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"Ok, I'm a Teacher Now":

Reading Young Adult Literature in a Teacher Education Program

Brittany Richer

Rhode Island College

"Ok, I'm a Teacher Now":

Reading Young Adult Literature in a Teacher Education Program

After taking a young adult literature course as part of my Secondary Education/English program, I felt I had gained only a limited understanding of the importance of the genre to my future career. In the class, we read several popular young adult texts, learned about their authors, identified censorship issues, and mentioned a few strategies related to the teaching of the texts. Much of the "understanding" related only to future applications in imagined classrooms, which left no room for critical reflection about what we might learn from reading the texts about ourselves as students and teachers. A sense of teacher identity based on theoretical beliefs, however, has been shown to increase the likelihood of teachers remaining in the profession (Chong, et al., 2011).

Much of the research related to young adult literature maintains a highly strategy-driven, short-term focus, leading to a division between theory and practice (Hayn, et al., 2011). Both are important, but not at the expense of one over the other. Amidst competing claims about teacher education, teacher certification, and student performance, it is important to understand the practical and theoretical opportunities that reading young adult literature provides for teacher candidates and teachers, whether specializing in the English content area or not.

As I moved through the education program, I noticed the reading and discussion of young adult literature in other teacher preparation courses, and thus began to observe and interview the pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and professors in those classes. I noticed that critical conversations about the relationship of young adult literature to the development of teacher identity can, and do, occur. In a class blog, Becky, a Master's of Arts in Teaching for Secondary Education/English student wrote, "I was reading it [the adolescent text *All of the Above* by Shelley Pearsall] as a reader and as a future-teacher,

which affected the experience. It wasn't just about "What did I think?" but "What would students think?" and "How might I use this?" This metacognitive moment, among others, reveals the pre-service and in-service teachers' critical thought not only about *what* to teach, but *how* and *why*. These rich interactions differed from my own experience of reading YAL in the Adolescent Literature course where lists of popular texts and authors dominated my teacher's lectures.

Recognizing the college environment where these stories of pre-service and in-service teachers' thoughts emerged, this research aims to follow the tradition of "school-based narrative inquiry" in which "the concepts and methods . . . are driven by practice and by a theoretical idea of the practical" (Xu & Connelly, 2010, p. 354). The questions framing this research include: What does reading young adult literature in a teacher education program provide candidates? What connections do teacher candidates make to their content areas? And, how does reading young adult literature affect the development of teacher identity? This research raises thought-provoking questions about the place of young adult literature in teacher education programs, questions that are relevant to teacher candidates, teacher educators, and those interested in exploring the competing claims in the field of education.

Literature Review

Teacher certification is not an easy process. Teacher candidates face several semesters of content area, theory, and methods courses, various formative and summative assessments, as well as rigorous standardized testing requirements. Although no universal teacher education curriculum exists, organizations like the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010) expect that "institution[s] offer a coherent program of studies that will prepare effective teachers" (question 2). To ensure this mission, they have developed a set of six unit standards that address all aspects of teacher education, from field experiences to faculty qualifications, but emphasize candidate performance. The first standard, "Candidate Knowledge, Skills, and Professional Dispositions" provides a

framework for the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teachers should possess in order to facilitate student learning, which, according to NCATE, is the main goal of the teaching profession (NCATE, 2008).

The knowledge, skills, and dispositions vary slightly according to the teacher candidate's chosen content area concentration. As a result, the various teacher associations for each content area, including English language arts, math, social studies, and science, have developed more specific standards that outline the knowledge, skills and, dispositions most valuable in a particular content area and grade level. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2003), for example, states very specifically that secondary education candidates should "demonstrate knowledge of, and uses for, an extensive range of literature. As a result, candidates demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of, and an ability to use, varied teaching applications for . . . numerous works specifically written for older children" (standard 3.5). Here, NCTE establishes both the definition and significance of young adult literature for English teacher candidates.

Since the earliest identification of the genre, there has been debate about the genre's definition. Joan Kaywell (2001), chair of the Conference on English Education (CEE) Commission on the Study and Teaching of Young Adult Literature captures the deliberation, revealing how at NCTE's Fall 1999 convention, a group of "leading experts in the field . . . agreed that we could write an entire text exploring the difficulty we have had in defining *young adult literature*" (p. 324). Some identified with Donelson and Nilsen's 1997 definition of texts that young adults will decide to read. Others identified with the definition of what is marketed for young adults. Of course, however, young adults may not read what is marketed for them and what is marketed for young adults may not have been written with that audience in mind. As a result, the definition most widely used and relevant to this paper is, "those texts written for audiences between the ages of 12 and 18" (Hayn & Bach, 2011, p.173).

Despite the intellectual debate, speaking for the members of the commission, Kaywell asserts that, "As English educators, we must continue to engage pre-service and practicing teachers in the reading and discussion of young adult literature so that these books will continue to find their way into classrooms to enrich students' reading lives" (p. 326). Here, Kaywell does not necessarily signal the potential learning opportunities for reading young adult literature as a pre-service or in-service teacher. She demonstrates the value of young adult literature for students, but not what the texts offer future or current teachers in terms of their own identities.

