

Reading Engagement Through Young Adult Literature  
In the Junior High Classroom

by

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READING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH YA LITERATURE

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### **Abstract**

Motivating students to read print text for sustained periods of time is becoming increasingly difficult in the secondary classroom. Therefore, it is imperative that secondary English language arts teachers find ways to motivate young people to read novels. Research indicates that high interest, high quality literature is crucial to the success of secondary readers. Also, engaged students who are interested and wanting to complete the books that they encounter in school will find success in reading. Incorporating YA literature into the junior high school classroom is an important strategy for teachers to increase relevance as well as personal connection with students. This project outlines teaching practices which support the implementation of YA literature into the junior high school classroom. These guidelines will allow teachers to increase their students' reading engagement through the use of relevant and contemporary books.

**Keywords:** Young Adult Literature, Reading, Motivation, Engagement, and Junior High School.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

Motivating students to read print text for sustained periods of time is becoming increasingly difficult in the secondary classroom. The way students read is evolving as they tend to favor digital mediums. Research suggests that the regular reading of novels beyond school hours has a positive correlation with academic achievement. Therefore, it is imperative that secondary English language arts teachers find ways to motivate young people to read novels. Given the multitude of hours spent by adolescents in front of screens, shifting their focus to print text is a challenge. One solution offered by the research is the introduction of Young Adult (YA) literature into the classroom. Many studies have been conducted to look at reading motivation and engagement with secondary students. Fewer studies have looked specifically at the use of YA literature in the junior high school classroom and the effect that its use can have on student motivation. The focus of this literature review is the use of YA literature in the secondary classroom and its impact on reading motivation. Also, which classroom practices best support the introduction of YA literature?

### Personal Interest

My personal interest in the effects of YA literature in the junior high school classroom stems from my experience as a classroom teacher over the past twenty years. Every year, I have my students complete a reading survey at the beginning of the year. More and more frequently, I have students in my classroom who simply hate to read. I am left to question the reason for this attitude shift and how to combat it? I concur with Steven Wolk (2007) who wrote, “any school aiming to nurture a love of learning must nurture a love of reading...schools must do more than teach a love for reading; they must reduce or eliminate practices that teach children that reading is a laborious ‘school thing’” (p. 653).

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As a junior high school language arts teacher, I have noted a shift in the type of student in my classroom as well as the demographics in my classroom. Classrooms in Alberta are more diverse than ever. The Edmonton Catholic School district is an inclusive district and as such, students who may have been in segregated classrooms at the onset of my career, are now fully integrated. Additionally, the number of English Language learners in our school district is also growing at a rapid rate. Compounding this is the expanding definition of literacy; students are reading and interacting with a wider variety of text, primarily digitally and they are reading in different ways. All of these factors have contributed to a need to change the way that we teach our language arts programs. The challenge presented to teachers is - how do we meet the complicated needs of the learners in our classrooms in a way that is engaging and motivating? "No longer is the curriculum simply the novel or the facts to be learned but, rather, the students and their teacher together using books, other authentic resources, and their own opinions and experiences to create the 'living curriculum' as a true community of learners" (Wolk, 2009, p. 666).

Young Adult literature is one of the fastest growing genres. In the first three-quarters of 2014, sales of books in the young adult category increased 22.4%. To compare, adult fiction and non-fiction sales were down 3.3% in the same period (Stampler, 2014). There is much debate regarding the use of the YA novel in place of canonic text in the language arts classroom. I am interested to research the impact of the use of the YA novel on student motivation. At the heart of my philosophy of teaching language arts is that helping my students to become lifelong readers is a gift. With the diversity in our classrooms, YA literature is a means to provide our students with characters with whom they can empathize, explore the world, and be motivated to bring about change.

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### **Research Pathway**

To conduct my research, I used the Eric database as well as the University of Victoria Library's search engine. At first, I used the search term "young adult literature" and "empathy" as my initial research was centred around the question as to whether or not Young Adult Literature could be used to develop a sense of empathy in middle school students. I found that the empirical studies in this field were primarily related to Educational Psychology and while interesting, would be difficult to relate directly to my professional practice. It was also obvious to me that as a classroom teacher, I would find it difficult to measure empathy. Therefore, I shifted my focus and employed the search terms "Young Adult Literature" and "Reading Engagement." I soon realized it was necessary to differentiate between "Engagement" and "Motivation" thus I added the latter term to my search. I also narrowed my search to include articles which were peer reviewed and empirical in nature.

It is apparent that the vast majority of educational researchers in the area of adolescent literacy are focused on content as opposed to student learning. Therefore, there is a limited amount of empirical research for the use of YA literature in the middle school classroom. Hayn, Kaplan and Nolen (2011) explain that "little exists about the transaction that occurs when YA Literature is taught in a classroom setting" (p. 177). This discovery prompted me to widen my search to include reading engagement for junior high school students. Many of the studies that I discovered included sections related to the use of novels and the importance of providing students with choice in the classroom which directly relates to the introduction of YA Literature. My focus is to review literature on reading engagement, the impact of YA Literature in the classroom, and changing literacies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to determine how youths read. My hypothesis guiding my research is that the use of YA Literature in the classroom will have a

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positive effect on the motivation of junior high school students to read. I have also found research which studied the motivational effect of providing students with choice. These studies are also applicable to my area of interest. My goal is to be able to use my findings to create a professional resource for junior high school language arts teachers interested in incorporating YA literature into their classrooms.

### Research Questions

1. What effect does a student's level of reading motivation have on his or her learning?
2. How does the introduction of Young Adult Literature in the junior high school classroom attend to students' motivation to learn?
3. What is the relationship between providing students with choice in the language arts classroom and their motivation to read?

### Definitions

**Young Adult Literature.** "Donelson and Nilsen (1997) defined young adult literature as "anything that readers between the approximate ages of 12 and 20 choose to read" (as cited in Alsop, 2003, p. 160). Further to this, "Young adult literature includes multiple genres and subjects and it does not solely focus on novels of teenage angst. Over the years, YA literature has grown expansively to include genres such as poetry, biographies, memoirs, informational texts, and science fiction and fantasy" (Gibbons, Dail, & Stallworth, 2006, p. 55). Young adult literature is written for adolescents "hoping to give them a more mature understanding of self and the world. The stories tend to have a sense of immediacy, rather than nostalgia, and their focus is on the experience of the individual, usually a teenage protagonist. It does not always provide the answers, but rather portrays a young person in search of them" (Jenkins, p. 135 as cited in Owen, 2003, p. 11). Most importantly, "young adult literature provides a context for

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students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations” (Glasgow, 2001, p. 54).

**Engaged Reading.** The definition of engaged reading is central to this literature review. When readers are engaged, they are not just going through the motions. Rather, they are “motivated to read, strategic in their approaches to comprehending what they read, knowledgeable in their construction of meaning from text, and socially interactive while reading” (Guthrie, Wigfield & You, 2012, p. 602). Ivey (2014) clarified this definition.

In short, whereas the goals of engaged reading, from an instructional perspective, are typically about getting better at reading, students who were engaged as readers viewed reading as fundamentally about working on relationships, both with others and with themselves. (p. 166)

Adolescent readers can be defined as engaged readers when they become active participants in the reading process.

**Motivation vs Engagement.** For this literature review, it is also important to differentiate between the terms engagement and motivation. While motivation refers to goals, values and beliefs in a given area, such as reading, engagement refers to behavioral displays of effort, time, and persistence in attaining desired outcomes (Guthrie et al., 2012). When students are engaged, “they are mastery- oriented, intrinsically motivated, and have self-efficacy” (Guthrie & Klauda as cited in Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017, p. 217). Engaged readers are fully immersed in the act of reading. They have transcended the need to achieve a reading goal for an academic purpose and instead, are reading because they are deeply invested in the text.

