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Reacting to Self-Selected Young Adult (YA) Literature: An Exploration of Students' Reading Experiences in an Alternative High School

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Reacting to Self-Selected Young Adult (YA) Literature: An Exploration of Students' Reading
Experiences in an Alternative High School

Danielle M. King-Watkins, Ph.D.

University of Connecticut, 2019

This research was a 12-week-long study of six participants attending the same alternative high school in a suburban district in the northeast of the United States. Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory and interpretative qualitative methodology were used to examine participants' reactions to reading self-selected young adult (YA) literature during their Readers' Workshop time in their English class. Data were gathered in a naturalistic ways, and the data gathering methods were informed by the participants and circumstance. Data sources included: participant interviews; participant reading journals; other artifacts completed in response to participants' reading; and daily participant reading logs. The data sources were analyzed using inductive analysis, where categories and themes were derived specifically from the data, rather than from any pre-formed ideas, assumptions, or models (Thomas, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Data from this study suggest that students in an alternative school react to their reading with expressions of empathy for the characters; expressions of wonder and questioning; expressions of negative reactions; and reactions to the act of reading. The findings of this study have instructional implications for teachers in alternative school settings, as well as for future research design. These implications center on engaging with texts through personal connection; examining reading experiences in relation to adolescent identity development; exploring

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

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adolescents' feelings of empathy for characters; and developing positive reading identities in adolescents.

Reacting to Self-Selected Young Adult (YA) Literature: An Exploration of Students' Reading
Experiences in an Alternative High School

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B.A., University of Connecticut, 2006

M.A., University of Connecticut, 2007

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at the

University of Connecticut

2019

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Danielle Marie King-Watkins

2019

APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Reacting to Self-Selected Young Adult (YA) Literature: An Exploration of Students' Reading

Experiences in an Alternative High School

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2019

DEDICATION

For my mom:

You will always be *the wind beneath my wings*.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

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It truly takes a village to complete a doctoral dissertation, and my village is spectacular. I am deeply grateful to everyone who has supported me throughout this process.

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RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

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RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

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I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I. Introduction.....	1
Background and Context.....	1
Problem Statement.....	2
Research Question.....	4
Overview of the Dissertation.....	4
II. Theoretical Framework and Review of the Literature.....	5
Theoretical Framework.....	5
Reader Response Theory.....	5
Review of the Literature.....	11
Introduction.....	11
Process and Criteria for Selecting Publications for Inclusion in this Review.....	11
Students in Alternative Schools and their Struggles with Issues of Identity.....	13
Young Adult Literature: Helping Students Navigate the Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood and their Identity Development Processes.....	17
YA Literature and Alternative Schools.....	25
Summary.....	33
III. Methodology.....	35
Interpretive Qualitative Methodology.....	35
Issues of Reliability.....	36
Context of the Study.....	38
Description of the Classroom and Readers’ Workshop Time.....	40
Participants.....	49
Data Collection Methods.....	52
Timeline of Study.....	53
Data Sources.....	54
Data Analysis Techniques.....	56
Subjectivity and Credibility.....	59
IV. Findings.....	61
Research Question.....	61
Expressions of Empathy for Characters.....	61
Expressions of Wonder and Questioning.....	83
Expressions of Negative Reactions.....	95
Reactions Related to the Act of Reading.....	105

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

V. Conclusions and Recommendations.....112

 Introduction.....112

 Summary of Findings.....112

 Limitations of Study.....113

 Discussion and Conclusions.....114

 Engaging with Texts Through Personal Connection.....114

 Examining Reading Experiences in Relation to Adolescent Identity

 Development.....119

 Exploring Adolescents’ Feelings of Empathy for Characters.....125

 Developing Positive Adolescent Reading Identities.....127

 Implications for Instructional Practice in Alternative Schools.....133

 Implications for Further Research.....139

Appendices

 A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions.....141

 B. Code Mapping Tables.....143

 C. Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data Triangulation.....145

 D. Example Reading Assignment.....147

 E. Young Adult Literature Read by Participants.....149

References.....152

**REACTING TO SELF-SELECTED YOUNG ADULT (YA) LITERATURE: AN
EXPLORATION OF STUDENTS' READING EXPERIENCES IN AN ALTERNATIVE
HIGH SCHOOL**

Chapter One

Introduction

Background and Context

Alternative education has been a part of the American public school system for over 45 years (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009). Alternative schools are serving a significant number of students each year, with well over one million students in the United States involved in some type of alternative education program (Lehr et al., 2009). Since the 1990s, the number of alternative schools in the United States has risen significantly in order to keep up with the needs of at-risk students in an educational society that is increasingly standards- and accountability-based. In the United States, the number of alternative schools rose from 2,606 in 1993 to more than 10,900 in 2001 (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Typically, these alternative educational settings are reserved for students who have difficulty adjusting to regular school and classroom environments (Lehr & Lange, 2003). High school dropout has become a national problem, and the implementation of alternative educational settings for students who are at risk for dropping out has been a focal strategy to combat this growing issue (Smaller, 2012).

Adolescence is the time when a majority of individuals begin to fully develop their identities (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1987), but positive navigation of this process requires the space to explore and try various ways of thinking and acting. If adolescents do not have a safe, nurturing environment where they feel comfortable working toward developing their identities, then the identity development process can be difficult, and some young people disengage from taking steps toward acknowledging or developing parts of their identity. One tool with the

potential to support adolescents in thinking about and developing their own identities is young adult (YA) literature. YA books are written about a wide range of topics and issues that are relevant to adolescents' lives, and they provide space for adolescents to reflect on their own lives and choices as they consider the lives and choices of the protagonists about whom they read (Hamilton, 2002). Adolescents are more likely to connect to characters to whom they can relate, and these connections through reading can serve as an emotional outlet for adolescent readers (Rosenblatt, 1938), many of whom may not have other safe, constructive outlets for expression.

Problem Statement

Adolescents who attend alternative high schools are often there because they experience difficulties adjusting to traditional classroom environments, and/or they have disciplinary issues in their regular schools (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Attending high school in an alternative setting can be challenging, because these students are physically separated from their general education peers, which can make it difficult for adolescents in alternative school settings to navigate through their personal identity development processes (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999).

Studies have shown that reading YA literature can provide adolescents with a means through which to work on developing their own identities (Goth & Clark, 2013; Greinke, 2007; Moorman, 2007; Thomas, 2011). Through connecting with the characters and situations, adolescents are able to recognize that they are not alone in their challenges and struggles in their schools and families (Johnson, 2011; Wopperer, 2011). Although the positive impact of YA literature on adolescents has been studied, especially in more recent years, there is a gap in the research when it comes to the impact of YA texts on adolescents in alternative school settings. Additionally, the work that does exist is often anecdotal, and the existing empirical studies on related topics often do not include students' perspectives.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Educators, administration, and other staff members of alternative schools are oftentimes forced to structure their programs and curricula to fit the same existing district or state-wide standards that are present in other public schools. What many individuals outside of the alternative school setting neglect to recognize is that students attending alternative schools might require different approaches and programmatic design than the standards and programs to which the rest of the district adheres or follows. Teachers at alternative schools recognize this, and it has led to tensions between complying with top-down standards and initiatives and developing innovative programs that will ultimately be more effective for students (Hemmer, Madsen & Torres, 2013). This leads to inconsistencies and tensions within schools and districts (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009). I believe that these tensions, the pressure that alternative school educators feel by the mandates and standards that might not be fitting or effective for their students, and the lack of resources and funding (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999), are likely driving reasons why YA literature is not utilized more in the alternative school setting. If teachers are trying to meet program standards in the form of online, scripted curricula and other methods of proscribed instructional strategies and they also do not have the resources and funding they need to incorporate other materials and texts into their curricula, it is not surprising that YA literature has not made its way into alternative school settings in a significant way.

While alternative education programs are typically designed to serve students who are at risk for dropping out of school (Fleming, et al., 2012; Fleming & Merry, 2013; Johnson & Taliaferro, 2012), there is not empirical research to show that YA literature is being utilized to its full potential as a tool to support these students. There is a need for research that investigates how students in alternative school settings react to their transactional reading experiences with YA texts. Exploring student perspectives allows for the examination of the reactions students

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

have to the books they are reading. The nature of these reactions provides insight into why certain components of these texts might be of such importance to this population, as well as how adolescents in alternative school settings go about navigating the way they think about the books they are reading. This is important for teachers to understand as they think about *how* they might most effectively use these texts with their students in meaningful ways. The findings can potentially be used to support justification for including YA texts in students' alternative schooling experiences and also to suggest ways in which this might be possible, despite the challenges that alternative schools and their teachers face.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question:

How do students in an alternative high school react to self-selected YA texts they read independently in school?

Overview of the Dissertation

This research study contains five chapters. Chapter One includes the introduction and presents the background and context, statement of the problem, research question, and an overview of the study. Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework and a review of relevant literature. The methodology for the study is detailed in Chapter Three. The findings for the study are presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five summarizes the findings, discusses the study's limitations, and presents a discussion, conclusions, and implications for instructional practice in alternative schools, as well as implications for further research.

Chapter Two

Theoretical Framework and Review of the Literature

Theoretical Framework

Students in alternative school settings are likely to encounter challenges and setbacks. With the known potential for YA literature to connect with adolescents and to encourage their own critical thinking and self-reflection, there is the possibility that YA texts could help to facilitate the identity-development process for these individuals. The Reader Response framework grounded the research conducted in this study, which investigated the nature of the reactions students in an alternative school setting made to self-selected YA literature.

Reader Response Theory

Louise Rosenblatt first introduced the ideas behind Reader Response Theory in the 1930s, however it was not defined as a theory until the 1960s, when it became more widespread. The foundation of reader response is that the reader has an active role in creating meaning from a text. Rosenblatt articulated this theory in response to New Criticism, which did not recognize the reader as a creator of meaning, but rather, argued that the only meaning of a text was in the text itself.

Reader Response Theory stresses the relationship between the text and adolescents' psychological, social, and cultural worlds (Allen, 1988). While Rosenblatt introduced the idea of reader response in the 1930s, her work continues to influence more teachers in their ways of dealing with literature than any other critic (Roen & Karolides, 2005). Personal factors (both past and present) will also affect the outcome of what happens in that interaction between the person and the text. When an adolescent reads, his or her attention will naturally focus on those components that relate most closely with his or her life, and what he or she reads "must take its

place in the complex web of influences acting upon him [or her]" (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 92). For example, in her 2006 study that examined how a focus group of middle school students talked about connections between humor and characterization in response to YA literature, Onofrey found that readers' individual responses to what they were reading dictated whether or not they engaged in the humor presented in the text. The text was not, in and of itself, funny to each of the readers. It was the interaction between the reader and the text that produced the humor. The students "built on their existing schema to draw connections between the characterization and humor" (Onofrey, 2006, p. 215).

Carico (2001) found similar results in her study that investigated the possibilities a reader response approach would offer to a female reading group of adolescent students as they read two YA novels with strong female characters (*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Taylor, 1976, and *Lyddie*, Paterson, 1991). The findings indicated that how participants negotiated meaning of the text was influenced by their own experiences, reading habits, and lives outside of school. After facilitating this reader response literature study, Carico encouraged teachers to use Reader Response Theory in their classrooms and schools. "With its emphasis on expression, examination, and connection," it promotes an atmosphere where "talk is welcomed, encouraged, studied, and fostered" (Carico, 2001, p. 518). This can lead to a more positive and accepting environment among students, which has direct implications for alternative school settings, in particular, given that many of the students are already dealing with challenges and negative experiences outside of their school settings.

Rosenblatt's work has been widely adopted and praised, but it has also been a target for criticism. In the years following one of Rosenblatt's first publications, *Literature as Exploration* (1938), the New Criticism influence began to permeate the field. Since Rosenblatt claimed that

the text exists “only in interactions with specific minds” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 32), her theory was not popular with the new critics, because she was not giving enough credit to, or putting enough emphasis on, the texts themselves. This is one of the reasons Allen (1988) believes that Rosenblatt’s work has received so much criticism. Allen also attributed some scholars not taking Rosenblatt seriously to the simple fact that “she made a conscious decision to eschew jargon and use a straightforward style” (Allen, 1988, p. 19). Rosenblatt herself said that she rejected the new critics’ view of the poem (or text) as an object; she claimed that this view neglects both the author and the reader. Rather, she views the act of reading a text as a transaction, or an ongoing process, among the author, the text, and the reader, with influences from the outside environment, as well (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Reader Response Theory frames the experience of reading a book as a means of “explor[ing] [one’s] own nature, becom[ing] aware of potentialities for thought and feeling within [one’s]self, acquir[ing] clearer perspective, develop[ing] aims and a sense of direction” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. x). This has a direct connection to the adolescent’s identity development process; through reader response, young people are able to explore their own identities through the lives of the characters about which they read. I would argue, too, that YA literature provides a low-risk environment in which to explore various facets of one’s self. Whereas students that are in alternative schooling situations may not feel comfortable exploring these “potentialities for thought and feeling” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. x) in their own physical environments, they may feel more comfortable doing so through literature. Rosenblatt also pointed out that it is important to recognize that for adolescents, the experience of reading is “further specialized by the fact that [they have] probably not yet arrived at a consistent view of life or achieved a fully integrated personality” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p.31). Therefore, adolescents are more apt to explore various

possibilities for their own lives and selves through the texts they read. They can place themselves outside of their own bodies, metaphorically speaking, and view themselves with a certain detachment in order to understand their situations and motivations from a more objective standpoint (Rosenblatt, 1938).

Muhammad (2015) conducted a study that demonstrated this idea of adolescents exploring their own selves and senses of identities through connecting to the texts they read. The qualitative case study was grounded in Rosenblatt's Reader Response framework, and the eight participants were members of a writing space for African American teenaged girls that Muhammad created "during a summer institute for the purpose of using writing to openly express their voices, identities, and perspectives on critical issues affecting their world, as they are positioned within a larger societal space that often ignores and misrepresents who they are" (Muhammad, 2015, p. 5). Participants read "literary mentor texts" written by African American authors. Through participant interviews and writing artifacts, as well as the researcher's observational notes, memos, and analysis of the mentor texts, Muhammad explored how reading and connecting to these texts influenced participants' writings about themselves and their identities. She found that when participants read and responded to the texts, the experience helped them to develop or generate ideas for their own writing. They were able to observe multiple forms of Black girlhood and conceptualize their own identities and representations of self. Reading books to which they could connect allowed them to think about their own identities and self-representations (Muhammad, 2015). This illustrates the connection between reader response and identity formation and expression.

