it comes to the lives of students. No one wants their child to deal with cancer or battle over their sexuality, but these events do occur, so we should not try to hide them from our students. Instead, let’s hand them a book that portrays one way of dealing with these problems, and let’s sit down and discuss their feelings about it.

Through my research, I came to understand a parent’s opinion of controversial literature in the classroom. Although, I am not a parent, I do understand how it could be frightening to send your child to school to discuss a book about sexuality, cancer, or identity. As parents, they are not able to be a physical presence in the classroom, and, therefore, are not able to witness how these topics are dealt with. However, I believe that parents and teachers need to create stronger bonds in order to have a higher level of trust established. Parents should be able to

come to a point where they can trust that their child's English Language Arts teacher is going to deal with these topics in a constructive manner. As I move forward in my journey as a secondary English Language Arts teacher, this is one of the many goals I hope to accomplish. I know that there will always be parents who feel uncomfortable with a situation like this, regardless of their relationship with the teacher, which is why I believe that parents should have the right to opt out of reading a particular book. However, I would hope that my students' parents could understand my reasoning behind these texts, as well.

As I enter the workforce as a secondary English Language Arts teacher, I hope to implement several controversial books. I believe that there are many ways in which ELA teachers can implement this type of literature in their classroom, even without it being the focal point. One great option for teachers is to pair young adult books with classic literature. By pairing a book like *The Book Thief* (2006) with Corrie Ten Boom's *The Hiding Place* (1971) or Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1958), students are able to take a personal account of the Holocaust, which focuses on historical facts, and compare it to a fictitious young adult's account which focuses more on the emotions involved. ELA teachers can also pair books by literary themes or techniques, instead of content.

Overall, I believe a priority for all teachers should be motivating and engaging students in the content. Throughout this project, I have focused on motivating students in secondary English Language Arts classrooms. I have come to the conclusion that Young Adult Literature, whether controversial or not, is a viable solution for the lack of motivation some students have to read. These books are relatable, realistic, and diverse enough that there is a text for every type of

student. In order to show the students this, ELA teachers must know their students and understand what type of literature would motivate them to read more. In addition, ELA teachers need to find ways to show students who believe they cannot learn anything from reading that there are lessons to be learned from books. Not only does teaching English Language Arts require an abundance of dedication and motivation from the students, but it requires that ELA teachers must be fully committed to the betterment of their students, as well.

Limitations of the Research

While I accomplished much of what I intended to with this project, there are still several limitations to the project. Surveying students using quiz-like questions is one limitation of the research conducted throughout this project. In an attempt to survey students' knowledge of particular works, the questions became reduced to quiz-like questions, instead of testing their knowledge of overarching themes and lessons in the books. Although the format of the questions on the surveys were created this way due to time constraints in testing, it would have been more beneficial to question students about themes and concepts, instead of names and places. While I do feel that some of these questions still measured students' understanding of the texts, it would have been more productive to measure their understanding of larger themes, as well. This type of assessment is contagious, as it presents itself in almost all classrooms at one time or another. We, as educators, have to remember that there are many varieties of assessments and, while no one is better than another, some are more appropriate for a specific time and place than others.

Another limitation of this study deals with the perceptions that people have of reading. Some students perceive assigned literature as boring and useless, regardless of the author, title, or genre. These students simply do not want to read because someone is requiring them to do so. Furthermore, all students will have an initial reaction to every book, whether it is a result of what a teacher has told them, what a friend has told them, the appearance of the cover, or the size of the book. These initial reactions may be very difficult for a student and teacher to get past. Some students will refuse to read a book because of the perception they have of that book, based on the initial reaction. This plays a part in the research conducted in this study because some students might have rated assigned books lower simply because their teacher assigned it to them. Therefore, we cannot always trust that the answers students gave about their feelings regarding literature would be the same in a different environment.

Future Research

However, throughout my future research, I hope to further investigate this idea of students' perception in relation to different genres of literature. One of my goals in continuing the research of this topic is to monitor students while they read the same book in an assigned reading context versus an outside "free" reading context. By studying students in this way, I would be able to examine how much perception does play a part in students' motivation and excitement to read. Although the research I have conducted thus far insinuates that students are more engaged in texts when they read them outside the classroom, I believe there are ways to see higher motivation inside the classroom. Through further research of the same text inside and

outside the classroom, I would be able to investigate what it takes to motivate students to a higher level using the text inside the classroom.