Because getting young adult literature into secondary school classrooms dominated by the classics is often regarded as an accomplishment itself, many of the publications related to young adult literature cater toward this goal, as Kaywell indicates. With the support of NCTE, the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents publishes *The ALAN Review*, a journal that focuses on "YA literature, its teaching, interviews with authors, reports on publishing trends, current research on YA literature, a section of reviews of new books, and ALAN membership news" (ALAN, n.d.). Texts such as *Literature and the Young Adult Reader* (Bond, 2011; Bushman & Haas, 2005; Brown & Stephens, 1995), share common features, such as lists of young adult texts organized by topic/subject, interviews with authors, and marginal anecdotes from adolescent students or classroom teachers about their experience reading young adult literature. Each of the four volumes of *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics* (Kaywell, 2000) offer chapters which suggest ways for teachers to integrate young adult literature into the study of canonical works often mandated in secondary school curricula.

Despite the practical importance of these publications, Judith A. Hayn, Jeffrey S. Kaplan, and Amanda Nolen (2011) have identified the need for "educational researchers to shift the focus of current YAL research from teaching the content (text analysis research) to that of student learning in the classroom (empirical research)" (p. 176). They systematically searched through databases like ERIC, MLA, and Academic Search Complete

for articles containing some combination of the words "young adult literature," "adolescent literature," and "research," but results indicated very few articles that utilized long-term studies. Ultimately, they argued that that, "teachers, academics, and researchers need to know what happens in a classroom setting when young people read adolescent novels" (p.177).

In 2005, John Kornfeld and Laurie Prothro took a step forward with this, using young adult literature as a way to explore middle school students' perceptions of curriculum and teaching. The pair argues that "reading literature which addresses student experiences in school can help students make sense of those experiences and, more importantly, open their minds to ideas about teaching and schooling that they otherwise might never have considered" (p. 217). A main goal of their research was to provide students with texts, discussion, and direct instruction to empower them to think critically about their own schooling experience. Kornfeld and Prothro write, "These literary embodiments of their own academic experiences help students realize that their experiences are not unique, and help students make sense of their abstract concerns and criticisms of schooling by anchoring them in something more tangible" (p.221). In accordance with Hayn et al., this study emphasizes what the young adult texts help the students learn. The limitation of these two studies, however, is the focus on the "transactional effects" (Hayn et al., 2011) for "young people," specifically students in grades six through twelve. This is not enough because, despite the definition of young adult literature as literature written specifically with the adolescent reader in mind (Bull, 2011; Bond, 2011), "young people" are not the only ones reading the texts.

A few recent studies confirm that people besides young adults – namely teacher candidates and teachers - read young adult literature for specific purposes. Research about the use of young adult literature in teacher education programs, therefore, highlights these constructive applications. Of course, some programs require a specific Adolescent Literature course as a way to expose their English language arts teacher candidates to the content

(Kaywell, 2001). Some professors, like Marshall George, use young adult literature as the textual content for their exploration of technology-use in the classroom. Jacqueline Bach, Laura Hensley Choate, and Bruce Parker (2011) use young adult literature as a text for professional development, "to promote meaningful dialogue and understanding of contemporary adolescent issues" (p. 198-9).

These authors believe that young adult literature offers a unique, more experiential look into the lives of the students they may, or may not, teach every day. This "may not" is important to note, because teachers do not necessarily teach students who are just like themselves. Multicultural young adult literature "helps students experience themselves as citizens of a diverse world" (Singer & Smith, 2003, p.17). Margaret Zidon (2011), who uses novels that feature young adult protagonists in her Adolescent Development course explains that, "literature provides the pre-service teachers with vicarious experiences about things for which they have limited to no knowledge, including, for example, poverty, second-language learning, or bicultural identity" (p. 226). Reading novels that include characters unlike themselves or the people they know offers pre-service teachers an opportunity for immersion in something new. Though reading cannot replace a real-world experience with diversity, the act of reading does provide a context for future involvement in a multicultural situation. Ultimately, as with young people who read young adult literature, teacher educators who incorporate young adult literature in their courses use the texts to help their candidates make connections to themselves (Bull, 2011; Zidon, 2011).

Kelly Bull's (2011) study of the potential connections that teacher candidates make with young adult texts revealed that "thirty six percent of the total think aloud data were connections outside of the texts being read. These connections outside of the text enabled readers to become personally involved and interested in the texts they were reading, relating texts to their own knowledge and experience" (p.226). Similarly, as with Zidon's (2011) use of novels in her course on Adolescent Development, "most students compare the experience of their own adolescent years, remarking that Toby's life [the character in the

text they read] reminds them of something that either they had done or someone in high school had done" (p.232). As both of these researchers concluded, reading these novels allowed the teacher candidates to make important personal connections to the texts.

These personal connections provided the teacher candidates with valuable learning opportunities, specific to the context of the reading. Bull's (2011) candidates, primarily future English teachers, synthesized their reading and think-aloud experience, "anticipating how they would be able to reach and teach their future students" (p.227). Similarly, Zidon (2011) asserts that "By seeing the adolescent's life the pre-service teachers can imagine a model of application to the real-world experience" (p. 235).

Though this anticipation of their future teaching is important, there is little evidence of the candidates' connection of these imaginings to critical stances about education. Thinking about using young adult literature in a middle school, high school, or college curriculum is a big step forward, but is incomplete without being able to explain *how* and *why* that use of young adult literature fits into what candidates believe about teaching. Linda Christensen (2009), classroom teacher, teacher educator, and author of *Teaching for Joy and Justice* describes her own evolution as a critical educator. Recounting her experience with the classics, she writes:

I was consuming them and teaching them without raising the basic question: Why are these books classic and why am I reading them and teaching them? Much later I learned to ask questions that fundamentally changed my choices: What do I want students to learn from these books? . . . [W]hat does the choice [of classics] indicate about who counts in our society? Whose gender, race, language, and country of origin do these books reflect? (p. 164-5)

Asking such questions about the connection between content and philosophy goes beyond the universal knowledge, skills, and dispositions put forth in the standards for teacher preparation. Though the standards guide the profession, they do not define teachers' theoretical beliefs. Experiences such as reading young adult literature in a teacher

preparation program, therefore, can potentially influence teachers' thoughts and actions, or, more specifically, their identities.