Literature can also offer an emotional outlet for adolescent readers. While some adolescents in alternative school settings may have difficulty expressing their emotions

outwardly (Self-Brown et al., 2012), books enable adolescent readers to experience emotions connected to their senses more than they may be able to otherwise (Rosenblatt, 1938). This can be an agent that promotes more productive development of identity for adolescents. What is unique about Reader Response Theory is that no one text will be the same experience for any two readers. Because each of us has a different history, environment, and circumstance, the reading experience of the same text will be different for each of us (Rosenblatt, 1978). Students in alternative school settings may not perform as well on standardized tests that are geared toward general education students in mainstream school settings, because students may not read the passages on the test in the same way that others do, based on their own environment and circumstances. In 2001, Rosenblatt was in frequent contact with her state representative to the House of Representatives, conferring with him in attempts to reorient George Bush's No Child Left Behind bill, specifically to lessen its focus on testing as a way to improve learning, because of her reader response philosophy of student learning (Roen & Karolides, 2005). An example of how this might play out in responding to literature is to consider how two different readers might react and respond to the same text, depending on the topic. For instance, reading a story about a cat will likely be a very different experience for a child who has a beloved pet cat than for a child who had a frightening asthmatic attack from being near a cat as a result of a severe allergy to cats. If a passage on a standardized exam required these two students to read a passage regarding cats, Rosenblatt would likely argue that assessing their responses with the assumption that the only "meaning" of the passage is in the text itself and not in their own meaning they create, based on their experiences, would be unfair.

In her theory, Rosenblatt is concerned with *why* we read and what we *do* when we read, which can be based on social context and/or personal choice. Some individuals in a particular

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

circumstance read for *aesthetic* reasons, or to absorb themselves in the experience of the text. Aesthetic readers are concerned with what is going on *during* the reading experience. On the other hand, *effereent* readers are more focused on reading for a particular purpose. Efferent readers are concerned with what will remain as the residue after the reading; they read to acquire information, to reach a logical solution to a problem, or for another specific purpose (Rosenblatt, 1978, pp. 23-24). Rosenblatt is not “caught up in the construction of characterized, ideal, informed, implied, or intended readers because her interest is in what happens when particular people read a particular text at a particular moment in time” (Allen, 1988, p. 20). While the purpose(s) behind why an individual reads is an important aspect of Rosenblatt’s theory, this aspect of the theory is beyond the scope of the present study, which focuses on what readers do when they read.

In Reader Response Theory, Rosenblatt is not as concerned with analyzing readers’ psyches; rather, she is much more interested in how readers become “self-aware, self-critical, and self-enhancing” (Allen, 1988, p. 20). This point is particularly important as we think about adolescents who are in alternative school settings. For these individuals, many of whom have accommodative challenges (Kroger, 2007) that are far too intense or traumatic to serve as mechanisms for progressing identity formation, the self-awareness, self-criticism, and self-enhancement they might experience from reading YA literature could provide that effective, progressive (rather than regressive) accommodative challenge to support the identity construction process in a positive way.

The Reader Response theoretical framework formed the conceptual basis for my study. My research purpose was to explore the reactions and the nature of those reactions that adolescents in an alternative school setting had to self-selected YA literature. Adolescents,

through reader response, can place themselves outside of their own bodies with a level of detachment. In doing so, they might be able to better reflect on and critically examine their own lives, though their perceived meaning of the text—reflection and critical thinking that might not have been possible otherwise.

Review of the Literature

Introduction

In this literature review, I describe what is known and not known about adolescents in alternative school settings in relation to their reading experiences and their reactions to reading YA literature. To that end, I present background information, including relevant studies, about adolescent students in alternative schools and the challenges they face. I then provide information about the value of YA literature and how it might have an impact on the identity development processes for students in alternative school settings, which is inherently connected to how they see connections to their own lives in the texts they read. Finally, I examine some reasons why YA literature may not be used in ways it could be in alternative school settings, which might lead to these adolescents not having the opportunities to read and interact with these potentially supportive texts. I explain how my study expands upon current knowledge by examining more closely the nature of the reactions that students in an alternative school have as they read self-selected YA texts.

Process and Criteria for Selecting Publications for Inclusion in this Review

To answer my research questions, I began by conducting extensive searches on the Academic Search Premiere, ERIC, and PsycINFO databases. I used the following search terms: *adolescent readers; adolescents, adolescence, alternative schools, alternative education, at-risk students, young adult literature, connecting to literature, connections to reading, identity, role of*

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

family, reader response, Reader Response Theory. I used varying combinations of the terms to retrieve different articles.

Initially, I reviewed the literature for this study with a focus on alternative schools and YA literature. The topic of identity also became a critical focus of the literature review when I discovered the connection between alternative schooling and the identity development of adolescents. The connection between YA literature and adolescent identity development also contributed to these search terms in the literature review process.

I was struck by how little research I was able to find that related directly to my research question. I found ample studies on the positive effects of reading young adult literature, and I also found a number of studies relating to identity development in adolescents. However, while I found some research on challenging issues in alternative education settings, I found no empirical studies that related directly to how students in alternative schools react to YA literature. As this was the case, I began to consider publications that were related to one aspect of my research, even if they did not encompass the entirety of my research question. As I found publications, I also checked their references for other publications that might be of relevance and retrieved those articles or books. My research included journal articles, full books, book chapters, and websites.

I found the following themes in the literature I reviewed:

- Students in alternative schools struggle with issues of identity, particularly the transition from adolescence to adulthood.
- YAL can help students navigate the transition from adolescence to adulthood and the identity development process.
- There is a lack of research on the effects of adolescents in alternative schools, specifically, reading YA literature. With the challenges that alternative schools face in staffing, meeting state

and district mandates, and implementing proscribed curricula, using YA texts in the classroom, and even exposing students to YA texts may not happen as much as it could, hence the lack of empirical research in the field.

These themes, supported by my review of literature, informed my purpose for my study and my research question.

Students in Alternative Schools and their Struggles with Issues of Identity

To begin, it is important to focus on the challenges that adolescents in alternative schools often face. Prior to examining how they react to reading self-selected YA literature, it is necessary first to understand *why* these adolescents may struggle in the first place, particularly because how they react to a text is inextricably linked to how they view themselves and their world.

In the following subsections, I first discuss the general period of adolescence and how identity development and transitioning into adulthood play an important role during this time in an individual's life. I then turn to the ways in which societal and individual perceptions about adolescence (as a phase of life) and adolescents (as the individuals that are in this phase of life) have an impact on how adolescents view themselves, which is closely tied to their self-identity. Finally, I discuss additional identity challenges that can be present for adolescents who are attending alternative schools.

Adolescence and identity. The transitional time between childhood and young adulthood is full of changes and identity development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1987). While experts disagree about the age range that adolescence encompasses, anywhere from 12-25, they agree that it is certainly a time defined not only by personal identity change and discovery, but also social identity formation and stability development, when adolescents begin questioning

who they are and how others view them (Tanti et al., 2011; Kilmstra, 2009; Carroll & Rosenblum, 2000). Adolescents go through many important psychological and psychosocial changes during this time period, including the emergence of abstract thinking; the growing ability of empathy, or taking on the perspectives or viewpoints of others; increased introspection; the development of personal and sexual identity; the establishment of a system of values; an increasing autonomy from family and more personal independence; a greater importance of peer relationships; and the emergence of skills and coping strategies to overcome problems and crises (Remschmidt, 1994, p. 19).

Through a variety of ways, adolescents, or teenagers, are often portrayed negatively, defined by raging hormones and patterns of delinquency and irresponsibility and given little reason to be taken seriously (Lesko, 2012). Lesko (2012) points out how these negative portrayals of adolescents in our society have led to socially-constructed, troubled depictions of teens as stock characters in books, television programs, as well as scientific discourses. She calls into question these commonly accepted representations of adolescents by challenging the widely accepted biological view of adolescence, which is that young people between the ages of 12 and 18 have “naturally occurring, largely biologically generated characteristics, behaviors, and needs” (Lesko, 2012, p. 7). In this view, the adolescent is outside of society and history.

Lesko’s work pertaining to the capabilities of adolescents demonstrates that adolescents are capable of deep and careful thinking about issues that matter; they care about the world in which they live, and their views should not be discounted. There is value in having them engage in tough conversations, because they have the capability to do so. I would add that this critical thinking ability extends to *all* adolescents, even though they may not fit the “general education” mold. The difficulty for adolescents in alternative school settings who are also dealing with

familial challenges or traumatic situations is that they likely face additional barriers in their thought and analytical processes. It may be difficult for them to critically analyze their larger world when so much of their attention has to be on day-to-day tasks associated with more basic survival needs. This does *not*, however, mean that these adolescents are incapable of this level of critical thinking; it means that it might be more difficult for them and that they might need extra support in facilitating this thinking process.

Transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. The transition into adulthood, *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000), is often an extended transition period that is “characterized by detachment from social institutions of childhood (e.g., school and family of origin) and tentative attachments to institutions of adulthood (e.g., work and family formation)” (Lee, 2014, p. 707). This is the time period during adolescence when young adults can experiment with different options in terms of their identities and future goals (e.g., schooling, career, social relationships) and generally occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 (Arnett, 2001). Because it is a transitional period, adolescents making the transition from childhood to adulthood have freedom from social norms and obligations, which grants them opportunities to explore life possibilities before making long-term commitments to adulthood (Berzin & Marco, 2010; Lee, 2014).

Some adolescents, like those in alternative schools, may be at a disadvantage because they are not able to experience this extended transition period of emerging adulthood. When these adolescents’ days are consumed with dealing with familial issues and the oftentimes-resulting adult responsibilities, they likely do not have the space and place to explore their own identities in a typical transitional phase. As a result, they can become marginalized as they take on their roles as adults. These adolescents experience *accelerated adulthood*, which forces them to enter quickly into adulthood, oftentimes without appropriate or necessary guidance and

resources. Familial challenges can be factors that force adolescents to experience accelerated adulthood, rather than emerging adulthood, which can put them at a disadvantage as they move into adulthood. This is a key point to consider as we think about identity formation in adolescents.

Impact of perceptions of adolescence/adolescents. Adolescence is often also viewed through a sociohistorical framework, which emphasizes that adolescent development follows a predictable pattern, regardless of context. Lesko (2012) argued that this view does not take into account that adolescents are fundamentally different and instead groups them together and assigns common characteristics to the entire group. Rather, a postmodern approach is best to effectively situate reasoning about adolescents within broader social and political contexts. She explained that we must recognize and break down our current assumptions about adolescents and begin anew to reimagine adolescence and what it means to be a member of that group. Having worked with adolescents for a number of years, I can attest to the fact that teenagers do recognize the way they are viewed by many members of society; the feeling of being stereotyped and discriminated against because of their age can be detrimental to their confidence and motivation to actively and enthusiastically participate in situations in which they feel they do not have a voice. These feelings of being stereotyped and discriminated against may be compounded in adolescents in alternative school settings. They often feel as if they are not a part of the mainstream school system that is comprised of their same-aged peers, which can lead to individuals internalizing the stigma of being in an alternative school setting (Swain & Noblit, 2011; Vanderhaar et al., 2014).

Additional identity challenges for adolescents in alternative schools. One of the problems mentioned most frequently in the literature about alternative schools is the physical

spaces in which they are located. Oftentimes they are located in basements, storage areas, or other outdated schools within the district. Many of these secondary alternative schools lack designated eating and recreation areas, science labs, and other amenities to which students in traditional schools have everyday access (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). Duke and Griesdorn mirror my own belief in saying that “the physical structures that house alternative programs should not reinforce in the minds of students the idea that they are ‘losers’” (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999, p. 91). If students feel undeserving of clean, up-to-date, safe learning spaces, how can they be expected to feel deserving of other advantages in life, such as success and happiness?

Often students *and* staff in alternative schools feel marginalized or isolated; it has become a part of the culture in the schools. The principal of SEI, the alternative school in Watson’s 2011 study, said that his alternative school “was like the ugly stepchild of the high school... the black sheep of the family” (Watson 2011, p. 1517). Though they may have different language to describe others’ opinions of them and their school, students in alternative schools are generally aware of the deficit perspective from which they are typically viewed by people on the outside (San Martin & Calabrese, 2011). This is something important to consider as we think about how students perceive themselves individually and in relation to others. If these adolescents recognize how others view them through a deficit lens, they might accept that perception about themselves, as well.

Young Adult Literature: Helping Students Navigate the Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood and their Identity Development Processes

I now shift the focus to young adult (YA) literature, which is critical to discuss because my study focused on the reactions adolescents in an alternative school setting had as they read these texts. First, I give a brief history of YA literature, including how the genre has changed

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

over the course of its existence, differing opinions about its quality, and the impact that these texts can have on young people. I then move to examining YA literature within the context of adolescents and issues of identity. Specifically, I discuss how research has demonstrated that adolescents are able to connect to characters, relationships, circumstances, and themes in YA literature, and, as a result, can better understand themselves. Reading YA literature allows for adolescents to explore their thoughts and feelings in a way that may feel safer and/or more comfortable than exploring them in their everyday lives.

YA literature: A history. During the 1960s, YA literature experienced a movement towards new realism, out of which emerged the classic, contemporary young adult novels still used in classrooms today, such as *The Pigman* (Zindel, 1968), *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), and *The Contender* (Lipsyte, 1967). YA literature also began to welcome authors such as Judy Blume, Paula Danziger, Robert Cormier, Chris Crutcher, Cynthia Voigt, Gary Paulsen, Sandy Asher, Walter Dean Meyers, and M. E. Kerr (Hamilton, 2002). Many of these authors, along with other authors that write for adolescents, are known for the issues and topics they cover, such as cultural diversity, historical fiction, child abuse, homosexuality, divorce, eating disorders, and teenage suicide, to name only a few (Hamilton, 2002). While there have been differing definitions of what constitutes YA literature, specifically, the definition I adopted and used for this research is Stephen's (2007) definition:

“Young Adult” refers to a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent's journey toward identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen voice that holds the same potential for literary value as its “Grownup” peers. (p. 41)

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Due to the broad range of quality and depth of literary value, there has been ongoing controversy about YA texts in the English language arts classroom. Among other critiques, YA literature has been accused of being simplistic, less than literary, not serious enough for classroom use, a marketing ploy, experimental, and not established enough to deserve spots in the canon (Stephens, 2007). Other critics have challenged and banned YA texts in classrooms, schools, and libraries for the books' subject matter and content, claiming that it is too mature for children and teens (Stephens, 2007). Hazlett, Johnson, and Hayn (2009) attributed the negative attitudes about YA literature to marketing techniques, lack of a consistent definition, and the standards currently in place in standardized testing, on which canonical classics, rather than YA texts, are heavily represented.

The reading of YA texts was an integral part of this study. Rosenblatt (1938) effectively articulated the importance of such reading when she explained that “[b]ooks may help the adolescent perceive the validity of his [or her] own temperamental bent, even when that may not be valued by his [or her] own environment. Thus, the young boy and girl may find encouragement to set up for themselves goals undreamed of in their own families” (p. 202). Through YA texts, young people in alternative school settings may find validation for their own feelings and emotions—validation that they may not be getting elsewhere in their lives. This feeling of being understood—and of understanding one’s self—is a critical step in the identity formation process.