An additional goal I have in the continuation of my research on students and literature is to determine if the books that are currently being assigned in ELA classrooms are teaching students life lessons, applicable to the real-world. I agree with Yvonne Siu Runyan, the former president of the National Council of Teachers of English, when she says, “The purpose of education is not to pass the test, but to find your passion and learn about yourself and the world around you, so that you can contribute to the world in a positive way” (Lane, 2013). If students are not learning anything about the world or themselves from a particular lesson, what is the point of teaching it? If students are not going to be more educated about the world around them by reading a specific book, why are they reading it? While I do not think that students cannot learn applicable life lessons from classic literature, I believe it will be easier for them to identify with and relate to YA texts. By reading John Green’s *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006), students learn about different relationships, as well as personal identity. When reading *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (2010), students learn about sexuality, love, relationships, and friendships. Through the heart-wrenching reading of *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), teens experience the value of life through deaths, sicknesses, relationships, and self-image.

Although, I do not think that these topics need to be the absolute focal point of an English Language Arts lesson, I do believe that teachers should emphasize the controversial topics in these books. By giving students an environment in which they can explore, discuss, and develop their opinions on these topics, they will be exposed to opinions that vary from their own. It is in

this moment that the students become more prepared to experience the world. Additionally, these lessons need to include analysis of the text and other literacy standards, but, as Ms. Runyan stated, the purpose is not to pass the test, but for students to learn about themselves and the world around them.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

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University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Sherron E. Roberts and Co-PI: Emily Adams**

Date: **March 19, 2014**

Dear Researcher:

On 3/19/2014, the IRB approved the following human participant research until 3/18/2015 inclusive:

Type of Review: UCF Initial Review Submission Form
Project Title: Bring John Green to School: Incorporating Young Adult
Literature in a Secondary Language Arts Classroom
Investigator: Sherron E. Roberts
IRB Number: SBE-14-10053
Funding Agency:
Grant Title:
Research ID: N/A

The scientific merit of the research was considered during the IRB review. The Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30 days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <https://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 3/18/2015, approval of this research expires on that date. **When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.**

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

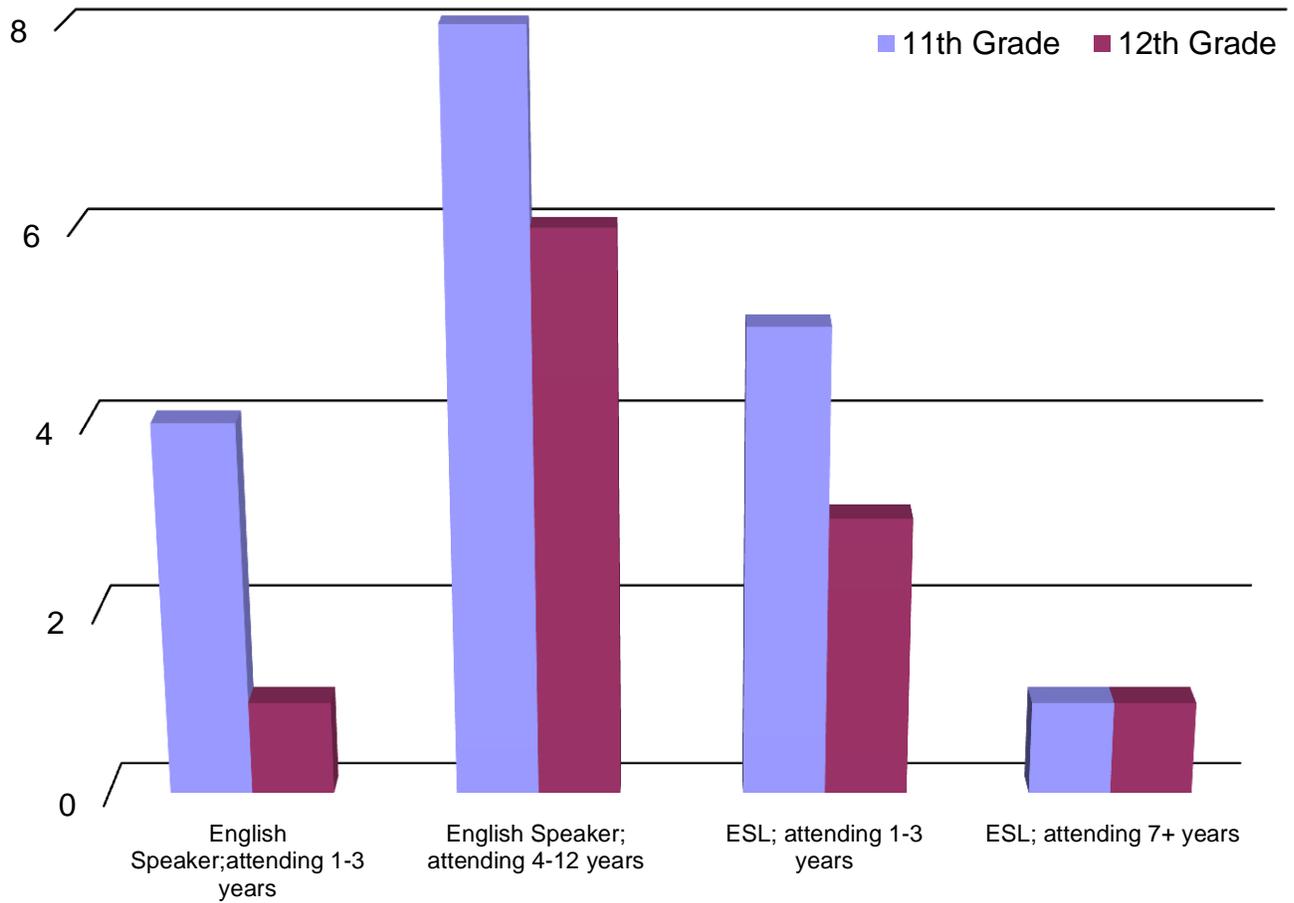
On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewska, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joanne Muratori".