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### Literature Review

#### Introduction

A recent large-scale literacy survey of 30,000 students in the United Kingdom, determined that there were notable differences in the reading behaviors and attitudes of students as they moved into secondary grades. More specifically, there was a pattern of reading decline into adolescence (Clark, 2014). As reading motivation declines, adolescents spend less time with text, which can have a negative impact on academic performance (Wigfield, Guthrie, Perencevich, Taboada, Klauda, McRae, & Barbosa, 2008). This decline in motivation is apparent in my own students; therefore, I am interested in research in this area as well as effective classroom practice, including the introduction of YA literature into junior high school classrooms to increase students' level of motivation.

A search of literature on reading engagement has brought to light the importance of increasing motivation for reading in the classroom. In this literature review, I will focus on:

1. The importance of reading engagement
2. Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation
3. Struggling readers
4. How adolescents read
5. Providing choice and relevant literature in the classroom
6. Teaching practices which enhance motivation
7. The power of YA literature

#### The Importance of Reading Engagement

Several studies have proven the importance of reading engagement for students. "Motivating students is important - without it, teachers have no point of entry. But it is engagement that is critical, because the level of engagement over time is the vehicle through

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which classroom instruction influences student outcomes” (Irvin, Meltzer & Dukes, 2007 as cited in Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017, p. 217.) Research also highlights that “engaged students, whether economically privileged or not, outperform their less-engaged peers” (Guthrie & Wigfield as cited in Brozo & Flynt, 2008, p. 172) which implies that engagement is critical to reading success. Therefore, it is important for classroom teachers to understand motivation and engagement as an aspect of reading comprehension and school achievement.

Highly engaged readers differ from their peers because they have developed reading behaviors which allow them to delve deeply into the text. A study by Wigfield et al. (2008) determined that highly engaged readers are very strategic, using comprehension strategies such as questioning and summarizing to derive meaning from text. Likewise, highly engaged readers are internally motivated to read, while reading frequently and deeply. Further to this, a major finding was that reading engagement and reading comprehension were correlated. The more a reader is invested and interested in the text, the greater the level of understanding. Additionally, “research shows that the number-one method of improving reading skills is by practicing reading” (Alverman & Phelps, Vacca & Vacca as cited in Gibbons et al., 2006, p. 57). This has major implications for the classroom teacher. If teachers can effectively increase engagement, there is a realistic expectation that students’ reading comprehension will also rise. The key is to determine which teaching practices in the language arts classroom have a positive correlation with reading engagement.

### **Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Motivation**

Children are motivated to read for multiple reasons. They may read for their personal enjoyment and for external expectations. In a longitudinal study investigating the effects of intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, classroom engagement, and extrinsic motivation on

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reading development (Froiland & Oros, 2014), researchers discovered that intrinsic motivation or perceived competence and classroom engagement in the fifth grade could be used to predict reading achievement in the eighth grade. It is important for teachers to note that the effects of these areas were more significant than other predictors of achievement such as gender or socioeconomic status. This study further points to the important that role that administrators, teachers, and parents play in providing opportunities for literacy development which motivate students. Wang and Guthrie (2004) found that only intrinsic motivation positively accounted for individual differences in the amount of time spent reading by the students in their study. The results of this study suggest that intrinsic motivation is pivotal to successful reading and that when “children’s curiosity about a story is generated, their interest in understanding the story is heightened” (Wang & Guthrie, 2004, p. 179). This study empirically supports the expectation that text comprehension requires motivational processes in addition to cognitive processes and also supports the implication that improving children's ability to understand text depends not only on their cognitive ability but also on their levels of motivation. Most importantly, “students who had less intrinsic motivation spent less time reading and were less likely to be successful in text comprehension” (Wang & Guthrie, 2004, p. 179). Thus, it is imperative that teachers employ methods to intrinsically motivate their students. By facilitating student involvement through relevant, interesting, and challenging text, teachers can increase intrinsic motivation and thereby improve the comprehension rates of their students.

### **Struggling Readers**

Today, classroom teachers must possess the skills necessary to adapt programming to meet the needs of all learners in increasingly diverse, fully inclusive classrooms. The research conducted into motivation for students identified as struggling readers has implications for

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administrators and teachers to consider as school literacy programs are developed. “The single largest factor contributing to low reading achievement is avoidance of books...students who initially find reading a little tough tend to avoid the book whenever possible and put in minimum effort” (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010, p. 25). Thus, begins the cycle of failure through avoidance. Morgan and Fuchs (2007) studied the correlation between students’ motivation to read and students’ success in reading. They found that motivation to read impacted reading achievement therefore, particularly in the case of struggling readers, school literacy programs must address motivation.

Klauda and Guthrie (2014) completed a longitudinal study examining reading development, and achievement in early adolescence for both struggling and advanced readers. This study produced three main findings. First, both motivation and engagement predicted achievement more strongly for advanced readers than struggling readers. This finding substantiates the expectation that the cognitive challenges faced by struggling readers may limit their capacity to increase their achievement as a consequence of their level of motivation or achievement. Additionally, advanced readers, due to stronger cognitive functioning, have a greater capacity for change in achievement, whereas struggling readers' capacity for such change may be limited by weaker cognitive abilities. Finally, contrary to other studies on reading motivation, this study highlights the fact that motivation and engagement may not facilitate achievement as readily for low achievers as for other students. While improved teaching practices will have a positive correlation with motivation and engagement for many students, students with lower cognitive functioning will require targeted programs to overcome accumulated deficits. While motivation is a key factor in the development of literacy skills for all students, struggling readers may require additional support.

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### **How Adolescents Read**

"Capturing the imagination of adolescents is no easy task. Young people – especially those more eager to watch than to read - are always transfixed by the here and now. Hence, the job of the teacher becomes doubly hard when they confront adolescents with something as passive as a book" (Hayn et al., 2011, p. 176). There has been a shift in the type of text that adolescents read. Clark, Osborne and Dugdale (2009) conducted a survey of 2176 of children nine to fifteen-years old in the United Kingdom. Their findings determined that technology-based materials are most frequently read, with nearly two-thirds of children and young people reading websites every week. Secondary pupils read more technology-based materials, such as website and blog/networking sites, every week than primary pupils. Further, Pitcher et al. (2007) surveyed adolescents to assess their motivation to read and found that students define reading as a school-based activity. "They revealed a discrepancy between their stated views of themselves as readers and writers and their actual daily practices" (p. 394). Many students who were interviewed stated that they found reading boring but in fact, spend upwards of 20 hours per week on the Internet reading or reading magazine and hobby books. For students, there is a separation between in-school reading and leisurely reading. To increase engagement, educators need to recognize the multiple literacies in which students are employing beyond the classroom and we must expand our definition of reading in schools to include texts which adolescents can relate to and interact with regularly.

In an article written to shed light on how youths read to assist educational policy makers, Moje, Overby, Tysvaer and Morris (2008) state that "youths do read outside of school...but they may not read and write the kinds of texts that adults value" (p. 146). They also highlight the importance of relevance in the literature that is taught in the classroom.