Methodology

Valorizing practitioners' or researchers' experiences without critical reflection on the habits of interpretation that shape how those experiences are given meaning produces naïve and insular texts that neither enact nor enhance the transformative purposes of narrative inquiry (Atkinson, 2010, p. 92).

Above, teacher educator Becky Atkinson explains the importance of identifying and evaluating the theoretical framework of a research study. Without reflecting on the method of collection and interpretation, the study loses credibility. Further, in the case of narrative inquiry, which informed my work, there is a reduced potential to effect positive change in the areas of teacher education and practice. As Shijing Xu and Michael Connelly (2010) propose in their study, "Narrative Inquiry for School-Based Research," narrative inquiry is often "driven by practice and by a theoretical idea of the practical" (p. 354). By this, they mean that the research questions often emerge from a practical (school-based) situation, the study takes place in a practical (school-based) setting, and when grounded in theory, the results have implications for teacher education and practice.

This belief matches the beginning of my own inquiry into the situation of young adult literature in teacher education. As an undergraduate Secondary Education/English major with a middle school endorsement, I had my own experience and my connections with peers and faculty at the Feinstein School of Education as my practical entry into the research. Specifically, after a less-than-critical experience in my own Adolescent Literature course, I noticed the inclusion of young adult literature in other areas of the Rhode Island College teacher education program. This led me to wonder what else reading young adult literature might provide teacher candidates and teachers, beyond a mere familiarity with texts and authors. My other research questions included, "What connections might teacher candidates and teachers make to their content area and education courses?" and "How does

reading young adult literature affect the development of teacher identity?" With this interest in the content of young adult literature and the pedagogy of teacher education, I conducted observations, surveys, and interviews according to the principles of narrative inquiry, all with the idea of critical pedagogy in mind.

Observations – Spring 2011

I conducted my observations in several school-based settings. First, I was a participant-observer in the Rhode Island College's Spring 2011 section of MLED 330: Interdisciplinary Reading and Writing in Middle Schools. This course encourages middle level teacher candidates to explore the theories and strategies of critical literacy in order to determine how they might fit into their teaching. Twelve undergraduate teacher candidates (including myself), eleven females and one male, enrolled in this class taught by Dr. Horwitz. Seven of the teacher candidates were in the elementary education program with three concentrating in mathematics, two in English, one in science, and one in special education, while five were in the secondary education program with one concentrating in English, one in mathematics, one in social studies, one in science, and one in foreign language. Dr. Horwitz incorporated an experience with young adult literature in the class through the use of Harvey Daniels' Literature Circles. As a member of the class, I participated in a four-person Literature Circle, reading Shelley Pearsall's (2006) young adult text *All of the Above*. I recorded five sessions of field notes about my own group's conversations. Later, I observed the other groups' final presentations, paying particular attention to the foursome that read Sherman Alexie's (2007) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, listening for the stories of their experience with the young adult text.

The graduate-level course, MLED 530: Applications in Middle School Instructional Models, also served as a site for observation. Twelve in-service middle school teachers enrolled in this course. Again, Dr. Horwitz incorporated an experience with young adult literature through the use of Literature Circles. Borrowing from F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin (1990), I "actively reconstructed" (p. 5) the events of the Literature Circle

discussions and class presentations for *All of the Above* and *Absolutely True Diary*. Importantly, this "active reconstruction," rather than "passive recording" of events, refers to my place as researcher in the class (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). Because narrative inquiry seeks stories and admits that everyone involved in the research lives a storied life, the field requires me to acknowledge my own simultaneous experience with the texts in the undergraduate version of the course. Aware of my position of participant-observer, I recognize that my own storied life affects my notetaking and interpretation of those notes for this and all other research situations.

Additionally, during my placement in an eighth grade English classroom at Feinstein Middle School in Coventry, as a future teacher and researcher, I watched for student and faculty interaction with adolescent literature. The books that the students' carried with them for silent reading, the student work posted on the wall, and informal conversations with the students, their teacher, and librarian provided practical information about the use of young adult texts in the middle school setting.

Observations – Summer 2011

I conducted another series of observations in Dr. Johnson's hybrid SED 444/540: Teaching Adolescent Literature course. The class included three in-service high school teachers (one who was a substitute), two of whom are seeking a Master's degree, and two pre-service high school English teachers, one of whom is seeking a Master's degree. In this course, young adult novels were the text, while theories of critical pedagogy framed the discussions. Held in the first summer session, this class included both in-person and online components. Between in-person meetings, the students each posted brief critical responses to the texts in the class's online blog, then took turns facilitating the discussion board, usually based on the issues raised in the blog. Though the students read six novels throughout the course, I focused my attention on the students' conversation and response to Pearsall's *All of the Above* and Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary*, which were both part of my spring research. The consistency of novels allowed me to look for stories, themes, and

patterns that emerged among undergraduate and graduate students as well as pre-service and in-service teachers in their experiences with young adult texts.