Reading books to which they can relate can encourage adolescent engagement with and excitement for literature. Through reading, adolescents can begin to question and understand (or recognize their lack of understanding about) aspects of the world around them and better understand themselves through reading about characters to whom they can relate (Johnson, 2011;

Wopperer, 2011). Ultimately, teachers, especially English/Language Arts teachers, are in the unique and important position of having daily influence on their adolescent student readers. Secondary teachers can introduce their students to texts that allow them to explore their own lives, as well as the lives of others (Hayn & Kaplan, 2011).

In regards to the use of YA texts versus other canonical texts in this study, I also echo Rosenblatt's sentiments when she said, "The fact that the play is 'great literature' may have determined its selection in the first place, but that means nothing unless it has human significance today" (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 236). I believe that, especially for adolescents, individuals need to find connection in books in order to invest in reading them in the most meaningful ways—in ways that can have an impact on their lives. In thinking about adolescents constructing their identities, it is important that they are able to see themselves in the characters and stories they read, something less likely to result from reading books that feature adult characters and were never intended for an adolescent audience.

Issues of identity: Young adult literature and adolescents. Adolescence is a significant time for developing one's identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1987). Bell (2011) raised an important question in regards to this: "When students are trying to find and make a place for their own story, what ideas about identity development are they working with and coming up against?" (p. 23). Bell argued that many canonical texts that feature young characters that grow up in cohesive communities do not speak to adolescents in terms of the multiple spaces in their lives and their negotiation of varying, provisional communities. YA literature, on the other hand, addresses all aspects of adolescent identity and allows adolescents to make meaning of their worlds and themselves through the books they read (Dail & Leonard, 2011; Baldwin, 2012). When adolescent readers can see themselves represented in the stories they read, they realize that

they matter and that their experiences do, as well (Miller, 2014). As a society, we “need to acknowledge new affiliations made between different socially situated identities and appreciate the conception of identity as fragmentary, local, and contingent on a person’s involvement and interaction with his or her world” (Bell 2011, p. 26). Bell (2011) asserted that YA texts are less about finding a geographical *place of belonging*, and rather, focus more on finding *a way to belong* in diverse and fragmented societies (p. 30).

Smith (1999) examined three novels by Brock Cole: *The Goats* (1987); *Celine* (1989); and *The Facts Speak for Themselves* (1997). In his analysis of these three texts, Smith focused on the theme of teens being abandoned by their parents, therefore needing to find their inner voices and identities on their own. Smith argued that in his novels, Cole illustrates how abandonment affects his adolescent characters’ growth and influences their inner voices.

Smith (1999) analyzed the protagonists in Cole’s books in terms of the impact of familial issues and feelings of abandonment in the adolescent protagonists. He found patterns illustrating how these two situations could have a significant impact on the characters in various ways. One character was dealing with being raised by a single parent, causing her to become a much more independent person. Another character had to endure two divorces between his parents, which resulted in a fear of love. A third character experienced feelings of abandonment with the death of one parent, which had an effect on her psychosocial development, causing her great difficulty in forming healthy relationships with others. In his analysis, Smith argued that these familial challenges, which are all too familiar to so many adolescents in real life, carry real weight in how they impacted Cole’s adolescent characters. Adolescent readers who are experiencing familial challenges themselves are likely to relate to these characters that find themselves in similar circumstances and may be experiencing parallel emotions. Through these connections, it is

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

possible that these adolescent readers may feel validated in how they are feeling, which may lead to more feelings of confidence in their own personal identities.

In his 2007 article, Greinke detailed a study he conducted of a program called *Changing Lives through Literature* (CLTL), which was implemented in a Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) in a county located in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city. The program was designed to immerse adolescent defendants in an intensive reading program that centered on YA literature, specifically novels that deal with difficult and challenging topics that are relatable to situations and circumstances many of the adolescents faced. CLTL was grounded in Reader Response Theory, in which the reader takes an active role in the reading process that results in a transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1938). Greinke found that reading these texts and identifying with the characters acted as a springboard for the juveniles to discuss issues relevant to their own life and to critically examine the (oftentimes poor) choices made by both the characters in the books, as well as by themselves. He found that the program worked for some of the participants; the ones it seemed to affect the most were the ones who were “ready to make a change” (Greinke, 2007, p. 18). The quantitative evidence in a portion of the study found a 19% recidivism rate for CLTL graduates versus 45% for a group that did not engage in a comparable reading therapy program (Greinke, 2007). If adolescent participants possessed a desire to make positive changes in their lives, connecting to protagonists they could relate to in YA texts affected their own self-developed identities. This study illustrates the effectiveness of reading YA texts for the participants that wanted to make a change in their lives. My study builds upon this work to examining more closely the nature of the reactions that students in an alternative school setting, specifically, had to reading their YA texts. While Greinke (2007) found the positive impact of YA texts on adolescents that *wanted* to improve their lives, my study explored

the reactions participants had to the texts they were reading, regardless of their goals and desires in their current situations and in life.

Additionally, Moorman (2007) conducted a case study of a 9th grade student in her literacy class in the Upward Bound Program at Trinity University, which is a federally-funded program that provides academic support to low-income students who are aspiring to be the first in their families to graduate from college. The 9th grader, Aurora, did not identify as a reader at the onset of the course, claiming she “didn’t like to read” (p. 6). When asked what kind of book she would choose if she were going to read, she was unable to give an answer. However, after diligently working with Aurora on how to preview YA texts in order to select books that would be of interest, Aurora was able to find two texts by Sarah Dessen, which she quickly finished. This led to her reading other YA books over the course of the summer program. During the interview with Aurora at the conclusion of the program, she discussed why she was so drawn to the YA texts that she read, explaining the importance of feeling connections with and similarities to the characters. When asked about the texts she read being told in the voice of a teenager, she responded that she would feel “more comfortable, because we can say, ‘Yeah, okay. I know what you’re talking about. I went through that too. I’m in the same position, but what did you do?’ We want something realistic to the teen’s experience” (Moorman, 2007, p. 12). Being able to identify with the teenage protagonist was imperative for Aurora’s progression and identity shift, as she began to identify herself as a reader over the course of the program. Thomas (2009), in exploring adolescents’ place and identity in urban YA literature, added that, “these noticings and remembrances from life and literature contribute to the formation of readers’ identities, as well as their sense of being anchored in worlds both real and fictional” (Thomas, 2011, p. 13).

Building on the concept of YA literature as influential in adolescents' identity construction, Goth and Clark (2013) conducted a study in which 25 seventh grade students participated in a four-month reading program that featured "Text Talk Tuesdays," where different groups of students presented their explanations of why certain YA texts (of their choosing) should be incorporated into the curriculum. Goth and Clark wanted to explore how self-selection of text supports the construction of adolescent identities, with a specific focus on males. In their 2013 article that details the study, they focused on three students, Jamal, Charles, and Ethan, because they were representative of the class as a whole. Their findings demonstrated that by having an element of choice and control in their reading, as well as by having the opportunity to voice the value of both books and themselves, adolescents had the necessary space in which they could construct or alter their identities (Goth & Clark, 2013).

Specifically, the presentations that the students gave illustrated how connecting to YA texts caused them to think more about their own identities. Jamal, who read Anne Scraff's *Secrets in the Shadows* (2007), presented about the book in a way that illustrated how he questioned the rules of relationships, especially when it came to making choices dealing with potentially dangerous behaviors. Through critically reading *Secrets in the Shadows*, Jamal reflected on the way the protagonist behaved, and thus applied that to his own behavior. Through "imaginatively rehearsing" situations that the protagonist faced—like stealing a friend's wallet—Jamal was able to make the deliberate decision not to follow in his path. Charles, who read Anthony Horowitz's *Ark Angel* (2006), used the text to show his peers some of his goals. Through the way he discussed the issues pertaining to the environment, he (and his classmates, during his presentation) realized how passionate he was about these environmental issues. Lastly, Ethan, who read Alex Sanchez's *Bait* (2009), used the text to reveal certain aspects of

himself to his classmates, exposing issues that dealt with victimization. He advocated for those who had been victimized in the text and spoke with agency on behalf of the protagonist. The findings in this study suggested a potentially powerful connection between YA literature and adolescent identity (Goth & Clark, 2013).

The aforementioned studies support the assertion that YA literature provides the means by which to examine one's own identity, especially for adolescents, as they make connections during and after their reading processes. I argue that this is especially true for at-risk students in alternative schools, who may struggle with figuring out how they see themselves. Because these students feel like teachers, peers in mainstream schools, and society in general, attach negative, stereotypical assumptions and perceived identities to them, one could assume that working through all of those externally-ascribed stigmas might be difficult to sort through, let alone even beginning to think about conceptualizing one's self. YA literature could potentially function as a support system for adolescents in alternative school settings as they work toward forming their own, personal identities.

YA Literature and Alternative Schools

The specifics of my study focused on students in alternative schools and the reactions they had as they read self-selected YA texts. As such, it was important to investigate any research that has been done in this area in order to recognize how my work situates itself within the field and expands upon what has already been discovered. While there is research pertaining to the impact of reading YA literature on adolescents' identity development, there is a lack of research on the effects of reading these texts on adolescents in alternative schools, specifically.

With the challenges that alternative schools face in staffing, meeting state and district mandates, and implementing proscribed curricula, using YA texts in the classroom, and even

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

exposing students to YA texts, may not happen as much as it could, hence the lack of empirical research in the field. It is important to understand the history and current state of alternative schools to fully understand some of the reasoning behind why a lack of inclusion of YA literature might be the case. I begin by giving an overview of alternative schools and their history, as well as defining the term “alternative school” for the purpose of my study. I then transition to discussing some challenges, issues, and realities of alternative schools that may impede the inclusion of YA literature for students that attend them.

Alternative high schools. In the 1960s, alternative schools began gaining popularity, resulting from a drive to create more innovative and progressive schools (Lehr & Lange, 2003). In the 1980s and 1990s, alternative schools began serving more of the student population that was disruptive or failing in traditional schools. They are now most often described as places for students who experience difficulties adjusting to traditional classroom environments or who have disciplinary issues in their regular schools (Lehr & Lange, 2003). According to the report by the Children’s Defense Fund (2008), 18,493 high school students are suspended from public schools each day. Adolescents’ dropping out of high school has become a national epidemic, with 11 high school students dropping out every second (Smaller, 2012). Factors, such as negative childhood experiences and homelessness, place alternative high school students at a higher risk for school dropout than those in regular public high schools. These factors also increase students’ risk for negative mental health outcomes and participation in risky behaviors, such as substance use and high-risk sex (Johnson et al., 2016). The United States Department of Education defines an alternative school as:

a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

is not categorized solely as regular education, special education, vocational education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs. (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 55, as cited by Lehr et al., 2009)

Despite this definition however, there is still much confusion and ambiguity surrounding the term “alternative school” (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Many alternative schools are nontraditional settings, such as buildings located off of the regular public school grounds. The lack of consistency associated with alternative schools has been a concern to some because of the potentially differing experiences that students have in these schools (Lehr et al., 2009). Other critics have argued that alternative schools as permanent placements are not beneficial to students, because students need to be able to function adequately in settings like those in conventional schools. Similar to the points about the negative aspects of potentially differing experiences in alternative school settings, these critics caution that if students are in these “atypical” educational environments for their entire secondary schooling experience and do not get exposed to any general education environments with their mainstream peers, that this could be detrimental to their future abilities to work and thrive in a “typical” society (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999).

According to Johnson et al. (2016), there are four main types of alternative high schools (AHSs) in the United States:

- 1) schools of choice that serve high-achieving students (Lehr et al., 2009);
- 2) residential schools that serve students who want a different educational experience (Aarestrup et al., 2014; Bentzen et al., 2013);

- 3) schools that serve low-income students who lack access to traditional schools because of living in a rural area and/or not having the financial resources to attend a traditional school (Hoffman, 2014; Hoffman & Marsiglia, 2014); and
- 4) schools that serve students who are risk for dropping out of school (Fleming, et al., 2012; Fleming & Merry, 2013; Johnson & Taliaferro, 2012) (as cited by Johnson et al., 2016, p. 21).

For the purpose of this study, AHSs refer specifically to schools that serve students at risk for dropping out of school, because of the high percentage of students in this demographic who experience familial and identity development challenges. These students have needs that typically cannot be met in traditional schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Carver & Lewis, 2010). Alternative schools generally provide a placement for students where they receive services, such as specialized curricula, which are designed to meet individual students' social, emotional, or mental health needs, and students in alternative schools typically have greater access to counselors, psychologists, social workers, or other related professionals than do students attending traditional schools (Wilkerson, Afacan, Justin, Lequia, & Perzigian, 2016).

In some districts, students that are not finding success in traditional schools have the choice to enroll in one of these alternative schools in order to meet the requirements for their high school graduation. More often, however, students are mandatorily placed in AHSs due to issues such as disruptive behavior in the regular public school, social/emotional challenges, or suspension/expulsion (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; Lehr et al., 2009). Once students have been singled out and labeled as "troubled" and sent to AHSs, they often carry this stigma with them. This likely contributes to the difficulty they may have in developing their self-identities.

Certain scholars in the field have found that there is a connection between AHSs and the school-to-prison pipeline that impacts high school dropouts disproportionately. For example, Vanderhaar, Munoz, and Petrosko (2014) conducted a longitudinal investigation in a large school district of 100,000 students to examine how placement in alternative schools is systematically related to predictors and the risk of juvenile detention. They ran four separate models to first determine the predictors that resulted in students being placed in an alternative school setting. Next, they analyzed, using logistic regression, the subsequent juvenile detention that included students that were in alternative school placements. First, they found that race, school mobility, grade retention, special education status, attendance, and out of school suspension were all systematically related to placement in alternative school settings. Next, they found that there are strong relationships between out of school suspension, disciplinary alternative school placement, and resulting juvenile detention. As a result of their study, the researchers stressed a need for a shift in the focus of how school systems perceive children deemed “disruptive.” They argued that the deficit perspective from which students in alternative school settings are viewed contributes to the school to prison pipeline (Vanderhaar et al., 2014).

AHSs are generally characterized by smaller class sizes and more personalized programming, such as individually-paced courses on computers for recovery credit, and flexible scheduling. Some students stay in AHSs for short-term placements, but many stay for at least six months, with 10% staying until graduation (Johnson et al., 2016). AHSs are funded by a variety of sources that include local, state, and federal dollars, grant monies, and community-based organizations (Lehr et al., 2009). In their comprehensive study of U.S. legislation and policy concerning alternative schools, Lehr et al. (2009) found that a consistent mechanism for funding

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

alternative schools was not clearly specified by states, which suggests that AHSs may be subject to changing and unpredictable economic conditions.