Knowing that much of the reading and writing youth are motivated to do on their own

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revolves around the maintenance of social networks, relationships, identity development, and self-improvement and self-expression, how do we engage young people in the texts of disciplinary domains outside of school (or in school, for that matter), which may often be far removed from the concerns of their lives? How do we build educational interventions that acknowledge youths' strengths and interests, while also engaging them in content-based reading and writing? (Moje et al., 2008, p. 147-148)

### **Providing Choice and Relevant Literature in the Classroom**

Choice may be one of the most critical elements of motivation (Turner, 1995; Ivey, 1999) and as such, is worth noting for teachers. There is a considerable amount of research that empirically supports the correlation between providing students with choice and their reading motivation. Ivey's work (1999) suggests a possible means of countering students' negative attitudes toward reading. She found that opportunities for choice in reading motivates middle school students to read. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) also determined that providing genuine choices increases effort and commitment to reading. Further to this, "allowing students more input into the texts they read, the response options they use to demonstrate content acquisition, and even the kinds of learning experiences they might participate in, will increase autonomy and agency (Freeman & McPhail, 2002 as cited in Brozo & Flynt, 2008, p. 173). A meta-analysis of the effects of choice enhanced intrinsic motivation, effort, task performance, and perceived competence (Patall, Cooper & Robinson, 2008) discovered that the ideal number of options to choose from is three to five. Offering too many choices may overwhelm students, whereas offering fewer than three options may not be sufficient to enhance a student's sense of autonomy.

Providing relevant reading literature can also positively influence a student's level of reading engagement. Assor, Kaplan and Roth (2002) analyzed teacher behaviors that help

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students to understand the relevance of schoolwork for their personal interests and goals to determine whether there was a positive correlation with engagement. “Behaviors that clarify the relevance of schoolwork for students involve educators' actions that help students to grasp the contribution of school work to the realization of their personal goals, interests, and values” (Assor et al., 2002, p. 262). Furthermore, children do not simply classify teachers as good or bad, and they do seem to perceive the different ways by which their teachers support or suppress their need for autonomy in schoolwork. This study identified the primary task of the teacher - to try to understand their students' authentic interests and goals, and then help students to understand the connection between their personal goals and interests and schoolwork. In another study into the importance of relevant material, "Yagelski (2000) wrote about the importance of ‘local literacies’ if students are to become truly literate readers and writers. Students need to read, write, and talk about issues that are relevant and real to them and that have immediate meaning for them in their lives” (as cited in Alsup, 2003, p. 165). Providing text to which students can personally connect is an excellent point of entry for teachers of reading. When students can see themselves and their experiences reflected in the books that they are reading, their level of interest will increase thereby having a positive correlation with engagement. That is not to say that students should be limited to text which is a relevant but as students discover the power of literature, they can be introduced to more challenging text which provide an opportunity for students to examine their thinking on critical issues and help to establish their role in societal change.

“As early as 1989, The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Literacy Development noted that middle schools may be the ‘last best chance’ for many students to acquire proficiency in literacy necessary for future success” (Martinez & Harmon, 2011, p. 12). Thus, it is imperative that middle school teachers employ research-driven practices. There are several factors which

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teachers must consider when developing literacy programs for adolescents. Educational theorist Nel Noddings (2005) explained that “as we listen to students, we become aware that their interests are enormously varied...as teachers, we must help students to bring these interests and topics together in ways that have meaning for them” (p. 5). In terms of literacy development, students must possess the will to read and learn, not just basic skills. Teachers must consider student motivation before they become focused on instruction of comprehension strategies. Researchers also noted that student interest has a profound effect on literacy and learning (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000) which is closely associated with motivation and engagement. Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez (1998) “highlight the importance of understanding motivation and engagement in relation to social context and the interactions in which young readers and writers find themselves” (as cited in Moje et al., 2008, p. 113). Educators must ensure that the literary demands of schooling are relevant to the demands of the world that adolescents have come to value (Moje et al., 2008) because “students are more likely to put forth the effort necessary to read and learn if the material interests them” (Guthrie & Davis, 2003 as cited in Brozo & Flynt, 2008, p. 173). Unfortunately, students required to participate in school reading that they consider boring or irrelevant may approach subsequent reading tasks with lessened motivation, which will hamper their engagement (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017, p. 218). It is important that we work to keep students engaged to limit the loss of motivation in junior high school years. Literacy experts, Ivey and Johnston (2013), emphasize that without serious support of students’ sense of autonomy and relevance in their reading, deep engagement is not likely. Fortunately, there are many specific teaching practices which can be employed to maintain and increase engagement for students.

### **Teaching Practices Which Enhance Motivation**

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Numerous studies have been conducted into instructional practices that increase motivation for reading. Guthrie et al. (2006) identified seven major instructional practices that increase motivation for reading comprehension: using content goals; affording students choice in the classroom; selecting texts with interesting and relevant content, and an appealing format; integrating social goals or cooperative learning structures in reading activities; having a teacher that students perceive to understand and care for them; employing extrinsic rewards and praise; and emphasizing mastery goals. These recommendations are consistent with other research in the area of reading motivation and engagement which demonstrates the need for teachers to individualize instruction for each learner in the classroom and that by doing so, a child will feel valued and part of the reading community. Also, Pitcher et al. (2007) determined that teachers need to: recognize the multiple literacies in which students are engaging outside of the classroom; model our own reading enjoyment; embrace engaging activities, such as literature circles and book clubs, into regular instruction in secondary schools; include reading materials of varied formats, levels, and topics in the classroom; and incorporate elements of choice in readings and projects. The research and recommendations consistently reveal that when teachers discuss their own love of reading and engage in conversations with students about books, a classroom culture of reading is developed. Individualizing instruction through the use of carefully chosen, highly relevant literature and providing students with choice are important teaching practices which language arts teachers should consider.

Additionally, in a study of 831 students and 37 teachers using the Motivation to Read profile, Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) determined that one way to increase children's desire to read is to let them choose their own books and to allot time during the day for kids to read them. A study conducted by Taylor, Frye and Maruyama (1990) also found that time spent on silent

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reading at school is beneficial and that time engaged in reading during the reading period over a relatively short time was significantly related to gains in students' reading achievement. Clearly, teachers and administrators have the authority to schedule time for students to read during the school day. In addition to positively impacting achievement, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that students saw silent reading as a way to make more sense of the text at hand, since time set aside freed them to concentrate, comprehend, and reflect without being disturbed or distracted by some other task. For these students, the benefits of personal reading outweigh the benefits of the whole-class or small-group readings and discussion they experienced. The research proves that there are substantial benefits to planned time for reading in the school day.

Another important area for language arts teachers to be mindful of is the incorporation of literature which students find interesting and relevant. “Adolescent students who participate in programs that connect literacy with real-life out-of-school issues and personal interests indicate more positive feelings about reading and writing in school” (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001, p. 3). Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) reinforce that it is important for teachers to provide books on many different topics that match the interests of their students. Edmunds and Bauserman’s (2006) study indicates that access to books positively influenced the students reading motivation. Schools with inviting libraries and well-stocked classroom libraries provide convenient and easy access to books which invite students to participate in a culture that supports reading. By creating a classroom library, teachers can increase a child’s access to books (Jones, 2006). To build a relevant and well-used classroom library, Rop and Rop (2005) recommend taking a careful inventory of the existing book collection and an assessment of the most pressing needs, based on the curricular units of the grade. They explain that books should invite children’s active participation and represent a variety of genres and complexity (2005). Also, involving children

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of all ages in the creation of the classroom library will allow students to become more invested in the literature (Hopenwasser, 2009).