Surveys

The nine question survey titled, "What do you know about adolescent literature?" used open-ended questions that invited participants to tell the stories of their previous interactions with young adult literature. Five undergraduate teacher candidates completed the survey at the beginning of MLED 330, before reading any of the course's required young adult texts. Two pre-service and five in-service teachers also completed the survey in SED 444/540 before or while reading the first required text for the course.

Observations – Fall 2011

Again in the fall of 2011, I observed Dr. Horwitz's section of MLED 330: Interdisciplinary Reading and Writing in Middle Schools. Twelve undergraduate teacher candidates enrolled in this class, with a gender breakdown of eleven females and one male. Six of the teacher candidates were in the elementary education program with four concentrating in mathematics, two in social studies, and one in English, while six were in the secondary education program with four concentrating in English and two in social studies. Like the spring course, Dr. Horwitz used Literature Circles to provide the teacher candidates with a young adult literature experience. There were three groups of four students; each group selected one of the following texts: Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary*, Raina Telgemeier's *Smile*, and E.L. Konigsburg's *The View from Saturday*. I recorded five sessions of field notes about the groups' conversations and observed the final presentations, listening for the stories of their experience with the young adult text.

Interviews – Fall 2011

As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) report, interviews are valuable sources of data in narrative inquiry (p. 5). To maintain consistency with the method of narrative inquiry, I conducted these interviews with Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) principles in mind: I tried to "use open-ended questions," "elicit stories," and "follow up using respondents' ordering

and phrasing" (as cited in Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007, p. 462). I also developed two interview protocols for use with the different participants. For example, I used the "student protocol" when I interviewed Rosie, an Elementary Education/Mathematics/Middle School Endorsement teacher candidate from the Spring 2011 MLED 330; Lauren, a Secondary Education/Mathematics/Middle School Endorsement teacher candidate from the Spring 2011 MLED 330; and Becky, a Master of Arts in Secondary Education for English teacher candidate from SED 444/540. Then, I used the "faculty protocol" when I interviewed Dr. Horwitz, professor of the Spring 2011 MLED 330, Spring 2011 MLED 530, and Fall MLED 330 courses and Dr. Johnson, professor of the Summer SED 444/540 course.

The Texts

Aware of the debate in the field about the definition of young adult literature, Dr. Horwitz and Dr. Johnson very purposefully selected the texts for their classes. In keeping with the accepted definition, all of their selections were written specifically with the young adult audience in mind (Bond, 2011; Hayn & Bach, 2011; Kaywell, 2001). After realizing the overlap of Shelley Pearsall's *All of the Above* and Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* in the MLED 330, MLED 530, and SED 444/550 classes, I decided to focus my observations on these two texts.

All of the Above tells the story of four inner-city middle school students, who, with the idea from their harried teacher, work to break the world record for the largest paper tetrahedron. As the diverse students begin to open up to one another, their personal and family struggles threaten to destroy their efforts. The students, teacher, and other influential adult characters take turns narrating the chapters, which keeps the story interesting and allows readers to feel closer to the characters, who are based on a real-life group of teens. *Absolutely True Diary*, narrated by fourteen year old Arnold "Junior" Spirit, invites similar personal connections. As he tells his story of deciding to make the daily trek from the Spokane Indian Reservation where he lives to the all-white high school fifty miles away, his combination of humor and reflection "leave you laughing and crying" (class

presentation, October 2011). Both texts involve classroom situations and themes of diversity which are important to young adult students and teachers alike.

Data Analysis

Because of the range of qualitative data amassed in a narrative inquiry study, Xu and Connelly (2010) assert that, "the researcher needs to build in a disciplined process of reading and rereading field texts, and writing reflective observations that may eventually give shape to the final narrative, the research text" (p. 363). For this project, my "disciplined process" included organizing the data according to my three research questions. I created subheadings under each research question which reflected the emerging stories, themes, and patterns. Each subheading was also divided according to the five classes observed and five interviews conducted. As Xu and Connelly suggest, the data analysis section uses those questions and subheadings for organization.

Limitations

Like any research methodology, narrative inquiry has certain limitations. With this study in particular, "the structure of the practical experience guides the conduct of inquiry" (Xu & Connelly, 2010, p. 356). Similar to ethnographic study, narrative inquiry recognizes that the context of the research situation affects the data collection and analysis. The observations, surveys, and interviews do not take place in isolation. Practical issues affect the scope and sequence of certain inquiries. Ideally, I would be able to return to the participants to engage in conversation about the evolving stories of their experiences with young adult literature as they continue in their courses at Rhode Island College and/or have students of their own. This would better address Hayn et al.'s (2011) concern about the gap in empirical research about student learning and young adult literature in the classroom. For as Maggi Savin-Baden and Lana Van Niekerk (2007) point out, narrative researchers should "acknowledge that people are both living in their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect on life and explain themselves to others" (p. 463). Particularly, in the context of my study, these "people" are

pre-service or in-service teachers who constantly, whether consciously or not, think and act in ways that change or maintain their teacher identity.

Data Analysis

Research shows that young adult literature is valued primarily for its importance to English educators and young adult students (Kaywell, 2001; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005). However, several teacher preparation programs have also recently recorded their use of young adult literature for purposes larger than exposing their English teacher candidates to their content. Some use the texts to expose their students to diversity (Zidon, 2011), some use YAL as the textual content for their exploration of technology-use in the classroom (George, 2011), while others arrange faculty reading groups for a more meaningful professional development experience (Bach et al., 2011). All of these uses emphasize the personal connections that readers can make to the literature. Though some researchers do acknowledge the teachers' imagination of future experiences (Bull, 2011; Zidon, 2011), these imaginings often lack any suggestion of the pre-service and in-service teachers' critical stances toward education. With little evidence of the disruption of the readers' thoughts, these studies miss the transformative power of YAL. Reading YAL allows teachers to explore their conceptions of students, classrooms, and most importantly, their theoretical beliefs about education.

