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Beyond The Literary Canon: Incorporating Young Adult Literature Into The Classroom



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Research Question: How does the incorporation of Young Adult Literature benefit students in the Secondary English classroom?

Definition

- **Literary Canon:** Classic books deemed worthy of inclusion in the curriculum by Harold Bloom in his book *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*.
- **Young Adult Literature:** Books written and marketed for teens.

Literature Review

- In a Google search, there are more than 2.5 million hits for summaries and survival guides for *To Kill A Mockingbird*, 2.5 million hits for *The Great Gatsby*, and more than 1.2 million hits for *The Scarlet Letter* (Broz, 2011).
- Adolescent students struggling with finding identity will take comfort in being able to relate to characters going through a similar situation (Dyer, 2014).
- In Canonical literature female characters are typically portrayed as weak, unintelligent, and in need of rescue. Because girls today are encouraged to stand against what was previously expected for their gender, Young Adult books with strong female protagonists will help girls find a role model in the curriculum (Coats, 2010).
- Currently the Common Core uses the Lexile scale to determine the difficulty and complexity of a book, and many Young Adult titles fall within the range for inclusion in the curriculum to achieve the standards (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012).

Methodology

- Self-study research on student perspectives of Canonical and Young Adult literature and the benefit the genre has for student engagement, identity formation, and standardized test success.
- Fifty junior English 3 students at a rural high school, a focus group of 8 juniors, and an anonymous pool of more than 100 high school graduates.
- Data sources included focus group surveys, full class questionnaires and practice ACT tests, and an anonymous online survey.

Results and Data Analysis

- Focus group students reported that they struggled with comprehending the classics and lost interest in reading because of the books included in the curriculum.
- Participants in the anonymous survey responded that they would have had a more engaging experience if they had been able to read relatable literature and have a choice in the books chosen for the curriculum.
- 72% of the anonymous participants responded that it would be beneficial for students to read more contemporary works and less Canonical works, while only 28% responded that the curriculum should still adhere to the Literary Canon.
- Students who responded that they read either every day or 4-6 days per week scored 25% better on practice ACT tests than those who responded that they only read 1-3 days per week or not at all.

Conclusion

- When there is more of a focus on Young Adult Literature and less on Canonical texts, students will be more engaged with the reading because they view the classics as outdated and boring.
- Using more relatable and recent books in the English classroom can make reading more interesting and will lead to the creation of lifelong readers.
- In order to successfully choose the right books, it is utterly important for teachers to learn about their students interests and backgrounds. Getting to know students individually and personally will not only help the teacher pick the best books for those students, but it will foster an atmosphere of mutual respect for literature discussions.
- A limitation to this study, was the student teacher's inability to create a Young Adult Literature centered class because of the curriculum already put in place for the school.
- Further study would require the teacher to have enough control over the curriculum to increase the amount of Young Adult Literature included in the classroom.