Additionally, responsive teachers make the difference for students who might otherwise become disengaged with school literacy. In a study of over 1700 grade six students, Ivey and Broaddus (2001), found that the participants “sent a strong message about the need to read personally interesting materials and having some control over what they read in school” (p. 367). They suggest that having a rich supply of texts and many opportunities to experience text through independent reading and through teacher read-alouds may be universal needs for diverse students. Creating a community of readers is also integral to engagement because students were motivated to read when people read to them and when people shared what they were reading with them (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006). “Like the sixth graders in the Ivey and Broaddus (2001) report, the students spoke warmly about two kinds of reading: teacher read-alouds and silent, independent reading” (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006 as cited in Pflaum & Bishop, 2004, p. 206). In shaping reading instruction for middle-grade students that is engaging and enhances critical comprehension, knowing about student perception is important. Teachers who know how individual students perceive and understand classroom events could adapt to their needs. When teachers recommend books to individual students based on their individual interests and life experiences, students feel valued and understood. Ultimately, students need to have ownership over their own literacy (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001) and teachers can empower their students by providing a classroom that is open and receptive to the needs expressed by the learner. Filling a classroom with literature that reflects the experiences of the students and providing time for reading demonstrates that there is merit in reading and that it is a valued activity.

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Finally, a teacher behavior that supports motivation is building student confidence or the belief in their own capacity. One of the biggest factors of building confidence is the students' having faith in their own reading skills because belief is more closely linked to achievement than any other motivation throughout school (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010). According to Cambria and Guthrie (2010) achieving confidence can be achieved through simple activities such as having a student find success in a small daily reading task. They also state that another factor in finding confidence is building a strong relationship with the teacher which can be fostered when a teacher provides students with carefully, selected, relevant literature.

### **The Power of Young Adult Literature**

A thorough examination of the research into reading engagement, motivation, and best practices for reading in the junior high school classroom has highlighted the positive correlation between relevance and choice with reading engagement. Research on the use of YA literature in the classroom has shown adolescent engagement with reading and motivation to read increases when adolescents read young adult novels (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Pflaum & Bishop, 2004). In their survey of English language arts teachers, Gibbons et al. (2006) discovered that young adult literature: offers teachers reasonable options for implementing full-length works of literature in their curriculum that do contain `sophisticated literary devices; matches students' interests; addresses the time constraints of a crowded curriculum; provides a bridge for reluctant and struggling readers in successfully reading classic works of literature; and builds literacy skills in readers. When teachers in the study were surveyed about their use of YA literature in the classroom, one teacher stated, "To limit our selections of novels, especially to the "classic" novels, is to tell our students that all these other texts, perhaps the students' preferred types of reading have less value" (Gibbons et al., 2006, p. 55). The teachers in the study repeatedly

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reported that their students do not like to read but would do so if they were provided with literature which they found interesting and relevant.

Often, “because they feel unconnected to the books they are assigned to read in English classes, both struggling and successful readers feel antipathy toward reading (Stover, 2001 as cited in Gibbons et al., 2006, p. 57). Contemporary YA literature is the ideal vehicle for language arts teachers to employ to engage students because it “offers a unique window on societal conflicts and dilemmas. Much of its appeal rests on the immediacy of first-person narration and the unique point of view offered by an adolescent main character” (Herz & Gallo, 1996 as cited in Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 638). “By asking young people to consider (and question) their assumptions about others and themselves as they read, we might guide them in gaining both a critical perspective of the society in which they live as well as a commitment to action in the attempt to improve it” (Glenn, Ginsberg, Gaffey, Lund, & Meagher, 2012, p. 25). The adolescent reader is able to identify with the protagonist who is “living and wrestling with real problems close to their own lives” (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 638). Students connect with characters who are struggling to find their identity and sense of self in a world that is complex and at times, unjust. “It is also at the middle level that students find controversial issues immediately compelling and, given the opportunity, think and wonder about ideas and their consequences” (Freedman & Johnson, 2001, p. 357).

As educators, “we must seek out fiction that asks students to wrestle with their own value systems, that depicts young adolescents making and sustaining strong friendships across racial lines (Freedman & Johnson, 2001, p. 368). In a survey of grade 10 students, Moeller and Becnel (2015) found that exactly half of the respondents admitted to seeing themselves in the characters and situations that they read about, and many provided examples from YA literature

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to illustrate this. Singer and Shagoury (2006) stated that “our goal as educators is to create classrooms where students learn to ask critical questions, support one another, and work toward positive social change” (p. 318). YA literature “provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations” (Glasgow, 2001, p. 54). Additionally, “engaging teenagers in stories they desire to read, provides them with the opportunity to exercise and develop their critical thinking skills and their opinions about what is important to them” (Monseau, 2000 as cited in Santoli & Wagner, 2004, p. 70). Moje et al. (2008) also explained that “much of the reading and writing youth are motivated to do on their own revolves around the maintenance of social networks, relationships, identity development, and self-improvement and self-expression.” Therefore, another important function of YA literature in the classroom is to build a community of readers. Strommen and Mates (2004) interviewed students in grade six and grade nine about their reading habits to identify factors which contribute to the development of a love of reading. They found that readers learn through social interaction with other readers, particularly when reading is entertaining and stimulating. Also, young people must see themselves as members of a community that pursues reading as a significant and enjoyable recreational activity if reading is to become a lifelong endeavor. Most importantly, for educators, adults who encourage readers to make reading selections based on personal interest and make it possible for young adults to become participants in an activity and their friends and the larger society values, successfully contribute to the reading love of their students. Building classroom libraries full of YA literature with protagonists and plot lines that students can relate to and learn to evaluate the world through, develops an important culture of reading in schools. In their analysis of students’ perceptions of the outcomes and processes of engaged reading in

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classrooms where teachers prioritize engagement through self-selected, self-paced reading of compelling YA literature, Ivey and Johnston (2013) found that while constructing meaning from text, students were also using text to construct meaning in their lives. “Through their engagement with these books and one another, these young adults were recognizing the possibility of, and the cultural tools for, shaping their individual and collective lives (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 371).

### **Conclusion**

The research demonstrates conclusively that language arts teachers have the power to motivate students to become lifelong readers. Helping students to become engaged readers will have a positive impact on their levels of comprehension and academic performance. Research indicates that high interest, high quality literature is crucial to the success of secondary readers. Also, engaged students who are interested and wanting to complete the books that they encounter in school will find success in reading. Incorporating YA literature into the middle school classroom is an important strategy for teachers to increase relevance as well as personal connection with students. “As secondary English language arts teachers, we not only want but need to instill a love of reading in our students. Teaching students to truly love literature, which will inevitably lead to increased reading and increased aptitude for literacy skills associated with reading, requires that teachers challenge and re-think some of their traditional approaches to literature instruction” (Gibbons et al., 2006, p. 57).

For my capstone project, I have developed a professional resource for junior high school educators interested in incorporating young adult literature into their language arts classrooms to increase motivation and engagement.

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### Chapter 3

#### **The Role of the Language Arts Teacher**

As a language arts teacher, I have become increasingly concerned with my student's lack of engagement with printed text. Based on the research on classroom engagement, student choice, and the use of YA literature in the classroom, I would like to provide a framework for junior high school teachers who are interested in implementing YA novels into their classrooms.