What Does Reading YAL in a Teacher Education Program Provide Candidates and Teachers?

Experience of reading young adult literature

Reading young adult literature in a teacher education program provides a shared learning experience for the students. Rhode Island College requires English content majors, whether in the Secondary Education or Middle Level Endorsement program, to enroll in and pass an Adolescent Literature course. The course exposes these students to the content of their future career and offers an opportunity to think about issues they may face in their classroom, like censorship or reluctant readers (Brown & Stephens, 1995; George, 2011).

When used in an education program, however, these texts written specifically for young adults serve a broader purpose to provide a common experience to start talking about learning, teaching, and student lives.

Naturally, many of the conversations about YAL began with candidates and teachers responding to the readings as students of the text, rather than teachers of the text. While reviewing the first discussion board and blog postings in Dr. Johnson's SED 444/550 class, I noticed how Jill explicitly described her own reading process. In referencing the use of different characters as the narrators for different chapters in *All of the Above*, Jill mentioned, "I did skip a chapter or two if I was engrossed in a certain story line, then I would back track" (course blog, May 2011). Later, in response to a fellow classmates' question about the use of cartoons in *Absolutely True Diary*, Dan recalled, "Often, I found myself going back and rereading the section related to the cartoons" (course blog, June 2011). Jill and Dan, both in-service teachers, explained specific details of their reading processes. Janice speculated on the value of this, remarking that, as teachers, "we have experience reading that we take for granted" (class discussion, June 23, 2011). Researcher and education professor Kelly Byrne Bull verified Janice's idea, taking it a step further, relating the importance of this practice to teaching, reasoning that "Understanding reading processes enables educators to guide their students toward connecting with texts in meaningful ways" (p. 224). Though Jill and Dan's observations about reading may seem fairly simple at first, they offer a place to start talking about and making connections between learning and teaching.

Based on Dan's metacognitive awareness and verbalized response, Jill made a move from being a student of the text, to a teacher of the text. She explained that the cartoons in *Absolutely True Diary* "serve so many functions for the reader (and for Junior [the protagonist]), and I also think they would help make the book even more initially attractive and engaging while reading for today's teens, especially ones who love graphic novels, video games, etc." (course blog, June 2011). For Jill, reading the young adult literature

seems to provide her with an opportunity to think about how she will engage her student readers. The cartoons, she says, may be useful to help bridge the gap for readers accustomed to visual communication. Importantly, Jill does not dismiss or criticize the students who love graphic novels or video games. Rather, her acknowledgment of their passion corresponds with wider conversations in education about literacy and discourses. For James Paul Gee (1989), literacy, or being literate, means mastery of a Discourse. A Discourse, he says, is a way of being in the world - the compilation of words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities (class notes, September 2011). When Jill acknowledges the value of cartoons, graphic novels, and video games for visual learners, she acknowledges their ways of being in the world.

Portrayal of (potential) students' lives

Jill's pause to understand the reading process led this in-service teacher to make connections to students' worlds. Likewise, I noticed teacher candidates show similar interest in the student-characters' lives. Because they do not have their own classrooms, they often asked questions as a way in to making those connections. In SED 444/550, one of the first blog prompts asked the students to reflect on their favorite character in Pearsall's *All of the Above* and explain why. James, a seemingly "tough guy" who appears to have little desire to do well in school, was the overall favorite. His graffiti-like drawings litter the opening pages of the text and Kelly, the class's only undergraduate explained in her post, "I keep asking myself, 'What is his [James's] story?' because I know there must be more to him than he is letting the reader in on" (class blog, May 2011). Before Kelly read through the book, she perceived the complexity of the student's life. Though this skill of prediction may have been influenced by her years of text analysis in her English courses, this reading of characters relates to the reading of people that Kelly will need to do each day as a teacher. As Jill alluded to earlier, Kelly's awareness of her students' worlds will help her know what her students value and how her teaching can reflect those literacies.

Interestingly, Lauren's reading of *Absolutely True Diary* in MLED 330 led to similar

questions about students' worlds. Reflecting on her experience reading Alexie's novel, Lauren shared, "I want to know Rowdy better. I want to know *why* about everything in his life. His parents? Why he beat Junior up all the time? Why was violence his outlet?" (interview, October 18, 2011). Like Kelly, Lauren cared about this seemingly troubled student. She recognized not only his aggression, but took a further step, asking questions about the causes of this behavior. In doing so, she also moved from lumping Rowdy, Junior, and the rest of the Native Americans "as 'those kids' and started to see them as human beings" (Horwitz, interview, November 23, 2011). Lauren's recognition of Rowdy as a human being, a student with a discourse all his own, can inform her teaching. Jill, Kelly, and Lauren could easily dismiss or criticize the literacies of the "video game geeks," the "tough guys," and the "angry Native Americans," but reading young adult literature provided them the opportunity to think about the value of others' discourses.