IRB Coordinator

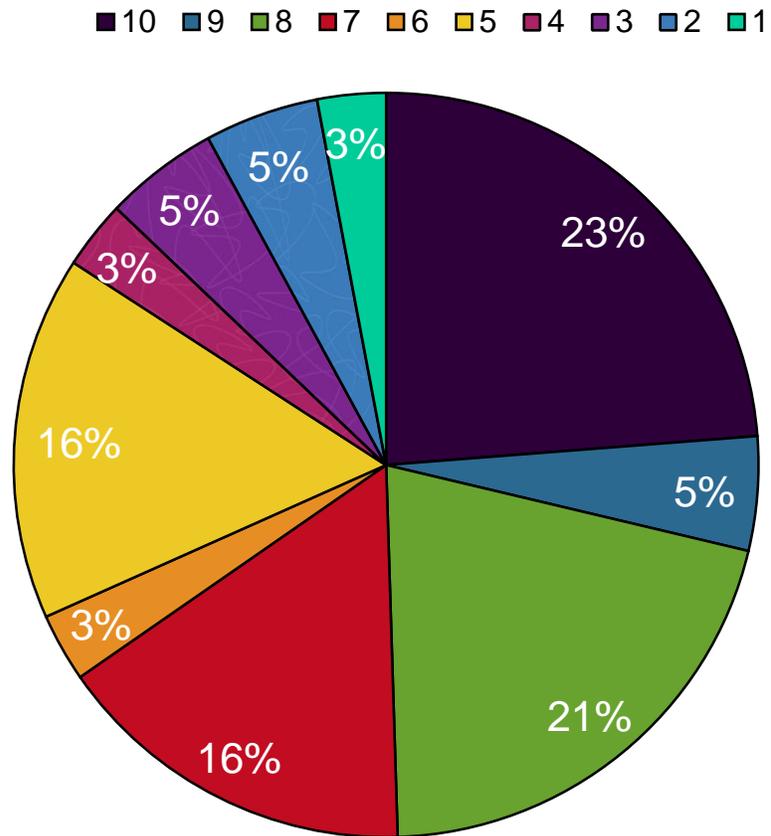
APPENDIX B: POPULATION GRAPH

APPENDIX B: POPULATION GRAPH



APPENDIX C: GENERAL READING HABITS GRAPH

APPENDIX C: GENERAL READING HABITS GRAPH



APPENDIX D: READING HABITS SURVEY

APPENDIX D: READING HABITS SURVEY

For the following questions, choose the most appropriate answer from the choices listed or fill in the blank.