There have been several mentors, colleagues, professional resources, and professional development sessions which have shaped my teaching practice. From each, I have borrowed ideas and strategies which I have molded into my own style. There is one moment though, that I can trace back to the beginning of my love of YA literature and new connection with my junior high school students. About ten years ago, I attended a session by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, a professor of English education at Boise State University and former middle school teacher who is highly regarded in the area of literacy. Wilhelm (2008) had recently published "You Gotta Be the Book" and was in Edmonton to present to an audience of language arts teachers about engaged and reflective reading. At this point in my career, I had taught language arts for ten or so years and felt that I was proficient at it. I had surrounded myself with strong mentors, collaborated with my colleagues, and worked to create genuine connections with my students. I was not though, a reader. Growing up, my mother was a voracious reader and our home was full of great works of literature – Margaret Atwood, John Irving, and John Steinbeck. I read when I was asked to in my English classes but never chose to read a book outside of class time. I was educated in an era when the whole-class novel was popular and while I finished them because the teacher assigned them, I did not feel connected to characters in the novels or their struggles. To me, reading was a school-based activity. My moment of epiphany came when Jeffrey

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Wilhelm asked the audience, “How many of you have read Harry Potter?” Now this was 2009, the seventh book in J.K. Rowling’s series had only been published two years prior and the films were still being released. The Harry Potter craze was at its pinnacle. I sat in my seat, hands in my lap. I had not read Harry Potter. Then Wilhelm said the words that changed my life. “Shame on you. How dare you work with adolescents when you have not read the series of literature that they are most invested in.” He was right. How could I connect with, and inspire my students when I was not familiar with the literature that they valued? From that moment forward, I began my journey into the world of YA literature. The truth is – YA literature has become a way for me understand my students, motivate them to read, and allow me to make them feel valued. In this project I will share a framework for incorporating YA literature into middle school classrooms including a rationale for their use, teaching strategies, building a classroom library, tips for administrators, and a list of books that my students love.

### **Why YA Literature?**

Research indicates that there is a pattern of reading decline into adolescence and that this decrease in reading motivation can have a negative impact on academic performance. Also, in the province of Alberta, where it is the goal of the curriculum redesign is to create engaged thinkers and ethical citizens, it is a requirement of language arts teachers to provide highly engaging literature to our students which is thought-provoking and enhances critical thinking skills. “By asking young people to consider (and question) their assumptions about others and themselves as they read, we might guide them in gaining both a critical perspective of the society in which they live as well as a commitment to action in the attempt to improve it” (Glenn et al., 2012, p. 25). Many of the protagonists in YA texts are involved in struggles of oppression or self-identity. Because junior high school students are also beginning to become less egocentric

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and more aware of their role in the larger society, they can relate to the characters in their books and recognize the role that they play in making our society more equitable and less oppressive.

“We must seek out fiction that asks students to wrestle with their own value systems” (Freedman & Johnson, 2001, p. 368) in order to stimulate students’ ability to respond critically to text and ideally, be moved to act. Students who are engaged in their learning are “mastery oriented, intrinsically motivated, and have self-efficacy” (Guthrie & Klauda, 2016, as cited in Afflerback & Harrison, 2017, p. 217). YA literature, due to its highly relevant, and often controversial content, provides opportunities for junior high school students to become fully immersed in the act of reading thus highly engaged learners. In a system that is striving to have students attain competencies, YA literature affords students the opportunity to analyze text and to synthesize ideas in a collaborative setting to further develop their fundamental values and beliefs and their awareness of global citizenship.

In Alberta, the provincial government began a massive curriculum redesign process with the transformational vision of Inspiring Education in 2010. Out of this process came The Ministerial Order on Student Learning which states, “the fundamental goal of education in Alberta is to inspire all students to achieve success and fulfillment, and reach their full potential by developing the competencies of Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, who contribute to a strong and prosperous economy and society” (Alberta Education, 2013, p.1). The goal of education is for students to become independent thinkers who are empathetic and sensitive to the needs of others. “To be ‘educated’ means to be allowed to think and wonder about ideas and their consequences; to be ‘indoctrinated’ means to hear only about acceptable values, beliefs, and traditions of a group” (Swiderek, 1996 as cited in Freedman & Johnson, 2000, p. 356). The beauty of the nature of YA literature is that it challenges students

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to critically examine their society and is a logical means by which language arts educators can teach the mandated curriculum in a way that is engaging for adolescents. “Using young adult literature is one of the most meaningful and enjoyable ways to inquire into social responsibility because we can situate this content in the wonderful stories of good books. And within these stories are moral and ethical quandaries, just as they are in endless civic issues” (Wolk, 2009, p. 667).

As the curriculum shifts towards the acquisition of competencies, schools must become student-centered in their focus where students have the opportunity to learn through inquiry, experience and interaction with others. Engaged thinkers will “know how to think critically and creatively and make discoveries through inquiry, reflection, exploration, experimentation and trial and error” (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 1). They can also “adapt to the many changes in society and the economy with an attitude of optimism and hope for the future; as a lifelong learner, believes there is no limit to what knowledge may be gleaned, what skills may be accumulated, and what may be achieved in cooperation with others; and always keeps growing and learning” (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 1). In addition, the ethical citizen “understands that it is not all about them; is committed to democratic ideals; contributes fully to the world economically, culturally, socially, and politically; values diversity in all people and adapts to any situation; demonstrates respect, empathy and compassion for all people” (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 1). Each teacher in the province is now challenged with finding ways to inspire our students to become productive members of our diverse community through the accumulation of the competencies. Again, YA literature delves into the issues that allow students to become leaders of tomorrow. Through the journeys of the protagonists’ struggles, students can learn to be analyze society and be motivated to begin conversations about necessary change. “Reading

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literature can be an ethical as well as an intellectual process” (Alsup, 2003, p. 159) and as such, can give students the opportunity to learn the processes of critical thinking through inquiry.

We are what we do, especially what we do to change what we are...A literature born in the process of crisis and change, and deeply immersed in the risks and events of its time, can indeed help to create the symbols of the new reality, and perhaps – if talent and courage are not lacking – throw light on the signs along the road... To claim that literature on its own is going to change reality would be an act of madness or arrogance. It seems to me no less foolish to deny that it can aid in making this change. (Galeneo as cited in Singer & Shagoury, 2005, p. 318)

YA literature is the ideal platform for meaningful discussions and projects which can alter the worldview of the students and therefore, be a transformative tool for educators.

Further to this, YA literature provides a solution for language arts educators in Alberta who are teaching in inclusive settings. The Edmonton Catholic School Board website states, “In keeping with our Catholic tradition of universal inclusivity, Thomas Groome reminds us that the word “catholic” comes from the Greek word “Katholos” which means “welcoming all” - just as Jesus did” (<https://www.ecsd.net/Programs/Overview/Inclusive-Ed/Pages/Inclusive-Education-Programming---Katholos.aspx>). Inclusion is one of the foundational tenets of Edmonton Catholic Schools. For decades, inclusive education has been the first choice in programming in the district, as reflected in the following district policy:

Flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of students is an important feature of inclusive education programming. Specific delivery models for individualized programs may vary from class to class and from school to school depending on the needs of the individual students attending. (Edmonton Catholic School District, 2017)

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In addition, the composition of our schools is changing. For example, in Edmonton Catholic Schools, the increase in the number of students identified as English Language Learners (ELL) is staggering. In 2007, there were 2807 ELL students in our district which accounted for 8.64% of our total population. In 2016, the number has grown to 9428 or 22.8% of our total population. Inclusive policies encourage students of all learning profiles to attend their neighbourhood schools which has created beautifully diverse classrooms with students from a wide range of educational, cultural, and social backgrounds. YA literature, too, is diverse in nature. While each book focuses on the experiences of an adolescent protagonist, the plots and themes of these stories are diverse. Students can learn about a multitude of topics through the characters' struggles.