Issues in alternative schools that may impede the inclusion of YA literature. While alternative schools are specially designed to meet the needs of at-risk students, there do exist issues in the ways the schools are designed, structured, maintained, and run, which can directly or indirectly impact the students that go there and their identity development. At school-wide, district-wide, and even nation-wide levels, issues of accountability policies and program design, funding and resources, and discipline are all topics of debate and, oftentimes, uncertainty. These are issues that could impact YA literature not being used to its full potential in alternative school settings.

Alternative schools are often encouraged by district leaders to construct a different educational program design that is geared toward at-risk students. As a result, the accountability rules that facilitate traditional schools may not be appropriate for alternative settings (Hemmer et al., 2013). However, when it comes to federal accountability, alternative schools are treated like all other schools, and held to the same standards. In her 2015 study examining the relationship between educators' beliefs and philosophies and daily school life in an alternative middle school, Kennedy-Lewis found that conflicting philosophies and goals of teachers and administrators negatively impacted the effectiveness of the alternative schooling process. Her findings reflected a lack of consistent academic standards and rigor and an inconsistent role of administration and lack of support for teachers' decisions regarding classroom management. The findings supported Lehr et al.'s (2009) claim that a lack of consistency has been a concern for many when it comes to alternative schooling.

While alternative schooling has aligned with a shift toward increased accountability for ensuring educational access and opportunity, as well as high academic standards and increased graduation rates, there has been little research conducted in how leaders of alternative schools interpret and implement accountability policies (Hemmer et al., 2013). In their 2013 study, Hemmer et al. used a theoretical frame of policy implementation, specifically the authoritative design of policy and social constructs of compliance, to examine how leaders of alternative schools implement accountability policies. They believed that if there are, in fact, discrepancies between meaningful learning experiences for at-risk students at alternative schools and performance-based standards outcomes, that there may be issues dealing with equity in alternative schools, which needs to be further evaluated. Hemmer et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative cross-case study to examine how seven school leaders at five alternative schools in Texas and California interpret and administer accountability policy. Their findings showed that there is a clear tension between compliance and innovation. In other words, school leaders did not have the autonomy to make all of their decisions based on what they believed to be in the best interests of their at-risk students, because of the increased, mandated accountability standards. All of the principals felt pressure from their districts to meet particular academic standards and to emphasize core academic subjects, rather than the fine arts or social needs programs. They also dealt with issues of over-enrollment in the alternative schools, making the individualized programming much more difficult. Principals in their study felt they had to make choices between innovative alternative school design and best practices, and accountability pressures such as increased enrollment, decreased academic achievement gaps, reduced dropout rates, and increased graduation rates (Hemmer et al., 2013).

Similarly, Watson (2011) conducted an ethnographic study of a successful alternative school, Sunnydale Enrichment Institute (SEI) in a metropolitan school district in a Midwestern city and found that the principal of the school said he “gets in deep trouble” for doing what he thinks is best for students when the school district authorities above him do not agree. He said he would regularly not attend district-wide administration meetings to avoid the conflict he knew would inevitably ensue at these meetings, as a result (Watson, 2011, p. 1516). Based on their 1999 study of 32 alternative schools in the state of Virginia, Duke and Griesdorn agreed that judging the effectiveness of all alternative schools using identical criteria is unjust. They also argued that it is unfair (and even counterproductive) to hold all alternative schools to the same standards that are used in the evaluation process for conventional schools. Duke and Griesdorn (1999) urged leaders and educational policy makers to seriously consider differentiating expectations of student outcomes based on student interest, ability, and motivation to learn.

Issues of accountability versus autonomy are important to my study, because alternative school educators may not feel comfortable integrating YA literature into their teaching because of these issues. If they feel pressured to use a specific, mandated curriculum that does not give them autonomy to be innovative with tools (e.g. YA texts) they know to be effective with students, then they might not take that risk of doing so. This results in the students not being exposed to this literature—books that may also help support them critically examining their own lives.

In addition, alternative schools often have limited visibility locally, which may, in some cases, enhance their level of autonomy in terms of how programs are run and discipline is handled. However, this lack of visibility may also hinder the receipt of services, such as technical assistance and staff development. It may also decrease the amount of funding, which

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

contributes to inadequate learning spaces and materials (Lehr & Lange, 2003). It could be more difficult for teachers to have the funds to provide YA texts for their students, as a result.

Summary

Based on the literature reviewed, the purpose of this dissertation was to closely examine the reactions that adolescents in alternative school settings have as they read self-selected YA texts in school. It is known that adolescence is a time when identity development/identity construction usually occurs, as adolescents transition into the beginning of adulthood. We also know that being in an alternative school setting can have an impact on adolescent identity development.

Young adult (YA) literature has been shown to help adolescents think about and conceptualize their own self-identities. When students can connect to characters, situations, relationships, and themes about which they are reading, they have opportunities to more effectively examine their own lives, relationships, choices, and identities. While this may be the case, there are many reasons, as detailed in this review of literature, as to why adolescents in alternative school settings might not have the access to YA texts in ways that could benefit them. There is a dearth in research conducted that has specifically examined the reactions that adolescents in an alternative school setting have as they read YA literature.

My work contributes to the related research by examining the reactions that adolescents in alternative school settings have as they read self-selected YA texts, specifically within the context of their own lives and circumstances. This study is important for students, because it spotlights student participants' voices as it expands upon current scholarship. If teachers, administrators, and program/curriculum developers (specifically for alternative schools) recognize the nature of these reactions, they might also realize the potential of including YA

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

texts in schools and in curricula. As a result, students would have the potential to benefit from its inclusion. This study also adds to the field of related research because currently there is a lack of research that has been done on the reactions by this specific population reading YA literature. It is my hope that this work will lead the way to further studies in this area, potentially investigating particular instructional and programmatic approaches for using these texts with students in alternative school settings.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Interpretive Qualitative Methodology

The overarching goal of this study was to explore the reactions that adolescents in an alternative school setting had to self-selected YA texts. To that end, I employed interpretive methodology, because my research question was exploratory. While there was a specific theory that framed my study, I did not enter into the data gathering process with specific findings in mind; rather, I wanted to allow my findings to be generated from the data organically. The codes themselves were generated from the data and were not pre-determined, regardless of the theory that formed the basis of the study.

Interpretive qualitative research seeks to understand how people interpret, construct, or make meaning from their world and their experiences (Merriam, 2002). Additionally, interpretive studies are based epistemologically in social constructivism, in which the focus is on “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). This approach is generally highly inductive, typically utilizing open codes, categories, and thematic analysis, which is the data analysis approach I implemented in this study (Lim, 2011). In this type of research, one integral characteristic is that individuals “construct reality in interaction with their social worlds” (Merriam, 2009, p. 22). The participants in this study were essentially constructing meaning of their experiences making connections as they read self-selected YA texts. Through the actual process of reading, the completion of journal entries and related assignments, and the participation in the interviews, participants made sense of their reading experiences, based on how they were thinking about the texts.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Interpretive studies are probably the most common form of qualitative research that is found in education (Merriam, 2009). Typically, to effectively observe and document this reality that participants are constructing during their experiences, interviews, observations, and document analysis are often used as data-gathering methods (Merriam, 2009). In this study, I employed all three of these methods, including interviews with participants, classroom observations during participants' Readers' Workshop time, and analysis of participants' reading journals, as well as other artifacts they created in response to or conjunction with their self-selected YA texts.

Issues of Reliability

While the flexibility within interpretive qualitative research can be seen as a positive attribute, some critics have also viewed it as negative because of perceived questionable reliability and validity, particularly because there is no one "right" way to conduct this type of research (Smith et al., 2009). While this criticism is controversial, I believe it is important to address it within the context of my study. I do so using Yardley's (2000) criteria, which consists of four principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research. The first principle is *sensitivity to context*, which, as the researcher, I ensured in my study. I recognized that my participants likely had various challenging circumstances in their. Knowing this, I made choices in my methods based on that knowledge (e.g., soliciting participants in person, rather than through an impersonal survey; constructing my questions in such a way that they are not overly intrusive if the participants chose not to disclose certain information). Through my methods and data analysis process, I was sensitive to the context of my study.

The second of Yardley's principles is *commitment and rigor*, which I also maintained throughout the study. My commitment was demonstrated through my level of attentiveness to

the participants and to the process. The study was rigorous in the completeness and complexity of the interview questions, the data collection methods, and the level of detail in the data analysis process (for more detail, please see the “Data Analysis” section). I maintained a high level of commitment to my participants, to the methodology, and to myself as a researcher throughout the process.

Yardley’s third principle is *transparency and coherence*, which is seen mostly in the level of clarity in the way the study was written up at its conclusion. Through my data gathering and analysis methods, I was explicit and transparent, providing specific examples from the data to illustrate my claims. In terms of coherence, I used an inductive data analysis method to ensure that the data produced a coherent argument, based on my findings.

The fourth principle in Yardley’s criteria for assessing qualitative research is *impact and importance*. It is my belief that my review of the literature, and particularly the current gaps in the literature, demonstrated a strong need for this work. The goal was to provide useful and important information to educators, teacher educators, administrators, and students about the nature of the reactions to YA literature adolescents in alternative school settings have, which can now be used to make curricular and instructional decisions.

Based on the nature of interpretive qualitative research, specifically in its focus on how people interpret, construct, or make meaning from their world and their experiences (Merriam, 2002), interpretive methodology was a logical methodology to employ for my study, given my purpose, research questions, and study design. In addition, I have thought about the ways my study addressed potential concerns with this methodology, through using Yardley’s (2000) criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research.

Context of the Study

The context for this study was a public alternative school that enrolled students in grades 9-12 and was located in a suburban town in the northeast United States. The school was situated in the center of town and was approximately two miles from the public high school in the district. It was housed in a historic building, built originally in 1802, and had since always been used as some type of educational facility. The building itself was a 70 x 34 feet, three-story building (noted on the district website). The first floor, where the alternative school was housed, consisted of two rooms off a central hall and stairway. According to informal conversations with the staff at the school, I knew that students and staff described the physical state of the building as less than desirable. The floors were uneven, the paint was rusting and chipping off the walls, there were mice feces that needed to be cleaned on a daily basis, and the windows were sealed shut. The tables, chairs, other pieces of furniture, and computers for students were ones that were unwanted and replaced at the regular high school. While staff members tried their best to make the school inviting, providing their own furniture, decorations, cleaning supplies, and food for the students, the physical state of the building was described as an eyesore and uncomfortable. Funding for the school came from the town's Board of Education, and the town's Board of Trustees oversaw the use of this facility.

The mission of the school was "to provide academic, social, and emotional supports for students at risk of dropping out of high school" (noted on the district website), and the staff members, comprised of two certified teachers (one white female in her 50s and one Black male in his 40s) and a certified social worker (a Columbian female in her 40s), described adherence to the following beliefs:

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

- Education is most effective when teachers, students and parents work collaboratively to address each student's individual needs, learning style, and environmental stressors.
- Education is most effective when teachers, students, and parents share a partnership where education is based upon interests and needs, discipline is derived from mutual respect and trust, and success is achieved through a shared commitment from students, parents, and teachers.
- Education is most effective in a caring learning-community where students feel safe, confident, and supported while transitioning to adulthood, setting appropriate short and long term goals, and becoming contributing members of society.
- Education is most effective when students are provided with a small teacher/student ratio, individualized instruction, flexible scheduling, and increased teacher-parent contact (noted on the district website).

During the time this study took place, there were 15 students enrolled in the school, all of whom lived in town. Four of the students identified as female, and 11 of the students identified as male. One of the males identified as transgender. The numerical breakdown of students in each grade, according to number of years in school, was as follows: ten seniors and five juniors. However, four of the seniors were not on course to graduate at the end of the school year. One of the females was suspended and did not frequently attend school. Two of the male students did not come to school, despite being enrolled, and one of the male students averaged one school day per week, due to frequent truancy. Fourteen of the students self-identified as white, and one self-identified as Latino. Nine of the students had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and one had a 504 plan. All students had individualized plans for their course work, depending on which courses and credits they needed in order to meet graduation requirements. Some of the courses

were run as independent studies, occurring simultaneously in the classroom, and some of the courses were completed online.

Description of the Classroom and Readers' Workshop Time

In this section, I describe the classroom setting and what occurred during the Readers' Workshop sessions in class. It is important to note that the term "Readers' Workshop" is widely used, and the definition of what this term means varies, depending on the context and the individual(s) defining it. I refer to this instructional reading approach as "Readers' Workshop" to remain faithful to the terminology used by the teachers and students in the context of my study, with the realization that a "Readers' Workshop" might look very different in another context. Based on classroom observations, it appeared that in this classroom, "Readers' Workshop" referred specifically to individualized reading and related assignments completed by students and facilitated by the teacher during instructional time. This approach differs from the more traditional, "whole-class" novels that are taught during English Language Arts.

It is also important to recognize the unique context of this study, particularly in terms of the role of the teacher and the relationship she had with participants. While some of the participants might not have had "average expectable environments" (Marcia, 1993) in their outside-of-school lives, it was clear that all of the participants had a close, positive relationship with the classroom teacher. Based on the data from classroom observations and interviews, it was evident that the teacher took on a parental role in her relationship with participants, a role that shaped the context of the study. In this way, the teacher had not only an academic role in the classroom, but a therapeutic one as well. This relationship provided feelings of acceptance and belonging for participants, which was evident in the ways they spoke about the teacher and the school as a whole. Because of this, participants did feel a level of support in their classroom,

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

regardless of the varying amounts of support they may have felt (or not felt) outside the classroom setting.

Participants in this study also took a “Teen Issues and Life Skills” class as part of their schedule in the alternative school. This class focused on, among other topics: effective communication skills; navigating roadblocks to effective communication; understanding and empathizing with others; practicing positive self-talk; setting personal goals; navigating the job application process; and building financial skills. The focus on these skills likely contributed to the culture of caring (Noddings, 2003) and resulting sense of belonging that participants felt in the classroom. This sense of belonging is important in the identity development process (Marcia, 1993) and also important to consider when thinking about the context of this study. Participants reacted to texts that they were reading during school, in that space where they felt that they belonged. While the reading was an assignment for their academic English class, there was also a therapeutic element to the reading, based on the journal prompts and artifacts the teacher assigned and provided for students to choose among. Many of the journal prompts and assignments dealt with empathy, lessons participants learned from reading their books, and connections to participants’ lives, which could be viewed as more therapeutic than academic in nature. However, the assignments were also asking students to support their claims or reactions with textual evidence (see Appendix D), so there were core academic skills connected to the reading, as well. All of the information presented in the following sections comes from the classroom observation data collected during classroom observations over the course of the semester and provides a detailed description of what the Readers’ Workshop encompassed within this particular context.