Opportunity to learn something new

All of the Above and *Absolutely True Diary* "disrupted the commonplace" experience for Kelly and Lauren (Fisher & Frey, 2008, p.10). In their reading of the characters, these students practiced critical literacy skills relevant to their future teaching. The texts allowed them "to consider the world from the perspective of . . . others," particularly those with gender and cultural differences (Fisher & Frey, 2008, p.10). Dr. Johnson and Dr. Horwitz both purposefully select multicultural texts to include in their courses. When asked about her choice of texts, Dr. Johnson explained that she picks books "you can read critically . . . not just about white males, but books that include the perspective of ethnic groups and the LGBT community" (interview, October 13, 2011). Dr. Horwitz conveyed a similar sentiment, saying, "I try to get diversity. The texts give [teacher candidates] experiences they might not have time for" (interview, November 23, 2011).

All of the Above, set in inner-city Cleveland, Ohio and *Absolutely True Diary*, set mostly on the Spokane Indian Reservation, reservation do lend themselves well toward critical reading. As Fisher and Frey (2008) write, the settings, character, plots, and themes

expose the teacher candidates "to information that challenges their assumptions about the way the world works" (p.10). Months after reading *Absolutely True Diary*, Lauren very honestly recalled her most important learning from the experience: "The biggest thing was when Dr. Horwitz pushed me to look into the relationships between the characters and not judge them . . . or analyze them in a negative way. Just because Rowdy and Junior's relationship is different from my life does not mean it is bad" (interview, October 18, 2011). Lauren realized that the worlds of two teenage boys on a reservation will be different from her own world as a pre-service math teacher. Rather than just hearing from a professor that teachers and students have different life experiences and different understandings of those experiences, Lauren's reading of Alexie's novel pushed her to confront the biases that she might unintentionally bring into her own classroom.

So what

Reading YAL provides both teacher candidates and practicing teachers an opportunity to think about the connections between learning, teaching, and students' lives. In-service teachers like Jill and Dan started by explicating their reading process. Building off each other's ideas, Jill moved from her own reading experience to that of her potential students, making a connection between their interests (or as Gee might say, Discourses), and how she can use certain texts to encourage literacy in the English content. Undergraduate teacher candidates showed similar curiosity about the lives of students. Kelly and Lauren wondered what the student-characters' discourses were, implying their interest in incorporating those students' ways of knowing into the classroom. Reading YAL pushed the teacher candidates further toward this goal by helping them recognize the biases that they may have unintentionally brought into the classroom. In all of these instances, the teachers and teacher candidates thought about learning and teaching in terms of the students' lives.

What Connections Do Candidates and Teachers Make with Their Content Area or Topics of Education Classes?

As a student in the MLED 330 class, I witnessed how, before learning about theories of discourse (Gee, 1989) and "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 2005), many pre-service teachers often assume that "literacy" refers only to a student's ability to read and write. As a result, they supposed that teaching "literacy" is the job of the English educators only. I noticed that reading YAL helps break apart this limited conception of literacy because students of all content areas – mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign language – experience the reading process. Dr. Horwitz supported this observation, commenting on the stereotypes that certain teacher candidates (especially mathematics) maintain about the relationship between reading and their content area (interview, November 23, 2011). Before engaging with any of the young adult texts, a secondary education/math major epitomized this struggle, saying, "I find it difficult to relate the topic of mathematics to young adult literature" (survey, February 17, 2011). Eager as she is to know "how adolescent literature can be incorporated into a middle/high school mathematics class in a relevant way," she cannot yet imagine the place that reading strategies, like Literature Circles, might have in her content area classroom (survey, February 17, 2011).

Text-to-strategy

Inspired by her own use of Literature Circles as a fifth-grade classroom teacher and her in-depth study of Harvey Daniels theory during her Ph.D. work, Dr. Horwitz exposes her MLED candidates to YAL primarily within the structure of Literature Circles. Daniels and co-author Steven Zemelman (2004) summarize the elements of this "collaborative learning and independent reading" strategy in their text *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher's Guide to Content Area Reading* (p. 201). When used across content areas, they define these "reading circles" or "book clubs" as "small peer-led discussion groups where members have chosen to read the same . . . book" (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004, p. 201). Each member is responsible for completing the duties of his/her assigned role (such as the discussion director, literary luminary, profiler, connector, etc.), with the goal that the group eventually realizes that roles are no longer necessary. Reading YAL texts in this way allows the

teacher candidates to develop an in-depth understanding of the book as well as the strategy.

In reflecting on her group's choice of *Absolutely True Diary* last spring, Lauren mentioned, "Our book really talked about the social aspect of schooling and life . . . How important academics and education is socially for students" (interview, October 18, 2011). Another member of the group agreed, saying, that the text, "touches on many social issues" (survey, February 21, 2011). In an interesting parallel, Lauren also noticed the social learning that took place within her own Literature Circle. She said that a valuable part of the experience was "having the perspective of a male [in an otherwise all-female class] and a bilingual mom [who spoke English and Spanish]" (interview, October, 18, 2011). This experience helped Lauren think about how both the text and instructional strategy fit in with her beliefs about the transformative power of the social aspects of education. As a future middle school math teacher, Lauren is unsure whether she will be able to include YAL in her curriculum, but she did express an interest in the cooperative learning strategy with maybe a switch of content from YAL to a word problem or a proof. Without Dr. Horwitz's purposeful inclusion of the YAL content and the Literature Circle strategy, Lauren might have missed out on this chance to decide what her classroom will look like. Further, because she experienced both the reading of the text and analysis of the strategy, she understands and can defend her choice of not only the "what," but also the "how" and "why."