When a reader can entertain the perspectives of several characters at once, it enables him or her to be able to predict the implications of one character's actions on the thoughts and feelings of the other. Amazingly enough, this can carry over into actual worlds, with students taking seriously the potential repercussions of their own actions on others...engaged middle school readers take up the moral and ethical dispositions developed in a narrative world and apply them to their actual social worlds. (Ivey, 2014, pp. 168-169)

Thus, the inclusion of YA literature can successfully achieve the desired curricular outcomes as well as the prescribed competencies to a group of learners with complex needs and backgrounds.

The combination of the ministerial order which shifted our focus to a competency-based curriculum designed to challenge each individual child to become an engaged thinker and an ethical citizen as well as increasingly complex needs in our classrooms has forced teachers to evaluate their teaching practices. The inclusion of more student choice through the introduction

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of YA literature into the classroom, is a way for language arts teachers to incorporate the mandated competencies, meet the needs of a diverse classroom, and to engage students with highly relevant literature.

### **Teaching Strategies**

Reading expert and high school English teacher, Penny Kittle (2013), begins her lesson plans with one question in mind – what can I hand them today that will hook them? She is a passionate teacher who fills her classroom with literature which is engaging and challenging to create reading experiences for her students. Through deliberate actions, teachers can increase reading motivation and engagement. Our students reading lives become an active part of the curriculum. Ripp (2018) believes, “We may not see the transformation, but if we make loving reading an urgent endeavor, then perhaps we are planting a seed. And one day, maybe years later, that child will not feel like saying, ‘I don’t read...thanks’ but will instead bring a book everywhere because they cannot imagine not doing so” (p. 15). Our goal should be to make literacy accessible for all students.

For many years, I was that language arts teacher who felt that every activity had to include an assessment and to ensure that students were actually reading, they needed to prove it to me through constant journaling, sticky notes, and comprehension tests. In his book *Readicide*, expert Kelly Gallagher (2009), defines readicide as “The systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools” (p. 2). I was guilty of this practice. So then, what can teachers do to inspire students to read? Ivey and Johnson (2013) studied a group of 70 middle school students whose

teachers had made a decision that would be considered radical in some circles: They shifted to students all decisions about what to read (or not to read) and what to do (if

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anything) with their reading. They filled their classrooms with books they thought students would find hard to resist, and they fully abandoned the idea of having students read the same book. They did not require students to create projects on the books they read, answer questions to prove their comprehension, or even write about their books in response journals. They did not present short lessons on cognitive reading strategies and then direct students to practice using the strategies in the books they selected. They did not set goals, or have students set goals, for how many books they might read over the course of the year. By the end of the year, students were reading like never before, quite literally. (as cited in Ivey, 2014, p. 165)

These students exhibited true engagement. Research indicates that providing students with choice in the classroom as well as relevant text has a positive effect on engagement. These are the practices that were observed in the aforementioned study.

Teachers need to find time for students to read regularly and to discuss their reading with each other. Ivey (2014) suggests that teachers make it a habit to invite dialogical engagements with text...expect that students will want to talk, allow it to happen even during “silent” reading, and arrange for it to happen regularly. Many students in junior high school spend large blocks of time sitting and listening and are rarely given the opportunity to create, compose, or read. While notably important, the challenge for the middle school teacher is to find a regular time for sustained reading. My colleagues and I have experimented with a few options, each with pros and cons, but have found that the implementation of a “literacy” block where students read self-selected novels for 45 minutes at a time, is most beneficial for our students. Other teachers begin each day with 10 minutes of reading time. This requires that the teacher establish a reading routine. In either model, each student knows that they are expected to have a book with them at

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all times and if they require assistance in finding a book, the teacher offers suggestions of books connected to that student's interests or experiences. The key is that students see that reading is valued. During this reading time, at the beginning of the year, I will read alongside my students and share my thoughts on my books with them. Within a few weeks, I begin to use this time to host reading conferences with each student. I can meet with four or five students per literacy block. I enjoy this time as it allows me a glimpse into my students reading lives. I take notes and accept challenges during this time. I make it my mission to find the perfect book for every child. While I am not always successful, the conversations create a classroom climate that places value on reading.

It is important for teachers to become reading role models for their students. As I finish books, I also discuss them with my colleagues and students and often have them take the books to read. One of the books that is circulating this year is Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*. This novel was chosen as the 2017 Goodreads Choice Awards winner. It is inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and centres on the protagonist's call to activism after her unarmed friend is shot in front of her. I found this to be a riveting novel, which I knew my students would also enjoy. Immediately after finishing the book, I brought it to my classroom and invited my students to read it. Because I had just finished the book, my students were more apt to take my recommendation. I am also very frank and honest with my students. I do not enjoy every book that I pick up. I encourage them to abandon books that they do not enjoy, and I tell them when I do the same. I need them to trust my suggestions for our relationship to work. I, in turn, listen to their suggestions and read what they bring to me as well.

A number of studies identify that students are motivated when they are part of a reading community and when they are read to. The whole class read-aloud has proven to be an effective

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way of drawing in readers. My colleagues and I have chosen many different novels. We read these books because they are interesting and engaging. We do not ask students to journal or take notes as we read. There will be no exam at the end asking them to recall insignificant details. Instead these read-alouds provide a basis for rich dialogue. Interestingly, the whole class read-aloud is most beneficial for my reluctant readers as it allows them to participate in conversations about the literature and its themes that they would often sit through silently before. A novel that I have experienced success with is Neal Schusterman's *Unwind*. This novel is set 100 years after a futuristic civil war between pro-life and pro-choice groups. The government has enacted legislation banning abortion but legalizing "Unwinding" of 13-17 year olds which we find out later in the book involves having every part of one's body donated to others. Thus, a person goes on living in others. The novel features three characters who, for very different reasons, are on the run, trying to avoid being caught and sent to be unwound. Adolescents can identify with this action-packed novel because of the oppression that these teens are experiencing. There are also many ethical discussions which stem from this novel as well.

### **Building a Classroom Library**

As the research indicates, student interest has a profound impact on literacy and learning. One of the most effective ways to generate student interest in through the use of classroom libraries. In May of 2017, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published a statement on classroom libraries. It states:

Classroom libraries – physical or virtual – play a key role in providing access to books and promoting literacy; they have the potential to increase student motivation, engagement, and achievement and help students become critical thinkers, analytical readers, and informed citizens. As English language arts educators, we know that no

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book is right for every student, and classroom libraries offer ongoing opportunities for teachers to work with students as individuals to find books that will ignite their love for learning, calm their fears, answer their questions, and improve their lives in any of the multiple ways literature can. (Retrieved from [www2.ncte.org/statement/classroom-libraries/](http://www2.ncte.org/statement/classroom-libraries/))

Teachers and school leaders play a role in the establishment of vibrant classroom libraries that “appeal to and support the needs of students with different interests and abilities; provide access to multiple resources that reflect diverse perspectives and social identities; and open up opportunities for (collaboration)” (NCTE, 2017). The challenge for classroom teachers is how to stock one’s library with books that students want to read. Involving students in the set-up and maintenance of the classroom library is imperative. Hoppenwasser (2009) explains that students will become more invested in the literature when they are involved in the creation of the classroom library. Ask them what they want to see on the shelves of their classroom library. I hang a piece of poster paper on the wall in my classroom, so students can continually add the titles of books that they would like to see purchased. My colleagues are also an asset as they possess a wealth of knowledge and expertise. We shop for books together and share book suggestions with one another. This collaboration is invaluable. Additionally, there are also excellent lists compiled by book lovers which provide suggestions for YA literature. Organizations such as The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) and The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) are excellent resources. The website Good Reads is a popular site for book reviews. It compiles a yearly “Goodreads Choice Awards” which allows viewers to vote for their favorite titles in a variety of genres. I have also used The

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Edmonton Public Library website as it allows EPL members to review books and I find that the reviews are honest and often reflective of my student's attitudes toward books as well.