Physical Environment and Resources

The alternative school was in an old building with slanted floors and creaky floorboards. Upon entering the school, I saw a classroom on the left and a classroom on the right. Prior to reaching the classroom on the right, there was an office on the right, belonging to the social worker. Located in her office were her desk, a round table, and two couches. The classroom on the left belonged to the male teacher, Mr. Benson. The classroom on the right belonged to the female teacher, who taught English/Language Arts, where the Readers' Workshop took place.

This classroom was an L-shape and set up with three tables pushed together in the middle of the room around a pole. There was also a small, wooden table next to another pole in the middle of the room. There were tables pushed against the wall with computer stations and one table with two computers more toward the middle of the room. The teacher's desk was near the rear door. Upon entering the room, to the left, was a row of blue wooden cubbies that were functioning as bookshelves. Mostly YA titles and textbooks filled the cubbies. There was a SmartBoard on the wall above the cubbies, and a chalkboard on the adjacent wall. A bulletin board and a white board were on the opposite side. Motivational posters that expressed positivity and the importance of hard work were displayed around the classroom. There were five window seats set up in five of the eight windows in the classroom. They had cushions and plush pillows. There was a yellow labradoodle dog, Buddy, walking around. Upon entering the classroom, students paused to pet Buddy and talk softly to him. Above each of the window seats was an orange sign that read, "WORK ZONE."

The social worker and male teacher were frequently late to school, which resulted in a lack of organization of the students when they first entered the school. If a teacher or the social worker was absent, the district did not send a substitute to fill in for that person; the school day

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

carried on without him or her. The female teacher was concerned for her students' safety and wellbeing when her colleagues were late or absent, because she felt that all three of them needed to be there in order to provide adequate support for the students, their learning, and their safety.

During my observations, I saw evidence of the social worker coming into the classroom at various times to speak with students. Students also seemed to feel comfortable going into her office and hanging out on the couches, talking informally to her. The only other support staff that I observed in the school was a Speech and Language Pathologist from the regular high school. She came during one of my observations to observe what they were doing during their block of ELA time and to help support students in the development of their reading and speaking skills.

Buddy, a yellow labradoodle, was present in the classroom. I observed that Buddy's role seemed to be an important one. Students appeared to be very calm around him, and it was clear that they all viewed him as an important part of the classroom. The teacher told me that Buddy is her personal pet and came to school with her nearly every day. Several of the students had even gone with the teacher to "puppy school" with their teacher and Buddy. Students tended to greet Buddy upon entering the classroom, and they pet him and talked softly to him frequently as they did their work. They were affectionate with Buddy and treated him with gentleness and kindness.

In terms of the number of students present in class, it varied to a great degree each day. Some days, there were ten or more students present, and on other days, there were only six. I also observed a new student starting during one of my visits. Additionally, there were students who arrived late and students that left early. There did not appear to be a consistent number of

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

students in the classroom at any given time, as students entered and left the classroom on numerous occasions during any given time period.

Instruction and Assignments

To begin the Readers' Workshop time in the classroom, the classroom teacher reminded students about the workshop process, telling them that they would read independently and silently for 30 minutes and then they would have an assignment to complete in connection with their reading (either a journal entry or other assignment). An example of an assignment students completed in their journals was the "5-4-3-2-1" journal entry on September 27, 2017. In this entry, students were asked to identify five traits about the protagonist, four traits about the antagonist, three significant events that took place in their reading, two important conflicts in their book, and one prediction they had about what might happen next. An example of another assignment students completed was the "Take Away" assignment on December 13, 2017 (please see Appendix D). In this assignment, students were asked to analyze one of their main "take aways" or lessons they learned by reading their books. They were told that this assignment would also serve as the basis for the Readers' Workshop portion of their midterm, so it was an assignment that would be revised.

During class reading time, there was an element of student choice in the book format; they could read on a phone, classroom Kindle, or regular book. There were clipboards available for students to use to assist them in completing their assignments so that they did not necessarily have to sit at a table in order to write. Students logged the pages they read on their Readers' Workshop logs. While the teacher had to explain the journal entry or assignment at the beginning of each Readers' Workshop session, it seemed there was a general understanding

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

among students in terms of the process and expectations for Readers' Workshop time. At times, the teacher also read her own Readers' Workshop book along with students as they read theirs.

What Students do During Readers' Workshop Time

During Readers' Workshop time, students read in different areas of the room; some read on the couch, some in the window seats, and some at the tables. There were many instances where students, once Readers' Workshop time had begun, took out other work (aside from reading their book) to work on. Upon closer observation, I understood that this was generally work students did not finish or had missed because they were absent from or late to school. Therefore, oftentimes many students did not get to read for the full 30 minutes. During one of my observations, I saw one student sleeping during the allotted reading time. He left school soon after because he was sick. As they read, a few students had ear buds in their ears and appeared to be listening to music as they read. Cell phones were clearly important to the students and also served as a disruption to their reading processes. During my three observations, I noted 16 different instances of students using their cell phones for reasons other than reading.

While students were reading, a few talked to each other about their books periodically. Occasionally, one would read a section loudly to the class so that everyone heard. Usually, these were sections that would likely be deemed inappropriate for the classroom or that would have some type of shock value, especially when it came to sexual content.

Influences on the School Environment for Students

In addition to the cell phone distraction, there were numerous influences that impacted the school environment for students. The other classroom teacher, Mr. Benson, whose classroom was located across the hall, often showed up late. When arrived, he came in and greeted each student, giving each one "daps," which is a fist-bump with a high five. Typically, students

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

would stop reading and begin chatting with him when he came into their classroom. While this did interrupt their reading time, I could see the positive implication of the friendly relationship he had with students. I could tell students were genuinely happy to see him and wanted to greet him.

Tardiness and truancy were both significant issues at this alternative school and had an impact on instructional and learning time in the classroom, specifically on Readers' Workshop, in this case. There were anywhere between six and 12 students present in the classroom during the observations, so the number of students actually participating in Readers' Workshop fluctuated significantly. Also, there was a new student that was starting one of the days I was observing, which was a common occurrence. The teacher expressed to me during one observation that it was difficult to have a period of time during which everyone was focused on the same task, because students were so frequently absent or experiencing other challenges that had to take priority over the learning task at hand.

I saw first-hand the number of outside-of-school issues and challenges that students brought with them into the classroom. On several occasions, students came storming into the classroom, loudly expressing their anger about something going on outside of school. For example, one student exclaimed that "someone was 'bout to get dropped cuz he's messing with my girl." When this happened, other students came right over to him and got riled up along with him. There was frequent cussing among students in their conversations, particularly when they were angry or passionate about a topic or issue. During another observation, one student was sitting at the table, visibly upset, because her grandmother, who had raised her and with whom she had been living, had just passed away. Rather than reading her Readers' Workshop book during Readers' Workshop, she was creating a poster in memory of her grandmother. At another

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

point, students were loudly discussing their anger about Donald Trump and his refusal to provide immediate help to the people in Puerto Rico after the massive storm. While these examples all impacted the time students spent reading, they were also moments that provided opportunities for students to engage in deep understandings about relationships and politics. These types of interactions among students and between the students and the teacher are important for development of the whole child. As Noddings (2003) conveys, the school should be a place “in which values, beliefs, and opinions can be examined both critically and appreciatively. It is absurd to suppose that we are educating when we ignore those matters that lie at the very heart of human existence” (p. 184). Overall, there were many influences that impacted students during Readers’ Workshop time in the classroom, but opportunities for important, critical thinking and discussion often happened as a result.

Interaction between Teacher and Students

There was clearly a strong relationship between the classroom teacher and the students. Students frequently joked around with their teacher, and their demeanor and body language indicated that they felt comfortable around her and safe in their classroom. There were many instances when the teacher demonstrated how “in tune” she was with each student, knowing when to put more pressure on them to get their work done, and knowing when to give them space if they were agitated. Overall, the teacher had a positive rapport with students, complimenting them often with praise such as, “You guys did a really good job reading today!”

One thing that was clear from the first day was the fact that the teacher took on a parental role to the students. I observed her talking to one student about his personal finances, trying to help him figure out how he was going to pay his mother rent and afford all the other expenses he had to pay that month. It was evident that the teacher had previously discussed a budgeting plan

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

for this student, as she kept referencing it with him. During another instance, the teacher took care of a student who was sleeping in a window seat during Readers' Workshop. She felt his head to see if he had a fever and advised him to go home and rest. Another day, I observed the teacher sending text messages to the students who were not present at school, because she was worried about how they were going to get to school in the bad weather. The teacher obviously felt a level of parental responsibility for the students in her care. She also engaged in conversation about books with the students, often recommending particular books to individual students. I observed her recommending the book, *Tyrell*, by Coe Booth, to a new student who entered the class, telling him that many students read it last year and really liked it.

While a high percentage of the teacher and student interaction was positive, there were several instances where students were defiant toward the teacher. During one observation, the teacher asked a student multiple times to please stop using the computer when he was supposed to be reading. He said, "hang on," and then began ignoring her. She then leaned over and turned the computer off. He responded by saying, "Are you serious?" She replied, "I don't know how else to tell you you're not doing that during English class." The student then said, "Well you're going to have a really distracted day, cuz I'm not gonna stop trying to get in touch with this kid all day." Apparently, he was angry with someone (who did not attend the school) and was going to keep trying to get in touch with him, regardless of what the teacher said. After that interaction, the student got up and left the classroom. Overall, the teacher-student interactions were positive and indicative of strong relationships. However, it is important to note that there were occasional instances of defiance and anger by individual students in the classroom.

Participants

A smaller sample size allows a researcher to interact with and gather data on each participant in much greater depth than if the sample size were larger. This study included six participants, enough to reach saturation, but still few enough to be able to gather rich, thick data on each participant (see Table 1). The exact number of participants was dependent upon the number of students at the school who were willing to participate and who also met the participant criteria. The one criterion for participants was that each participant had to be a student at the alternative school. They also had to complete or decide to stop reading at least one independent reading book. Four of the participants identified as white, cis-gender males. One participant identified as a Latino cis-gender male. One participant identified as a white trans-gender male.

In order to solicit participants, I introduced myself and talked to the collective group of students about how I was interested in learning more about their reading experiences and reactions to what they read through observing their independent reading and talking with them about their books. I told them that we would not necessarily be talking about specific life events until (and, when/if) they were ready, but we would be talking about the books they chose to read and how they might see those texts connecting to their own lives. I chose to solicit participants in this way because the students did not know me and were not likely to feel comfortable honestly filling out a survey that contained personal questions.

I included the information about the study (purpose, what the study entailed, how long it would last) in a letter that I handed out to all students. The letter contained a permission form at the end, and interested participants filled out the permission form and handed it in to their

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

teacher or to me. That way, each student had control over what he or she shared, so confidentiality was maintained in terms of identifying students that fit my criteria.

Parental/guardian consent was secured for all participants under 18, and participant assent was secured for all participants. I explained to the students that, while I could not guarantee that their responses would remain *confidential*, as what they said may appear in my write up of the study, I could guarantee that their responses would remain *anonymous* (Smith et al., 2009). While this was the case, I also explained to students my obligation as a mandated reporter if they disclosed that they were being harmed, harming themselves, or harming someone else. After I compiled a list of potential participants who agreed to participate in the study, I then asked the teacher as the *key informant* (Janesick, 1994) if there was anything academic or behavior-related that I should know about any of the students that may have impacted how I collected data (e.g. emergent bilingual status, diagnosis of a learning disability, a need for audio books, diagnosis of emotional instability, etc.). I then began my study with that group of participants who would impact data collection. While nine students agreed and completed permission/consent forms to participate in the study, only six were present for enough time to finish or stop reading at least one book, which provided enough data to warrant use of it in my study.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Additional Information	Book(s) Read
Kyle	18	Cis-gender male	white	Lives with his mom and stepmom; has anger toward father, who left when Kyle was three and doesn't follow through with promises; father also has a new family; Kyle had only four high school credits at 18 years old	Stopped reading <i>These Shallow Graves</i> (Donnelly, 2015) Finished <i>Mr. 60%</i> (Smith, 2017) Finished <i>Prince of Pot</i> (Kyi, 2017)
Carlos	19	Cis-gender male	Latino	Thrown out of house at age 14; family members are very active in a gang; he served time in a juvenile detention center; he saw his brother get killed in front of him; he was shot himself (and then left that city); first person in his family on track to graduate high school; says he's been "bad" in school since he was little; lives with his girlfriend and her alcoholic grandfather; reads on 3 rd grade level	Finished <i>Tyrell</i> (Booth, 2006)
Dylan	18	Cis-gender male	white	Lives home with mother and father, who barely make ends meet; he has really struggled with mental health issues and was hospitalized for them; lies a lot; parents tend to be enabling of his negative behaviors	Finished <i>This is Not a Test</i> (Summers, 2012)
Logan	16	Trans-gender male	white	Going through hormone therapy during study; parents are divorced; had a step-dad who abused his mom, resulting in his mom leaving his stepdad; his dad is not involved in his life	Finished <i>Dime</i> (Frank, 2015) Finished <i>Some Assembly Required</i> (Andrews, 2014)
Jacob	17	Cis-gender male	white	Lives with both parents and two older sisters; very strict parents who believe in corporal punishment	Finished <i>Tyrell</i> (Booth, 2006)
Ryan	17	Cis-gender male	white	His mom is an alcoholic who goes to live at a nearby campground when it's warm enough—she leaves the family and leaves his father in charge until it's too cold to camp; Father is busy working all the time and is rarely around Ryan lives with his girlfriend and friend in low-income housing complex in town.	Finished <i>The Scar Boys</i> (Vlahos, 2014)

Data Collection Methods

Data collection took place over a 12-week period, from September-December 2017 (see Table 2). My methods were designed to explore the ways in which participants reacted to the YA texts they were reading. The aim in the research design was to make the participants' reactions transparent. Given that a researcher cannot see into the minds of participants, I used my data tools to better understand the reactions that students were having in their reading. Through these tools, my goal was to capture the nature of these reactions in students' reading response experiences.