Critical evaluators of pedagogy

Being a critical evaluator of pedagogy means asking "what," "how," and "why" about content and practice. For undergraduates without classrooms of their own, the YAL texts provide a safe space to question instructional decisions in terms of the teacher characters. For in-service teachers, reading the texts helps them honestly ask "what," "how," and "why" about their own practice.

In a similar position as Lauren as a future middle school mathematics teacher, Rosie, had one major question about *All of the Above*. Though she appreciated the text as "a

reminder of how [adolescent] students think . . . and how doing something engaging [like assembling a record-breaking tetrahedron] can bring a class together," she was "concerned that the book hadn't gone back to the classroom. The original issue was a bad math class" (interview, October 14, 2011). Of course, this concern may have been beyond the scope of Pearsall's vision for the text, but Rosie's response reflects her own developing thoughts as a teacher – how does this extracurricular activity affect the students academically? The mathematics content is important to her and she is thinking deeply, wondering about the connections between the after-school tetrahedron club and the students' performance in the classroom.

The practicing teachers thought critically about the "what," "how," and "why" in their own classrooms. One teacher in the MLED 530 class reminded herself aloud about the importance of participating in an activity before assigning it to her students. By participating in an activity like Literature Circles ahead of time, a teacher can better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy and where her students might succeed and struggle. She can prepare supports and extensions instead of having to react to unanticipated situations (class discussion, April 2011). Also, Dan reconsidered the importance of modeling in his classroom. Reflecting on Dr. Johnson's use of blogs in "Teaching Adolescent Literature," Dan commented, "they enhanced my own reading and I really took the time to develop my responses. I have a blog for my class now, and when I think about it, it really needs to be modeled" (class discussion, June 2011). Returning to his experience of participating in online conversation with Dr. Johnson in this summer's SED 444/550, he realized that the students might benefit from a teacher's example. Modeling productive dialogue will help students know that responding to other's work requires more than just an "I like it." These two practicing teachers recognized the "what" (Literature Circles and blogs) in their classrooms, asked "why" a strategy might not be reaching its potential, and "how" they might adjust instruction accordingly.

So what

Reading *All of the Above* and *Absolutely True Diary* provided teacher candidates and teachers the opportunity to make connections to the content and strategies of their future and current classrooms. These thoughts helped break open a content area teacher candidate's ideas about the potential use of literacy strategies in her mathematics classroom. The readers became critical evaluators of the "what," "how," and "why" of both storied and real classrooms. Teaching for literacy is not just about making connections to the "what" of students' discourses, but also about imagining "how" and "why" those literacy experiences take place.

How Does Reading Young Adult Literature Affect the Development of Teacher Identity?

Interaction with theoretical perspectives

As seen above, reading YAL in a teacher education program helps teachers and teacher candidates think about their current/future students and classrooms. These in-service and pre-service teachers framed their thoughts about students and classrooms in terms of teaching for literacy, regardless of content area. More intriguing to me however, as an aspiring student of education and narrative researcher, is the story of where those beliefs came from and what actions teachers and teacher-candidates take on those beliefs.

In my observations and interviews, I noticed that some of the teacher candidates' "whats," "hows," and "whys" were influenced by very specific theoretical perspectives. As a teacher candidate taking graduate-level English classes, Becky surely made note of the literary features of the texts she read, such as the changing narrators in Pearsall's *All of the Above*. Drawing from the theories of English background, she explained, "Point of view is such a rich topic to delve into with students because it connects to issues of purpose, persuasion, and even power" (class blog, May 2011). Becky identifies point of view as a major topic of the English content area (the "what"), but with her mention of "power," makes an explicit connection to the discussions of critical pedagogy that took place in the SED 444/550 class (the "how" and "why"). Because Dr. Johnson draws strongly from the

work of social justice educators and critical theorists like Linda Christensen and Deborah Appleman, she incorporates their work into the classroom discourse. The inclusion of these theoretical viewpoints pushed Becky to identify the "relationship between critical pedagogy and literary theory" (class blog, June 7, 2011). She sees this intersection as "a way to motivate students" because "students are interested in the struggles, they connect with their real world experience" (class blog, June 7, 2011). Reading a young adult literature text through the lens of race, class, or gender helps students grapple with big issues and find words for questions that they might not otherwise be able to ask. Though discussion of the text may have started out with personal responses to literary issues, Becky and her classmates made connections to their greater beliefs about education.

In a final example, Kelly explicitly shared the story of her initial, not-so-positive personal reaction to *All of the Above*. Importantly though, she critiqued her own reaction, connecting to her prior reading of Lisa Delpit's "The Silenced Dialogues: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children" in her FNED 346: Schooling in a Democratic Society course. She explained, "As much as I wanted to be furious at the beginning of the novel [*All of the Above*] when Marcel's father made it clear that he valued working in the family restaurant more than Marcel's education, Delpit's work reminded me that other families come from different backgrounds and have different sets of values about life. As a teacher I will have to recognize this and learn to work alongside and within student's various social worlds" (class blog, May 2011). Despite a lack of classroom experience, Kelly negotiates the "what" of being a teacher of diverse students, with the "how" (working alongside and within their worlds), and the "why" (values that are different are not necessarily wrong). Reading YAL has provided an opportunity to more fully relate a theory of education to her reaction to a classroom situation. Unfortunately this study does not allow for follow up observation of Kelly's teaching when she does have her own classroom in the future, but her conversations and writings show how she has used and internalized a theoretical framework learned in a previous class.