Teachers fortunate enough to have supportive administrators who provide a budget for classroom libraries are at an advantage. Many of us are given a modest budget or no budget at all which requires us to be creative. Every year, in my opening letter to parents, I invite them to send books to school for our classroom library. This has been an effective means of supplementing texts in our library. Also, the Scholastic catalogues can be a source of inexpensive books for our classroom. A few years ago, Scholastic added the Teen Readers Club now called the Middle School Club which offers more mature selections appropriate for junior high school students. Twice a year, the Edmonton Public Library hosts a book sale. A librarian once explained to me that when a book is released, the library purchases multiple copies due to popularity. There is insufficient shelf space to keep multiple copies indefinitely therefore, they sell off excessive copies. I have had great luck at these sales finding gently used copies of current titles for a drastically reduced price. Recently, I stumbled across the [bookoutlet.ca](http://bookoutlet.ca) where I was able to order new books for approximately half price of other websites.

Providing a wide variety of literature, which allows students to find books that they can escape into, relate to, or learn from is essential. Make it a priority to read the books in your classroom library or school library so that you can offer that "perfect" book to each of your students. Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) found that students were motivated to read when people shared what they were reading with them. Talk to your students about what you are reading and ask them about their books as well. Being able to hand a book to a student and say that as you were reading it, you were thinking that it would be a meaningful book for that child is powerful. A.S. King's *Ask the Passengers* is a beautiful story about a young girl named Astrid

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who spends hours lying on her backyard picnic table watching airplanes overhead. She has a secret that she desperately wants to reveal to someone but instead, confides it to the passengers in the strangers on the planes as they fly over. The truth is that she is falling in love with a girl and is struggling with her sexual identity. When I read this novel, I immediately thought of a student who had shared similar struggles with me earlier in the year. I gave the book to her to read and it opened up some excellent dialogue for her and me about societal expectations and finding one's own identity. During an acceptance speech at the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards, Will Smith (2005) said, "There have been gazillions of people that have lived before all of us. There's no new problem you could have – with your parents, with school, with a bully. There's no new problem that someone hasn't already solved and written about in a book" (Retrieved from <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=-08M7Jpl4>). It is our responsibility as teachers of reading to find the books for students that actively engage them and invite them to participate in our community of readers. Including books at a wide variety of levels is also important. While teachers need not label books according to reading levels which would have a negative impact on motivation, students should all be able to find literature that they can access. Audio books are more readily available to students through local libraries and online platforms. Encourage students to listen to books as well as read them. Also, consider texts in multiple languages. For example, Maximilian and the Mystery of the Guardian Angel by Xavier Garza is a side-by-side English and Spanish book which has been enjoyed by Spanish speaking students with beginning English skills.

Finally, when creating a classroom library, the physical set up of the room and a system for organizing books is important. Whether large or small, a carefully curated library calls students to interact with the books. Ruetzel and Clark (2011) have created an excellent guide for

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teachers to organizing literacy classrooms. For a classroom library they recommend that teachers “organize the classroom library into a quiet, peaceful area with comfortable seating. Clearly mark library shelves and book tubs so that students can easily locate interesting books” (p. 97). Books should be displayed in bins and organized into themes. Students love to participate in this process. Try to have books displayed throughout the classroom as many students, particularly reluctant readers, are often hesitant to comb through perfectly aligned shelves but will grab a book that is displayed openly in the classroom. One difficulty that I have encountered with the classroom library is keeping track of books. I have to admit that I do not have a perfect system for students to take out books. I rely on the Honor System and have come to peace with the fact that books will walk off. My colleagues have had moderate success with apps which allow you to catalogue your books and students can easily sign them out. Another colleague created laminated book marks for each of her students and as a student borrowed a book, they would place the book mark on the shelf in the place where the book would have been. The key is to find a system that is easy and not too time consuming where the focus is on the enjoyment of reading not the accounting of books.

### **Controversial Texts**

Many of the books written for a YA audience could be considered controversial. In a study of junior high school teachers conducted by Freedman and Johnson (2001), “the teachers demonstrated a keen awareness of the pedagogical importance of the power literature has to engage young people in deliberate questioning, genuine dialogue, and critical reflection, yet their feelings of insecurity pressured them into opting for a less provocative piece” (p. 358). This paradox is a sad reality. Often the books that students are most engaged to read, are those which are often avoided for fear of controversy. It is also in the junior high school years that students

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find controversial issues compelling and, when allowed to do so, “think and wonder about ideas and their consequences” (Swiderek, 1996, p. 592). Particularly with my grade nine students, I try not to censor their book choices. There have been exceptions to this occasionally in my career. I try to get to know the families of my students so that I am aware of any issues or contexts that they may object to. I borrowed a letter from Penny Kittle (2013) which I adapted slightly and send to each of my student’s parents informing them that their children will be exposed to a wide variety of literature over the course of the school year and that if they have any concerns, they may contact me. This places the onus on the parents to alert me of any concerns and also, encourages them to become an active part of our classroom community. See appendix A for a copy of the letter.

Research suggests that students will be more engaged with the text if they are able to exercise choice to select a book in which they are interested. One of the more popular books in my classroom is Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Alexie’s use of self-deprecating humor provides a poignant story of a young man named Junior who is raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Due to the mature content, this novel is often banned in schools and libraries. I believe that it allows my primarily middle class suburban classroom to understand the struggles of poverty, drug addiction, and bullying in a way that builds empathy with Junior because they gain a glimpse into his thinking and emotions. When I have a group of students who choose to read a controversial text, I guide them through the process. I provide many opportunities to discuss the text and to research relevant issues. These books provide a platform for discussions which are often deep and engaging because the students are very invested in the narrative.

### **Tips for Administrators**

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In the last three years, I have become the assistant principal at my school. Although research indicates that teachers have a profound ability to impact the reading lives of their students, this is true of administrators as well. Administrators have the power to directly impact their students reading lives through the creation of a reading culture in one's school. Also, they can provide the necessary resources of time and money to language arts teachers to collaborate with their colleagues and to purchase literature that students want to devour. Ripp (2018) has a series of suggestions for administrators who are keen to support the reading programs in their schools. First, she recommends that administrators buy books for their school. An alarming trend that I have observed in several junior high schools in my school district is that they are doing away with libraries. One new school opened in 2012, chose to purchase no print books for their library, opting instead for digital formats. Another older school renovated their library and filled it with fancy furniture and computers but removed all of the books. This school has modest classroom libraries in the language arts classrooms but does not send the message that reading is important in their environment. I recognize that schools do need to integrate digital mediums and multi-modal texts but there is something special about the tactile experience of opening a new book. I had a student profess the other day, "I love to hear the crack of the spine when I open a new book" (personal communication). School leaders must make the purchase of books a priority and provide classroom teachers and librarians with the budgets to keep their classroom and library shelves packed with the books that students desire to read.