This study was conducted during participants' regularly-scheduled Readers' Workshop time, where they self-selected YA books, presumably from their classroom library, to read independently during class, in which they participated three days per week in school. During their Readers' Workshop, they each had a journal in which they wrote (sometimes in response to prompts given by the teacher, and sometimes freely, based on what they wanted to write about in relation to their reading). They also completed assignments (called artifacts within the context of this study) associated with their reading, which ranged in type. Following each participant's completion or abandonment of a book, I conducted an interview with the participant, in which I discussed his reading (and reading-related) experiences during the course of the reading the book (see Appendix A). In order to facilitate this process, I asked the teacher each Wednesday if a student had stopped reading a book (whether they finished it or had decided not to continue reading it). Then, I reviewed the participant's artifacts and journal entries from that book (the journals remained in the classroom, so I reviewed those during after-school hours) and came prepared to interview participant(s) on the following Wednesday.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Table 2
Timeline of Study

Dates	Study Component
May-July	Completed and submitted IRB approval form
August 30th	Participants' first day of school
September 6th	My introduction; handed out consent forms to students
September 29th	Consent forms due
September 29th- December 8th	Once consent forms were obtained, participants participated in their ongoing Readers' Workshop time three days per week, including all normal journal writing and assignments, which were collected by the teacher and given to the researcher at the conclusion of each completed or abandoned book during 12-week period. The teacher also kept track of which book students were reading in the daily log, which was given to the researcher, as well.
September 27th	Classroom Observation
October 4th	Participant Interview (1)
October 25th	Participant Interview (1)
November 1st	Participant Interview (1)
November 8th	Classroom Observation
December 2nd	Participant Interview (1)
December 13th	Classroom Observation Participant Interviews (2)
December 16th	Participant Interview (1)
December 20th	Participant Interview (1)
September 2017-January 2018	Transcribed interview recordings
January 2018- May 2018	Coded data
May 2018-April 2019	Analyzed data and wrote up study

The 12-week period during which I gathered data spanned the first semester (two grading periods) until winter break. When students returned from break, their schedule would have been slightly different in preparation for midterms, so I concluded my data gathering process prior to the winter break.

Data Sources

Data were gathered in a naturalistic way, and the data gathering methods were shaped/informed by the participants and circumstance. The following were the data sources in this process:

Student interviews. I interviewed each participant when he finished a text. This meant that he finished reading the book in its entirety, or, it meant that he decided to stop reading a particular text. I conducted a total of nine interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 20-50 minutes and took place in a location within the school, based on space availability and student preference. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed within a week of the interview. The interviews were informal and semi-structured, which “allow[ed] the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions were modified in light of participants’ responses, and the investigator [was] able to probe interesting and important areas which [arose]” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, pp. 29-30). I had a set of questions for each interview, but the interviews were guided by these questions, rather than dictated by them (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This type of interviewing allowed me to individualize the interview for each participant and to gather thicker, richer data as a result. The interviews also included questions growing from researcher review of journal entries and student artifacts, which were available during the interview. Students were able to use the texts as evidence for their responses, but were not required to do so. The questions pertaining to their journals and their artifacts they created during the course of the

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

study served to have students think about and explain their thinking as they were completing the reflections/artifacts.

Reading journals. Each student had a reading journal for Readers' Workshop. Students were given the option to use a computer to type their journal in a Word document (computers were available in the classroom for student use), or they could use the notebook journal. The journal entries included teacher-provided prompts that dealt with text comprehension, text-to-life connections, family, and identity, as well as other topics the teacher deemed important in their reading experiences. These reading journals served as written accounts of students' transactions with the text (reader response theory) and also potential connections to their own lives and how the text might have caused them to consider elements of their own lives or selves. I reviewed participants' reading journals, with their permission, prior to our interviews so their writing could inform some of the interview questions. I also asked that participants brought their journals to our interviews, so there was the option of referring to them during the conversation. The number of journal entries varied, depending on the participant. Each participant had between one and six journal entries for the book he was discussing in the interview.

Daily student reading logs. Log sheet of students' daily reading, including which book they were reading and which page they were on, were filled out daily by the teacher. These log sheets allowed me, as the researcher, to see which books students were reading, if they began a new book, stopped reading a book, and why. A student's reading log might have also prompted an interview question about why a participant made a particular reading choice (e.g. Did something "hit too close to home"; Did the participant not feel enough of a connection to the characters or the situation?).

Data Analysis Techniques

The process of inductive analysis is unique in that the categories and themes developed are derived specifically from the data, not from any pre-formed ideas, assumptions, or models (Thomas, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). As aligned with the interpretive methodology in this study, the inductive data analysis method also served to explore the reactions that participants had to the self-selected YA texts they were reading throughout the course of the study.

Once the data were transcribed, I then read through the data several times in order to familiarize myself with it. Next, I conducted initial coding, which was “breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). Keeping in mind my research questions, I initially coded the data for each participant using the NVivo software program. I coded the data within each case, and then across cases, looking for similarities, differences, and patterns. During this process, I used various types of codes. I used structural codes, which are codes that apply a specific content-based or conceptual phrase representing an inquiry topic to a segment of data in a way that relates it to a specific research question (Saldaña, 2013). An example of structural coding is the code, “connection to family life” that I assigned to the piece of data below from an interview with Dylan when he was discussing the protagonist’s father:

I feel like he’s just, he asks a buncha questions all the time, he, uh, he demands answers and if he doesn’t get them, then you get consequences for it [...] cuz he’s the father, and he’s in charge. But I understand that, but that’s to an extent. Like, there’s arguments that I get in with my dad, like why, and he’d be like, ‘Cuz I’m your father, you’re gonna listen to me,’ and I guess, yea, that’s

reasonable. I don't really have an argument for that. (Interview transcript, 11/1/17, lines 485-502)

This code (and the data coded with this code) related specifically to my research question, which asked how students in an alternative school reacted to self-selected YA literature.

Additionally, process coding utilizes gerunds to connote action in the data. Process coding is particularly useful in studies that search for “ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations...often with the purpose of reaching a goal” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 96-97). Since this study was exploring the reactions participants have as they interacted with YA texts, I also used process coding. An example of process coding I used is in the following data excerpt from the same interview with Dylan. The process code I assigned to this piece of data was “Book causes participant to wonder about aspect of own life.”

Like, everything all on earth has ceased, and I see that when I watch stuff like *The Walking Dead* [a television show about a zombie apocalypse], like there's, it's kind of a weird thing to say, but I always thought how cool it was how time works, how when I'm sitting here at school, talking to you right now, my room is just sitting there, not doing anything [...] Like, I wonder what happens in my room when I'm not there. And, my cat's just sitting on my bed right now, but what is he doing? (Interview transcript, 11/1/17, lines 818-825)

Here, Dylan was wondering about what was going on in his room when he was not there, because of something he read in his book and connected to a television show he watched.

Finally, I used affective coding, which investigates “subjective qualities of human experience (e.g., emotions, values, conflicts, judgments) by directly acknowledging and naming those experiences” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 105). Emotion coding is a type of affective coding that

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

labels the emotions that participants either recall or experience, or that the researcher infers about the participant. Another type of affective coding is values coding, which codes data that “reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or world-view” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 110). Since participants in this study were connecting their own lives to the YA texts they were reading in various ways, some of the data indicated participants’ emotions and/or values, which made these types of affective coding appropriate. An example of an affective code I used was “Anger at injustice, cruelty, immorality of character’s actions.” Below is an example of a data segment, taken from a journal entry written by Logan, to which I assigned this code:

A lot of parts in this section that I read surprised me. Like when Arin and Katie broke up, Katie said, “But Todd makes me feel like a woman. I need a man with a real penis.” (223) I would never expect her to say something like that to him, since she is trans herself. Not only did she cheat on him, she also told him he wasn’t enough of a man for her to be with him. (Journal entry, 11/24/2017)

Based on Logan’s tone and facial expression, paired with what he said, I interpreted his anger about the way the character, Katie, treated her ex-boyfriend in the book.

After the initial coding process, I then examined the codes and began to form categories by grouping similar codes together, keeping in mind my research question. I used these categories in the axial coding process, during which I determined which of the codes were the dominant ones and which ones were less important or could be grouped under one of the dominant codes. The axial codes served as themes in my data, and if there were related sub-categories, they were organized underneath the respective theme. These themes were used to inform the write-up of my findings (see Code Mapping Tables in Appendix B).

As Saldaña (2013) conveys, the coding process is not linear, despite an initial plan that might seem to be such; rather, it is cyclical. While the description of my coding process may appear linear, this was an iterative process and required looping back in the process multiple times.

Subjectivity and Credibility

As the researcher, my observations and interpretation of the data were informed by my own background. Being a lifelong reader and lover of books, in addition to majoring in English Education and teaching high school English for seven years, I recognized that I have a deep, personal connection to literature and to YA texts, specifically. I have a strong belief that literature can impact individuals' lives in significant ways, simply by reading it. Over the course of my study, I maintained a focus on prompting my participants *to* think but not telling them *what* to think in order to address this aspect of subjectivity.

I also grew up in and live in the town where my study took place, and my mom was one of the teachers employed at the alternative school during the time of my study. Although I attended the public schools in this town, I did not attend or have any connection to the alternative high school, with the exception of having seen the inside of the building several times when visiting my mom, always when students were not present. I ensured that I did not have any contact with the students prior to the study, and I also ensured that I was facilitating the entirety of the study (with the exception of handing out materials on the days that I was not there and reminding students of the reading tasks) in order to address this aspect of subjectivity.

To ensure credibility, I employed triangulation among data sources (see Appendix C). Additionally, I utilized the members of my doctoral committee as peer debriefers (Merriam,

2009), during my research design, data analysis, and reporting of findings. These methods of ensuring credibility also served to strengthen transferability of my findings.

Chapter Four

Findings

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was: How do students in an alternative high school react to self-selected YA texts they read independently in school?

Following the process of inductive analysis, the following themes were derived specifically from the data, rather than any pre-formed ideas, assumptions, or models (Thomas, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In this chapter, I present the findings that I generated in each thematic category of data: Expressions of Empathy for Characters; Expressions of Wonder and Questioning; Expressions of Negative Reactions; and Reactions Relating to the Act of Reading. Thinking about these themes in relation to the research question allowed for a deep understanding of the types of reactions student participants had as they read self-selected YA texts.

Expressions of Empathy for Characters

Merriam-Webster defines “empathy” as “the feeling that you understand and share another person’s experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else’s feelings.” As participants wrote about and discussed their self-selected YA texts, it was evident that all of the participants appeared to empathize with at least one character in each book they read. Through these feelings of empathy, they were able to put themselves in a character’s shoes and think about their own life as a result of this empathy. Additionally, most of the participants expressed positive feelings associated with being able to empathize with a character from their books. This was true even if the feelings of empathy were grounded in characters’ negative or challenging experiences to which participants felt they could relate.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Participants were most likely to discuss and write about characters to whom they could relate. In some of these instances, participants put themselves in a character's shoes as they thought about what they might do in a similar situation, given their own life experiences. Many times, participants indicated that they were rooting for the protagonist to emerge from a difficult situation in a positive way. Through reading their self-selected YA books, participants also thought about their own lives as they reflected on their reading through their interviews, journal entries, and other assignments. As Rosenblatt (1938) asserts, this type of connecting can serve as an emotional outlet for adolescent readers. They can express hopes and desires for a character that they might not feel comfortable expressing out loud about themselves.

During his interview about *This is Not a Test* (Summers, 2012), Dylan put himself in the shoes of the protagonist, Sloane, as she dealt with the negative feelings toward her sister after her sister ran away, leaving her to fend for herself in her house with her abusive father:

I think I would feel really upset, to the point where I would almost feel the same hatred for her as I do for him [...] because she, we made these plans for weeks, months, years, about leaving together and getting away from all this bullshit, she just leaves me behind. And I'm stuck with this abusive piece of shit for the rest of my life. [...] And if I was put in that position, I'd have a hard time forgiving my sister. [...] my sister or my brother. I have a brother, too; he's 36 years old.

(Interview transcript, 11/1/17, lines 669-675)

Earlier in the interview, Dylan had talked about how he felt he related to Sloane because he found similarities between the relationship he has with his own father and the one Sloane has with her father. In this section of the interview, it is evident that Dylan was putting himself in her shoes, particularly in line 670, when he appeared to unintentionally shift his pronoun use

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

from third person “she” to first person “we” and “me;” it was as if he could possibly be aligning himself with her without fully realizing he was doing it through his discussion about the book. I could see Dylan working to try to figure out to what level he agreed with Sloane’s feelings about her sister, Lily, and her own abusive father. It was evident that Dylan understood parts of why Sloane felt the way she did, but he was still trying to grasp why she felt other ways (i.e. in relation to her sister). The immediate connection to his own difficult family situation after this contemplation demonstrated how, when trying to figure out a character’s actions or feelings, he connected them to his own experiences and feelings.

Jacob, though he did not offer much elaboration during our interview, also mentioned how he felt he could somewhat understand the protagonist’s thought process during a challenging time, similarly to how Dylan understood Sloane. When I asked Jacob how he felt about Tyrell, the protagonist in *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006), doing illegal things to get money, he responded:

I mean, he’s just tryin’ to make some money, man, and you just gotta do what you gotta do. (Interview transcript, 12/6/2017, lines 79-80)

He went on to talk about his own job working at a garage and how he knew the feeling of having to work in order to have money and how stressful that could be. When I asked if he had stresses like Tyrell when it came to work he said, “I mean, sometimes, but, like, just goes from day to day” (Interview transcript, line 105). He talked about the differences in their jobs, highlighting that Tyrell’s was illegal and his was not, but he could still identify with the stress of having to make money.

Jacob did not offer much information in response to my initial questions, but when asked follow-up questions, he did expand upon his answers, as illustrated in the following example:

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Researcher: Okay, what wasn't good about his family life?

Jacob: Uh, his dad is in jail.

Researcher: Ooo, that's not good.

Jacob: His mom didn't really take care of him.

Researcher: What about any siblings that he had?

Jacob: He was the oldest, uh, with a younger brother.

Researcher: And what was his relationship like with his younger brother?

Jacob: It was pretty good, I guess.

Researcher: [...] Does his younger brother look up to him a lot or do they not get along?

Jacob: Nah, I guess he looked up to him.

Researcher: How could you tell?

Jacob: I mean, he had nobody else to take care of him, so... (lines 40-51)

I got the sense that Jacob had opinions about what he was reading, but he needed prompting to expand upon his thoughts. In a journal entry, he was able to articulate some of Tyrell's goals and began to compare them to his own, but his response remained very general without a lot of detail:

Some of the main goals in life for the main character in the book Tyrell is to make as much money as possible while still being able to take care of his family. He also wants to not go to jail like his father and be able to take care of his family. I can't really tell if he is taking the right path because i [sic] don't know whats [sic] its [sic] like to live in the ghetto and have your father in jail all the time. Both

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

main characters and my goals are a little similar because we both like to make money and have fun and stuff. (Journal entry, not dated)

This journal entry was an example of a potential opportunity to get Jacob to expand more about his own goals and how they related to Tyrell's, and also served as an interesting counterpoint to other participants feeling that they could more easily put themselves in characters' shoes. In Jacob's case, that act of seeing things through a character's eyes did not come as easily, even though he did articulate some similarities between Tyrell and himself. When I asked him about some of the similarities between their goals, he opened up a bit about the importance of being able to spend time with his friends, just like Tyrell wanted to do.