Beyond the education program

Personal thoughts and informed responses to questions of "what," "how," and "why" seem to be the first part of developing a teacher identity. Though questions remain about what action the pre-service teachers will take related to the "what," "how," and "why" they explore during their time in a structured education program, I observed how well these connections to theory will prepare teacher candidates to continue in the field of education. At the "Transition to Teaching" panel hosted by the Rhode Island College Middle School Association, a fifth-year middle school English teacher (and Rhode Island College graduate) relayed the importance of staying connected to theory throughout a teaching career. Citing her own reading and application of Nel Noddings' "Ethic of Care" theory, she explained the "what," "how," and "why" of the transformation of her own classroom. Confident in her identity as an educator, she has taken on two practicum students, with whom she can share her knowledge of the content area content as well as her commitment to theory-based practice (panel interview, November 30, 2011).

So what

Reading YAL helps teacher candidates ask questions about the "what," "how," and "why" of education. When the teacher candidates base their answers on beliefs and experiences with either content area or pedagogical theories, they are on their way to developing their identity as critical educators. A current teacher's own story of her implementation of theory-based practice supports the importance of this pre-service metacognitive work.

Discussion

The story of the research shows that reading young adult literature allowed teacher candidates and teachers to talk about the "what," "how," and "why" of students, classrooms, and their beliefs about teaching. Interestingly, despite the different readers (teacher candidates and teachers) and classes (MLED 330/530), themes emerged relative to each text.

For example, *All of the Above*, Shelley Pearsall's story of four middle schoolers who come together to build a record breaking tetrahedron, led to critical discussions about power. Rosie, a pre-service teacher in the spring 2012 MLED 330 course, questioned whether Mr. Collins who "seemed a little uncomfortable in his role as teacher" (interview, October 14, 2011) felt empowered to make changes in his classroom teaching to help supplement the learning that took place in the afterschool tetrahedron club. Then, Kelly, a pre-service teacher in the summer SED 444/550 course who also read *All of the Above*, acknowledged the power she will have in her own classroom to either be frustrated or take the time to understand that her students "come from different backgrounds and have different sets of values about life" (class blog, May 2011). Rosie and Kelly read *All of the Above* in different contexts, but each emerged from the reading with insights about relationships between power and teaching. These pre-service teachers thought about their own identities in terms of the questions the texts raised about "what" power teachers have in their classrooms and "how" different teachers might exercise that power.

Absolutely True Diary, the humorously poignant story of Junior's life both on and off the Spokane Indian reservation, led to personal, yet critical revelations about aspects of life that teachers and teacher candidates take for granted. In an SED 444/550 discussion about Alexie's young adult novel, in-service teacher Janice recognized that as teachers, "we have experience reading that we take for granted" (class discussion June 23, 2011). Likewise, with some help from Dr. Horwitz, pre-service teacher Lauren became aware of the danger of making assumptions about others' lives based on her own her own experience in life. Just because Junior and Rowdy's life differs from hers, "does not mean it is bad" (interview, October 18, 2011). Though Janice read *Absolutely True Diary* in a "Teaching Adolescent Literature course" while Lauren the text in an "Interdisciplinary Reading and Writing in Middle Schools" course, they recognized and analyzed the assumptions that in-service and pre-service teachers make in their thinking about students and classrooms. Importantly, confronting these assumptions in a college course allows teachers and teacher candidates to

change "how" they might interact with their students and explain "why" based on their reading of the young adult texts. If teacher identity includes the "what," "how," and "why" of teaching, then Janice and Lauren's experiences show how teachers and teacher candidates can think and act in ways that change their teacher identity.

These critical conversations about power and assumptions add to the existing dialogue in the field about teacher education, teacher certification, and student performance. As NCATE (2010) specifies, they expect that "institution[s] offer a coherent program of studies that will prepare effective teachers" (question 2). The use of young adult texts across different teacher education courses and the ability of teacher candidates to come to similar learnings respective to the texts show the coherence of the program of study. There was no overlap of teacher candidates within the SED 444/550 and MLED 330/530 courses, which means that the participants emerged with a comparable experience. Furthermore, because this reading of young adult literature encouraged the teachers and teacher candidates to think theoretically about their identities, they are more likely to remain in the field (Chong, et al., 2011).

Implications

As teacher candidates and teachers think about the "what," "how," and "why" of education and continue in the profession, they might also think about how their reading of young adult literature corresponds (or, does not correspond) to the definition of the genre. Though Kaywell (2001) acknowledges the difficulty of YAL experts to develop a definition and Hayn and Bach (2011) state the most general definition of the genre as "those texts written for audiences between the ages of 12 and 18" (p.173), their work does not necessarily leave room for the powerful experiences that teacher candidates and teachers can have with young adult texts. Talking only about the existence of the debate in the field of young adult literature is not enough. Conversations about the factors involved in the debate, like who *else* reads the texts (namely, pre-service and in-service teachers) and what that reading experience provides those readers, facilitates critical conversation about

content (if concentrating in English) or beliefs about education in general (if concentrating in English or any other content area).

Notions of theory and practice need not be separate. This research about reading young adult literature in a teacher education program demonstrates the "theoretical idea of the practical" (Xu & Connelly, 2010, p. 354). The observations, surveys, and interviews show teacher candidates and teachers thinking theoretically about their *own* practical experience with the young adult literature in addition to their imaginings about the practicality of such texts in their future or current classrooms, which is usually the extent of conversations in most young adult literature courses. This ownership of their experience with the literature in other education courses, however, allows the teacher candidates and teachers to make informed, theory-based decisions about their interactions with students, the constructs of their classrooms, and, most importantly, their identities as teachers.

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