Ripp (2018) also explains that administrators must hire educators who are knowledgeable and passionate. Few schools have full-time teacher-librarians these days but when possible, librarians can create libraries that are well-stocked and vibrant. They are another reading role model in your school who can guide students on their literary journey. It is also vital

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that school leaders staff their schools with teachers who love to read. Ripp (2018) explains, “Years of experience show that students will read more if we read as well and are able to create a book community where our love is a cornerstone of what we do” (p. 77). Students need to see adults in their lives who model positive habits and a love of literature. Additionally, our most amazing teachers who know the research should be with our most vulnerable students. School leaders act as instructional leaders by having tough conversations with teachers. Ask them what they are basing professional decisions on and challenge them to evaluate their classroom practice to ensure that students are benefitting. As a new administrator, I recognize that I need to be in the classrooms of my school regularly, providing my staff with professional reading based on research to create a dialogue amongst staff that is driving a desire to do the best we can for every student.

Finally, researchers have discovered the importance of scheduling time for reading during the school day. School leaders can organize the timetables in junior high schools to include independent reading time. There are a multitude of ways that this can be implemented. We have found that the most successful method for our school is to provide each class with a literacy block in the timetable. For this 45-minute block, students read a self-selected text. We ask that the teachers act as reading role models during this time as well. While it is tempting to finish up the set of essays on one’s desk or respond the emails that seem endless, it is critical that teachers invest in this time so that students understand its value. The school leader must visit classrooms and read with their students.

Another critical aspect of a school literacy program for schools is staff collaboration. Fullan’s Coherence Framework (2016) emphasizes the importance of building capacity in school staff. “No amount of external accountability will be effective in the absence of internal

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accountability” (Ellmore, R. as cited in Fullan, 2016, Youtube). When a group is working cohesively, it will self-regulate. If an environment is created which is transparent, non-judgmental and open, student learning will improve. Through shared practice, “leaders who are change savvy know that they cannot become successful without the collective commitment and ingenuity of the group. This collectivity is seen not as a nuisance but rather as a necessity” which should underpin how we structure and conduct our work. (Fullan, 2011, p. 53). Farmer (2012) also asserts that collaborative change is far more powerful than individual change. “Groups provide a means to ‘up the ante’ for change; individuals can contribute to change, and the power of the group as a whole can influence decisions about change” (p. 125). As collaborative teams, teachers can accomplish powerful things that benefit students. They simply need the time, funding, and a supportive environment for change.

### **Conclusion**

Language arts teachers hold the key to unlocking a student’s motivation to read and learn. By becoming aware of our students’ interests and responsive to them we can establish a lifelong love of reading which can allow students to benefit of a plethora of texts by experiencing life through the character’s experiences. Steven Wolk (2007) argues “passive schooling creates passive people. If we want people to think, learn, and care about the many dimensions of life, if we want neighbors who accept the responsibility of tending to the world and working to make it a better place, then we need schools and curricula that are actually about life and the world” (p. 650). The Alberta government is also mandating that our schools create engaged thinkers and ethical citizens who are socially aware and possess the necessary competencies to be innovative, creative, collaborative, and responsive to societal needs. It is the responsibility of educators to provide educational experiences, which are personally and socially transformative. YA literature

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should be the cornerstone of a school's literacy program as it has the power to engage students and invites them to become critical thinkers who aware of the plight of others in the world as well as recognize that they are part of a global community. YA literature is an effective means to create students who have a lifelong love of reading and learning. Is there a more important gift?

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## READING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH YA LITERATURE

**Appendix A**

Hello Parents of Language Arts Students,

I love to teach Language Arts; it is one of the greatest joys of my life. I love to read all kinds of literature including your child's work. This year we aim to improve our skills as readers and writers. I can always find time to provide extra help when your child needs it. My door is always open so please encourage your child to find me to plan a time that works for him or her, either before school, at lunch or after school.

One my main priorities for this year is to establish a reading habit in my student's lives. I am hoping that we can work together to help our young adults rediscover the pleasure and passion of reading.

Students in my class will often have the ability to choose what they want to read. I love to hear students recommending books to each other. What I seek is an eagerness for my students to read - a drive to seek answers and escape in the books that they have chosen. My goal is for each student to read at least 5 books this year and I hope that many will read well beyond this goal. This has many tremendous benefits:

- Reading relieves stress as it allows you to escape the present.
- Reading builds stamina to prepare students for high school and post-secondary studies where it is a basic expectation that students can sit and read for 1-2 hours at a time. We need to prepare our students for this.
- I often hear that students won't read. I believe that this is true if students do not feel passion for the books which they are assigned. In my experience, students will read if the right book is put in their hands.

Because I respect your role as a parent and the traditions that you hold sacred, if you want me to monitor your child's book choices closely, by all means, call me and we'll work out a plan that we can both contribute to.

Thanks for your support,

Erin Winch

P.S. Our classroom benefits from your castoffs! Please send books you no longer need to our classroom library, especially ones that you have loved, if you can bear to part with them. Better yet, come to class and share your book with us. Share your passion for reading; get to know these amazing students at FMT!

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### Appendix B

#### Books That My Students Love

The following is a list of my grade nine student's most loved books. They have been sorted into genres although many cross over into multiple categories. By grade nine, I am comfortable providing my students with literature with mature content. I recommend that you familiarize yourself with any book before you make recommendations for students and that you support your readers with regular conferencing. The goal is to get kids reading and talking about what they are reading so provide opportunities for them to dialogue with their peers as well.

#### **Race relations/ Cultural minorities**

1. The Hate U Give – Angie Thomas
2. The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian – Sherman Alexie
3. Monster- Dean Walter Myers

#### **Mental Health/Addictions**

4. Turtle All the Way Down – John Green
5. It's Kind of a Funny Story – Ned Vizzini
6. Thirteen Reasons Why – Jay Asher
7. Please Ignore Vera Dietz - A.S. King
8. Crank – Ellen Hopkins
9. Speak – Laurie Halse Anderson
10. Everything, Everything – Nicole Yoon
11. All the Bright Places – Jennifer Niven

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**Contemporary Teen Life**

12. Eleanor and Park – Rainbow Rowell
13. I am the Messenger - Markus Zusak
14. Every Day – David Levithan
15. The Statistical Probability of Love at First Sight – Jennifer E. Smith
16. Nineteen Minutes – Jodi Picoult

**Fantasy**

17. A Monster Calls – Patrick Ness
18. Full Tilt – Neal Schusterman
19. Cinder – Marissa Meyer
20. Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children – Ransom Riggs
21. The Iron King – Julie Kagawa
22. The Red Queen – Victoria Aveyard

**LGBTQ+**

23. Ask the Passengers – A.S. Kings
24. George – Alex Gino
25. Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe – Benjamin Alire Saenz
26. The Perks of Being a Wallflower- Stephen Chbosky
27. Will Grayson, Will Grayson – John Green and David Levithan

**Science Fiction**

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28. Unwind by Neal Schusterman
29. Feed – M.T. Anderson
30. Ready Player One – Ernest Cline
31. Legend – Marie Lu
32. Ender’s Game – Orson Scott Card
33. I am Number Four- Pittacus Lore
34. Across the Universe – Beth Reves
35. The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave - Rick Yancey
36. Maximum Ride – James Patterson

**Historical Fiction**

37. The Book Thief – Markus Zusak
38. We all Fall Down – Eric Walters
39. Safe House – James Heneghan

**Anything by John Green**

40. Paper Towns - John Green
41. The Fault in our Stars - John Green
42. Looking for Alaska - John Green

**Dystopian**

43. Delirium – Lauren Oliver
44. Matched – Ally Condle
45. Divergent – Veronica Roth