1. What grade are you in?

9th 10th 11th 12th

2. Is English your first language?

yes no

3. How long have you attended this school?

4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you enjoy reading?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all

love to read

5. How much of your assigned reading do you read?

None

I read a little

At least half

I read most of it

All

6. How often do you read books that are not assigned?

Never Once a year Once every few months Once a month All the time

7. Overall, how much do you enjoy the reading assigned to you?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all

It is all good

8. Why do you read the assigned reading (if and when you do)?

To get a good grade Parents make me I like to read Combination

10. On a scale of 1 to 10, do you feel like you have learned anything from the assigned readings?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all

Absolutely

APPENDIX E: YOUNG ADULT READING SURVEY

APPENDIX E: YOUNG ADULT READING SURVEY

For the following questions, if you have read the book, please choose an answer, even if you're not sure about it. If you have not read the book, circle "I haven't read this book."

1. In *The Hunger Games*, how did Katniss' father die?

- a) in a hunting accident
- b) he was sick
- c) the Capitol killed him
- d) in a mine explosion
- e) I haven't read this book

2. In *The Hunger Games*, what is tesserae?

- a) a poisonous berry
- b) a wasp created by the Capitol
- c) a bird created by the Capitol
- d) an extra food ration
- e) I haven't read this book

3. In *Looking for Alaska*, what does the gang do to honor Alaska?

- a) build a playground
- b) plant a tree
- c) play a prank on Speaker Day
- d) play a prank on the Weekday Warriors
- e) I haven't read this book

4. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, why do Hazel and Augustus go to Amsterdam?

- a) to get away from the hospitals
- b) to visit Mr. Van Houten

c) to celebrate being healthy

d) they had always dreamt of it

e) I haven't read this book

5. In *Divergent*, who warns Beatrice to keep her Divergent identity a secret first?

a) her mom, Natalie

b) the tester, Tori

c) a factionless man she meets

d) a magic eight ball

e) I haven't read this book

6. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, houses are determined by...

a) a sorting hat

b) a card

c) a wand

d) balloons

e) I haven't read this book

7. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, who has the ring before Bilbo?

a) Frodo

b) Gollum

c) Elrond

d) Strider

e) I haven't read this book

8. In *The Hobbit*, the Arkenstone is a symbol of what to Thorin?

a) power

b) wealth

c) love

d) family

e) war

f) I haven't read this book

9. In *The Book Thief*, what does Death have a fascination with?

a) people

b) ghosts

c) books

d) colors

e) weather

f) I haven't read this book

APPENDIX F: ASSIGNED READING SURVEY

APPENDIX F: ASSIGNED READING SURVEY

For the following questions, if you have read the book, please choose an answer, even if you're not sure about it. If you have not read the book, circle "I haven't read this book."

1. In *The Lord of the Flies*, what is the monster Sam n' Eric talk about?

- a) the pig head
- b) Piggy
- c) a figment of their imagination
- d) a dead parachutist
- e) I haven't read this book

2. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who is not a member of the Finch family?

- a) Dill
- b) Scout
- c) Atticus
- d) Jem
- e) I haven't read this book

3. In *A Wrinkle in Time*, Mrs. Who speaks most often using what?

- a) riddles
- b) Bible verses
- c) Biblical tongues
- d) foreign quotes
- e) I haven't read this book

4. In *The Hiding Place*, what is the last physical tie between Betsie and Corrie?

- a) the vitamin bottle
- b) the blue sweater

c) the Bible

d) I haven't read this book

5. In *Julius Caesar*, what does Antony urge the people of Rome to do?

a) rejoice that the tyranny is over

b) rise up against Caesar's killers

c) mourn the loss of a great leader

d) parade his body through town

e) I haven't read this book

6. In *Romeo and Juliet*, what does the nurse bring Romeo as a sign of Juliet's love for him?

a) a ring

b) a rose

c) a letter

d) a lock of her hair

e) I haven't read this book

7. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, who pays for Edmund's treachery?

a) Peter

b) his sisters

c) the beavers

d) Aslan

e) Tumnus

f) I haven't read this book

8. In *Les Misérables*, why does Fantine lose her factory job?

a) she is a prostitute

b) she has an illegitimate daughter

c) she does not work hard enough

d) she spits in Madeleine's face

e) I haven't read this book

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