Like Jacob, Ryan did not elaborate much on his answers during our interview, and it was even more difficult to get him to engage in conversation. However, Ryan did demonstrate that he could understand how the main character, Richie, in his book, *The Scar Boys* (Vlahos, 2014) felt toward his father. In a journal entry, Ryan wrote:

Richie and his dad have a special type of relationship. When they started to describe Richie and his father's relationship, I immediately started thinking of me and my fathers relationship He act's [sic] like my friend, because those father son chats don't work anymore. (Journal entry, 10/2/2017)

When I asked him about this journal entry during our interview, Ryan said:

Uhhh, I don't remember. Like, the father-son chats aren't really working cuz I'm only hanging out with my friends and they're the people I really listen to. So, it's the same thing. So, yea, I get it. (Interview transcript, 12/13/2017, lines 188-190)

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Ryan did not want to elaborate much more, but from this short comment, I could tell that he could identify with Richie's feelings of frustration because of his own feelings about the relationship Ryan had with his father, versus the one that he had with his friends.

Dylan could identify with some of Sloane's feelings, because, like Sloane, he also struggled with depression and anxiety. The journal entry that began this conversation was:

I see parts of myself in Sloane. I struggled with depression and suicidal tendencies as well so I can relate. I hated myself, hated other people, didn't think life had a purpose. I notice a lot of that in Sloane throughout the book. (Journal entry, 10/11/17)

When asked about his journal entry on this topic, Dylan said:

I struggled with depression and anxiety and all kinds of stuff for two years, uh, transferring from eighth grade to high school. I hated everyone, I didn't want to talk to anybody, and I had suicidal thoughts for a lot of that period, and I got counseling, and I got help, and I feel, almost, relatable to her, cuz, like, the impact that I would cause by killing myself on other people, or, like, my family—my family would be destroyed. (Interview transcript, 11/1/17, lines 193-197)

Reading and thinking about the character's contemplation of suicide made Dylan think about his reasons for not giving in to his own suicidal thoughts when he was experiencing similar challenging feelings.

It is important to recognize the multiple ways Dylan expressed the way this book made him think about his own life. He talked to me about it during our interview in many instances, but he also wrote about it in this excerpt from his journal. For Dylan and other participants, referring to their journal entries (because I had read them prior to our interviews) during our

discussions helped them to open up about these connections they felt to the characters. Often, when questioning participants about their books, they would begin to scratch the surface of their responses to the questions. However, when I referred specifically to a journal entry or artifact they wrote or created and asked them about it, they were able to talk about the connections they felt more deeply, as evidenced by the above journal entry Dylan wrote that led to the prior discussion.

Similarly to Dylan, Logan empathized with the protagonist in the book he read, *Some Assembly Required* (Andrews, 2014), a true story told from the perspective of Arin, who identifies as a transgender male. This connection grew from Logan also identifying as a transgender male. Throughout his interview, journal entries, and other artifacts, it was evident that Logan thought about his own life and experiences associated with being transgender in comparison with the experiences that Arin had throughout the course of the book. At one point in his interview, Logan recognized that he was lucky to have parents who were so accepting of him when he came out to them. This realization came as a result of reading about Arin's coming out experience with his parents, who were not initially as accepting as Logan's were. Logan connected to the feelings that can accompany coming out to one's parents—the nervousness, the fear, the excitement. Because he really understood these feelings, he could first empathize with Arin and then recognize that he was much more fortunate in his own coming out experience with his parents. The empathy he felt toward Arin helped lead him to this realization. Logan said, "Cuz, like, my family was accepting from the start, and, like, his wasn't" (Interview transcript, 12/2/17, line 59). When I asked how that has made his experience unique, he replied, "Cuz you, like, get, like things get done quicker" (line 62). Getting "things done quicker" was in reference

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

to his hormone therapy. He also wrote in his journal about gender dysphoria and the role it played in his life, as well as the role it had in Arin's life:

Gender dysphoria is the distress a person experiences as a result of the sex and gender they were assigned at birth. This connects to the book/character because it's about Arin's experience with gender dysphoria throughout this life. I already know a great deal about this topic because I was diagnosed with it before I read this book. Gender dysphoria is a recognized medical condition, not a mental illness. The best way to treat this condition is to transition to the desired gender.

(Journal entry, 11/15/2017)

Reading this book inspired Logan to do more research on gender dysphoria, because he knew from his own diagnosis that that was what he experienced, as well. He related to many of Arin's experiences and empathized with what Arin felt as he was going through them. Through writing and talking about Arin's experiences, Logan was able to reflect on how his experiences in similar situations were alike and different and what the implications were, as a result.

This was revealed to me in the conversation that was initiated by Logan talking about Arin's family's initial non-acceptance when he came out to them. Logan began talking about what can happen to a transgender person who feels that their personal identity is not accepted by those around them. He told me what he went through that caused him to be placed in the alternative school, explaining that he was so angry about hearing people refer to him by his birth name that he, "wasn't, like, going to school and shit because, like, I just hated hearing, like, my birth name" (Interview transcript, 12/2/2017, lines 67-68). This experience was obviously significant in Logan's identity development, because it dealt with his gender, as well as his

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

schooling experience, being moved from the regular high school to the alternative school as a result of his absenteeism.

Because he experienced gender dysphoria, Logan told me that he understood how Arin felt about being born as the wrong sex for his true gender when he said, “I think I knew most of the stuff they were talking about in [the book]” (Interview transcript, 12/2/17, line 160).

However, he did still want to explore other sources of information that dealt with the topic, which he discovered throughout the book. For example, he said:

But I did learn, like some resources, stuff like movies [...] and books. [...] *Boys Don't Cry*, it was made in, like 1999, so [being transgendered] was, like—[...] definitely not more accepted back then [...] So, there's a movie made off of it, which I wanna see. (lines 162-173)

Hearing Logan talk about other resources and sources that exist about a topic that was so close to his heart made me consider what implications this might have for alternative school teachers. Perhaps teachers could design mini text sets centered on a particular topic that includes YA texts in their classroom libraries. Additionally, students could have a hand in helping to design these text sets and include resources that are meaningful to them or that they found to be particularly relevant and accessible.

Logan read another book called *Dime* (Frank, 2015), in which the main character was involved in teen prostitution. He was genuinely disturbed by the subject matter but also felt deeply empathetic for the main character. This book was illustrative of how reading independently-selected YA texts spurred the desire in some participants to find out more about certain topics that were introduced in the texts they read. For example, in a journal entry about

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Dime, Logan talked about the issue of child prostitution and how he connected the story in the book to that issue in the real world:

This book made me feel that [child prostitution] is an issue that doesn't get a lot of light on it [...] Child prostitution is still a big problem in some countries, and probably still a problem in yours. [...] The people that make something like this so common are usually left free, and the victim is forced with them or jailed. The book made me wonder about what kind of mentality the people that run these circles have. What makes them think ruining kids lives as a way to get money.

(Journal entry, not dated)

These connections were evidence that he was thinking about what he was reading within the context of his community and world, making comparisons and connections to what he has seen or read about. When we were talking about this journal entry during the interview, he told me that as disturbing as it was, he wanted to learn more about child prostitution. I asked him why, and he explained:

I dunno. It was just, I thought about, like how the character, like, how she acted, and the environment she's in, and it just, like, the places she's at a lot, like [...] like sidewalks and motel rooms, she was at those places a lot [...] Obedience and discipline, if they wouldn't listen, they'd get, like, beat or something, like one time, I think he, like, punched one of them in the face and then knocked out their teeth. (Interview transcript, 10/25/17, lines 79-84)

Here, I saw that part of the reason why Logan wanted to learn more about child prostitution was because he felt empathetic toward the protagonist, *Dime*. He thought about the settings *Dime* was in and the treatment she would receive if she didn't listen to Daddy (her pimp). Thinking

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

about these components of the text was what drove Logan's desire to learn more about this topic. During the interview, Logan also expressed that he enjoys reading books told from a perspective that is unlike his own. He told me, "I don't think I like books more that I, like, relate to, because I like to see, like different point of views, not just my own" (lines 207-208). So, not only did he want to learn more about a topic with which he was mostly unfamiliar, but he also liked to put himself in the shoes of someone else who might not necessarily share his viewpoint. Several of the participants indicated that they liked to read books told from perspectives of characters who were different from them, which could be a way for educators to help support students in learning about people from cultures with which they might not be familiar.

Logan chose to express in a poem how the protagonist felt when it came to Dime's lack of family:

My body is not mine
Nothing is my own
My freedom has been taken
And so has my innocence.

These people I live with
I'd rather leave behind
Bruise me for not obeying
Tell me not to cry.

I wish I had a family
I wish I had someone who cared
Instead I have a man named Daddy
Who dismantled me and made me bare.

I have no family
I have no home
I'd rather be 6 feet under
My family is unknown.

Explanation:

Dime was full of light, color, and creativity. But the darkness of her surroundings hid her potential and made it so she can't be seen.
(Artifact, 10/25/2017, lines 246-270)

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

In his poem, Logan displayed empathy for Dime's feelings of despair. He recognized the "freedom" and "innocence" of which Dime had been stripped because of her situation. He described the pimp, "Daddy," as having a presence in Dime's life that made her "dismantled" and "bare," which showed that he comprehended how she was feeling, so much so that he was able to choose those words, "dismantled" and "bare" to describe just how negatively Daddy was impacting Dime. When he said that Dime would "rather be 6 feet under," he again demonstrated empathy in the way he truly recognized the depth of Dime's despair; she was feeling so defeated that she would rather be dead than experiencing what was currently happening in her life. As he was explaining his thinking that went into writing the poem, he said:

I don't think she would know what home was because she, I think at the start of her life, maybe, she was treated well, cuz she was a younger kid, but she's adopted, but then as she got older and her adoptive mother got more children, she kind of, like, didn't pay attention to Dime at all; she just paid attention to the little ones, and she started drinking and stuff. So, she had to take care of the kids and stuff. And then she got in this situation, and I don't think she thought that was home either, because (pauses) I don't see how that can be home. (Interview transcript, 10/25/17, lines 125-131)

Logan also told me there were points in the book where he almost had to stop reading it. For example:

Yea, it's when they bought an eleven-year-old and she did webcam videos and then eventually she got pregnant and she gave birth, and I was like, she's *eleven*. I was like [...] it was hard [to continue] after that. (Interview transcript, 10/25/2017, lines 178-182)

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

He went on to explain that he continued reading because he had to know what happened to Dime. Logan was clearly invested in this character and reported that he empathized with how she was feeling. It was evident in the poem he wrote that Logan understood the empty feeling that the character was experiencing, because of her lack of a true family and the reality of her struggles in her life of child prostitution with “Daddy.” The poetic format allowed for this creative expression of empathy for the character.

Dylan, like Logan, chose to write a poem about his protagonist’s view of “home.” While he was reading *This is Not a Test* (Summers, 2012), he wrote a poem from the point of view of Sloane, the protagonist:

Home

A home is a place where Lily suffers with me
But she left, and she’s gone what to do when dad hits me

A home is a place where you’re loved and appreciated
But where I am now, love is underrated

A home is a place where you relax, and feel safe
But every time I move, dad gets on my case

What are you doing, why is that, then slaps me in the face
Pushes me to the ground, then calls me a disgrace

(Artifact, 11/1/17, lines 1104-1123)

In this poem, Dylan first explored the relationship that Sloane had with her sister, Lily, and how Sloane felt once Lily ran away and she had to take the brunt of her father’s physical abuse by herself. According to what Dylan wrote in this poem, it seemed that he had a vision of what

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

home *should* be like, based on some of the lines he wrote, including: “A home is a place where you’re loved and appreciated” and “A home is a place where you relax, and feel safe.” However, the lines that came after those lines describing this idealistic home indicated that he understood that Sloane was not experiencing this positive image of “home.” When asked about how Sloane would define “home,” he said: “Sloane battles being depressed and suicidal while also trying to stay alive for the sake of her fellow survivors. If I was her, I would define her family and home as dysfunctional to say the least” (Interview, 11/1/17, lines 1062-1065). He used the word “dysfunctional,” which implied that the “home” she experienced went against the image of what “home” should have been in his mind. The juxtaposition of these two images of home seemed to inspire Dylan to explore it in poetic form. He also chose to write another “Where I’m From” poem from the point of view of Sloane:

“Where I’m From”

By “Sloane” and Dylan

I am from burnt toast and empty rooms, from silence and a ticking clock,

I am from constant envelopes and constant bruises,

I am from sore bodies and tense situations, or long nights and excuses I school [sic], I am from high school auditoriums, from locker rooms and barriers,

I am from cafeteria rations or the thudding on the walls,

Cold running water and powerless rooms!

I’m from flatbeds and locker filled hallways,

I’m from nausea and discomfort or the tension between us,

From empty gyms and emergency broadcast systems,

“This is not a test” and “Please wait for help to arrive” Or the end is nigh, please stay in sight,

But help isn’t coming...and I’m ready to die. (Artifact, 11/1/17, lines 1127-1151)

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

This poem was intriguing to me, because although Sloane had positive aspects of her life (as indicated by Dylan in his interview), such as her sister, Lily, and her friends, every single image he chose to portray in the poem was negative. Additionally, he concluded the poem with saying, “I’m ready to die.” The fact that there were positive aspects of Sloane’s life and yet he only wrote about the negative ones made me ponder the connection between challenging experiences or circumstances and the creative outlet or expression of poetry for adolescents in alternative schools. Logan also chose to focus on negative circumstances that his character was enduring, and when I looked across all of the poems that participants chose to write, every single one was predominantly focused on negative or challenging experiences that a character or characters endured. Other artifacts and journal entries included more of a balance of positive and negative topics related to characters, but poems were all focused on negative aspects of characters’ lives. This might be related to participants’ empathetic reactions they had to reading their books. Their poems were evidence that participants had deep, real feelings of empathy as they related to the characters, and poetry seemed to be a form of expression for some of these empathetic feelings as they related to characters’ challenging experiences. I would argue that participants’ poems would not have been as meaningful if they did not stem from these empathetic connections that participants felt with the characters.

Kyle connected to the main character in his book, *Mr. 60%* (Smith, 2017), just like Dylan and Logan connected to their respective protagonists. Kyle felt he could understand what the protagonist, Matt, was going through, particularly in connection to experiences Kyle had at the mainstream high school in the district, before being transferred to the alternative school. He explained:

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

I can understand what they're talking about somewhat, like I know what's going on, like in this (points to the book) Mr. 60 Percent, like this kid's almost failing, and like, he sells drugs or whatever and does all this bad stuff. He's a deadbeat, soon-to-be dropout, and like his vice principal is counting down the days till he gets underneath 60% in all of his classes and then he's gonna expel him.

(Interview transcript, 10/4/17, lines 77-81)

This connection was similar to the one Logan felt to Arin, in that Kyle could understand how the protagonist was feeling because his own experience was so similar, just like Logan felt a solidarity with Arin. It was clear to me, in how Kyle really took his time in answering the question about how Matt was feeling, that he was reflecting back on how he felt when he was experiencing a comparable circumstance, as he talked about Matt directly after expressing how he was feeling in a similar situation. When I asked what similarities Kyle saw between his experiences and Matt's, he replied:

A lot [...] He doesn't really know what to do. He's kinda, he doesn't really think about it. He's kinda (pauses) like self...self aware (pauses) of what he's doing, but also, like, like, can't really comprehend what's going on. (lines 100-107)

Throughout this section of the interview, Kyle went back and forth between talking about Matt's experiences and talking about his own experiences. With how easily he moved between the two, it appeared that he believed his own experiences at the "Big School" paralleled the experiences Matt was having in his mainstream high school. What was also interesting to me at this point was how Kyle would stop, pause, and think back to his experiences at the mainstream high school in the district, almost as if he were an entirely different person during that time in his life. He mentioned to me in another interview that he has changed a great deal since his time at the

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

“Big School,” which is what all of the students refer to the mainstream high school in the district as. Kyle said, “I know what it’s like to fail,” so he could empathize with how Matt was feeling in his book. The last comment he made about Matt being self-aware struck me as metacognitive in the way that he was thinking about how Matt was thinking. By watching him pause and then recall his own experiences as he talked about what Matt was experiencing, I could sense in how Kyle was reflecting back on his own experiences that he was also trying to articulate how when he was in that situation, he had a level of self-awareness but also “couldn’t really comprehend” what was going on, as well. Through reading about Matt’s experiences and experiencing related feelings of empathy himself, Kyle could think more about his own life and past challenges, which was a pattern across five of the participants when they felt they could relate to characters’ experiences.

Like Logan did in reading *Some Assembly Required*, Kyle likely had a reading experience that was unique to him because of his own connections to the protagonist’s challenges.

Similarly, Dylan talked about how his experience of reading *This is Not a Test* was unique to him *because* he was able to connect to the negative experiences that the character was going through:

I feel like if you take two people and put them in a room with the same book and somebody that hasn’t really expressed, or experienced, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts [...] it’s hard for them to relate, just because of the simple fact that they don’t understand [...] And it’s like I’ve been around some people that have just instantly shot people down, like if you’re depressed, you’re crazy [...] Or, if you have anxiety or you’re psychologically not able to talk to people because of some, whatever reason, then you’re a freak, and because of it, I feel like that’s why a lot of people just stay quiet, keep to themselves. And reading the

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

book, you understand suicide is a bad thing, and you feel bad for the person, but you can't really feel like the person cuz you haven't been in their shoes before.

I've been in those shoes before, and I've come out of it. (Interview transcript, 11/1/17, lines 266-283)

I found it intriguing that Dylan brought up how different people read books in different ways, depending on their own life experiences. In lines 266-270, Dylan made it clear that he thought it was easier for someone to relate to a book if they have had similar experiences as the character(s). In this case, because he experienced first-hand what Sloane was going through, he felt he could understand the text on a deeper level than someone who might not have gone through the same type of experience. By Dylan saying he had been "in her shoes," he was reflecting on how he handled the situation of having suicidal thoughts in relation to suicide within the context of the text. Dylan's connections he felt to Sloane and some of her challenges were illustrative of the pattern I found across the data from participants; they felt that they could relate more strongly to the book if they had experiences similar to those of the character(s).

Comparably to Dylan, Carlos also connected to his protagonist's challenging experiences in *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006). Carlos was a participant who, by his own definition, had a "challenging life" thus far. He had been kicked out of his home, homeless, arrested, and incarcerated. He also had recently (a year prior to this study) witnessed the shooting death of his brother, and he, himself, had been shot. During my interview with him, he showed me the scars on his legs where the bullets entered his body and explained that the doctors were unable to remove most of the bullets, so they were still in his leg and caused him pain when it rained outside. During the time of the study, he lived with his girlfriend (who also attended the same alternative school at the time of the study) and her grandfather, who was an alcoholic. Carlos had a third grade reading

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

level, as conveyed by his teacher, and he typically read along with a book as he listened to the audio version. He told me that, prior to reading *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006), he did not consider himself to be a reader and that he had never read an entire book in his life. During our interview and in his journal and artifacts, Carlos expressed frequent disbelief at the similarities between Tyrell, (the protagonist) and himself, particularly with their life circumstances. In a journal entry, he wrote:

Im Reading a Book called TyRell. This Book makes me feel good because I been threw wat TyRell going threw homeless having no money, no food to eat i was in how own shoes so I know how he feel and wat He going threw. I Realize that my Book I can Relate to it because i can say the same, living with His girlfriend then she kick's him out so he's homeless, he had to make money some how to feed his family. (Journal entry, not dated)

Carlos articulated in this journal entry that reading the book actually made him “feel good” because he connected to the challenging circumstances in which Tyrell found himself. In this journal entry, Carlos did not just say that he could relate to Tyrell in a general sense. Rather, he gave examples from the text to show the specific connections he was making (e.g. being homeless; having no money; having no food to eat). These examples were obviously experiences that no one would want to go through, but because Carlos could empathize with Tyrell, it led to positive feelings of solidarity; he realized that he was not alone in these negative experiences and feelings.

In addition to talking about how *Tyrell* made him “feel good,” as we conversed, Carlos also mentioned how “funny” he found the book during no fewer than six different instances in

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

the course of our interview, which are included in the following interview excerpts. When he was asked why he chose to read *Tyrell*, Carlos answered:

Cuz *it's funny*. It's like, about the hood? (laughs)...Cuz it's like, it's, it's like he's going through it—I know I've been through that situation. I've been through what he's gone through, so it's like (pauses) it's crazy. (Interview transcript, 12/13/2017, lines 41-44)

Shortly after, when I asked Carlos how he felt in comparison to Tyrell since he said he was in the same kind of situation, Carlos explained:

Cuz I was homeless before. I was homeless. My mom had kicked me out from her house. I was, like, 15 years old, so, it was, like, (pauses) I just had to do my own thing, you know [...] So, that's how I started, and I asked, when I read the book, *I was laughing, yo, because it's so funny, you know?* Me reading this book and I've been through it, you know? And I know what the little kid is going through, you know? (lines 54-60)

He continued on and talked about Tyrell's girlfriend:

Yea, and then his girlfriend, and then his girlfriend kicked him out, and all that crazy stuff. *It was funny*. (lines 64-65)

Later in the interview, Carlos talked about how much he liked the book and said:

Yea, so that book is good, I just, I dunno, *it's just funny cuz I've been through that situation, so I know, you know*. (lines 156-157)

Soon after, Carlos discussed the decisions that Tyrell made. Carlos explained his reactions:

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

[Tyrell] had to do what's good for his family, you know. But he was always on his own, and he was with his girlfriend. It was just, like, back and forth doon, doon, family, and then he would go over to his girlfriend's, and then his girlfriend would kick him out, and then he would be fucked, go back on the streets, and it's just, like, crazy. *That book is funny*. I like it. (lines 187-191)

Finally, Carlos compared the book to a movie and described:

Yea, the book, it's so funny [...] It's like, they tell you, like, the book, it's like, it's like, it's like a movie, but it's words; they tell you, straight-up, what they say, you know [...] I like how they be real, you know? (lines 429-434) (Italics added.)

Reflecting on my written afterthoughts about this interview, I was struck by how Carlos kept talking about how “funny” the ways in which he could relate to Tyrell and his circumstances were. In the interview excerpts in this data, most people who would hear or read Carlos’s words would not find humor in what he said at all. When he was saying how “funny” the book was, his face lit up and he smiled. This interview stuck with me for a long time after it concluded. I found it to be unsettling as I thought about how Carlos was outright laughing at the difficulties that both he and Tyrell had to face. However, I recognized that he did not actually find what happened to Tyrell (and to himself) to be humorous, but rather, he was in utter disbelief that he could really have so much in common with this other, fictional character. Carlos would shake his head and say over and over how “funny” the book was, but what he meant was that it was so mind-blowing to him that he did not even know how to articulate it—hence his labeling it as “funny.” This was evident in the examples above where he explicitly stated his disbelief about the similarity of his experiences and Tyrell’s with both his spoken words and his body language (eyes wide, shaking his head). As the interviewer, I knew about

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

some of Carlos's own challenging experiences that he disclosed to me, including: being homeless; having a difficult relationship with his mother; seeing his brother get killed; being shot himself; living with his girlfriend and her alcoholic grandfather; being arrested and spending time in jail; and adjusting to suburban living after being a self-proclaimed "city guy." Because I knew about these experiences Carlos had, I could understand that he really *could* understand and empathize with all of the challenges that Tyrell was facing.

His connection to Tyrell also translated into Carlos's confidence that Tyrell would pull through and rise above his challenging circumstances. When asked about whether he thought Tyrell had the strength to overcome his challenges and come out on the other side, Carlos responded:

Mmhmm [...] He got, he gotta get through it. It's more tougher for him. I dunno if he's gonna get to, like, any shootouts or, like, any gangs to get money, you know. It's tough in that situation. I know he got it in him, cuz he's younger and I put, goin' through it. (Interview transcript, 12/13/17, lines 551-558)

Carlos was rooting for Tyrell and believed he could make it through his difficult experiences because Carlos felt that *he*, himself, was able to do just that. It was evident to me that he had a certainty that Tyrell could do it, specifically because of the connections he made between Tyrell and himself, and Tyrell's challenging experiences and his own. Participants in this study rooted for characters to whom they could connect, particularly as these characters navigated (or attempted to navigate) through challenging circumstances, and they believed these characters would make it through and come out stronger or better in some way on the other side. As evidenced by the data in this section, Carlos cheered on Tyrell; Logan felt solidarity with Arin;

Dylan connected to Sloane; Kyle understood Matt—they all empathized with their respective protagonists because of their own life experiences and challenges.

While students in alternative schools have needs that typically cannot be met in traditional schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Carver & Lewis, 2010), it is important to note that participants showed that they each felt they understood a character's feelings as they were reading. Participants put themselves in characters' shoes and thought about their own lives because of the empathy they felt for characters. Some of the participants, like Carlos, expressed that they felt good when they could empathize with a character, and some participants expressed their empathetic feelings in the form of poetry, like the poems that Logan and Dylan wrote. These expressions of empathy suggest that participants, these adolescent readers at an alternative high school, *are* capable of this type of critical way of thinking and empathetic way of feeling, as Lesko (2012) claims. Thus, it is imperative that teachers recognize and believe in their ability to do so; assignments and conversations should be crafted with the assumption that these students are capable of these types of expressions, not that they are incapable of them and should therefore only be required to complete monotonous scripted curricula and assignments. Rather, these adolescents just might require space and support as they navigate the process of expressing the feelings they have.

Expressions of Wonder and Questioning

Participants exhibited their active engagement with the texts in their reactions when they questioned what they were reading. Sometimes this questioning took the form of asking about something (e.g. a situation, a character's decision) in the text itself. Other times, the questioning arose as inquiry about a participant's own life, based on what they were reading in their YA book. Along with this questioning, most of the participants also expressed wonder, mostly in

regards to wanting to learn more about a particular topic or type of character as a result of their reading.

Questioning Aspects of the Book

Most of the participants did not shy away from expressing confusion or a lack of understanding if they had questions about things that were occurring in their books. Dylan, for example, was discussing the zombie apocalypse in *This is Not a Test* (Summers, 2012). He said:

Especially if there is no cell reception, how does that work? [...] I told you that the, the zombie threw through the bay window, well when they get back to Sloane's house, the bay window's boarded up, the side windows are boarded up, all the windows are boarded up and all the doors are boarded up, so he clearly made an attempt and they survived together at some point, but that just makes me wonder how that worked out with Lily and her father being abusive and her running away—how did that—I, I dunno how that worked. (Interview transcript, 11/1/17, lines 166-174).

Dylan was asking logical questions as he reflected back on the beginning section of the book he read. These questions demonstrated that he was thinking critically about what he was reading, wondering about logistical aspects of the plot, like how characters were able to send text messages to each other when there was no cell reception due to the zombie apocalypse. He also questioned the logistics of Lily running away, despite what was going on around where she and her abusive father lived. These questions indicated that Dylan was actively thinking about the plausibility of what was taking place in his book and critically questioning how some of those events were able to happen.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

In this section, Dylan was also demonstrating his ability to make inferences as he read, even though the answers to his questions might not have been explicitly stated in the text. When he said the part about the windows and doors being boarded up and then stated, “so he clearly made an attempt and they survived together at some point” (lines 171-172), it showed that he was taking information that was explicitly stated in the text and applying it in order to make an inference about something that was not explicitly stated (the father making an attempt at keeping the zombies out of the house). In this case, Dylan’s questioning about what was happening in the book generated the inferences he made as he reacted to what he read.

Similarly, Logan also used the information that was provided in the text to draw conclusions about what he thought might have been happening, though it was not explicitly stated. During our conversation about *Dime* (Frank, 2015), Logan reacted to how the book ended with some confusion:

[Dime] obviously didn’t like what she was doing, so it’s not in, like, a happy tone at all. [...] And at the end of the book, I don’t really know if she did, but it said, like, she was gonna commit suicide and jump off a bridge and drown herself, so that’s what the “resting at the bottom of the sea” meant, like the bridge and stuff [...] It was kind of unclear, cuz it said she took off her coat and then she was going through the pockets when she was about to go off and she found this card or something and it just said what the card said—it was some business card I think, and that’s how it ended. (Interview transcript, 10/25/17, lines 90-100)

When Logan referred to “resting at the bottom of the sea,” he was referencing a line in the “Where I’m From “ poem that he wrote from Dime’s perspective:

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

I'm from thing I wish I'd never seen,
Pregnant children forced to tease.
From webcam videos I'm forbidden to see
The streets where I'm fercked for a fee
Doors where I wish I could leave.
Cities I want to see
Resting at the bottom of the sea,
Strangers I hope would save me
From this nightmarish reality.
I am from those moments—
That tore me apart—
Stomped me out before I could sprout.
(Artifact, not dated, lines 347-358).

His entire poem, as exemplified by this last stanza, revealed a deep understanding of how Dime felt in her situation: hopeless, abused, broken. Logan was certain of these feelings that had such a strong presence in the protagonist because of Dime's situation, as evidenced by his word choices, such as "nightmarish reality" and "stomped me out," in the narrative poem he wrote. However, he was uncertain about what happened at the end of the book, as evidenced in his comments above, in terms of whether or not Dime actually jumped from the bridge and committed suicide or not. Logan questioned the ending but used what he knew about Dime and the explicitly stated facts at the end to make a logical guess about what happened. Logan guessed that the business card might have been given to Dime by "someone who could help her" (line 107), so that might have been what saved her after all—a stranger she "hope[d] would save [her]." Logan used critical inferring skills when he took what he knew about the character from the rest of the book and applied it to a part he was not sure about to make a logical inference in the end. This pattern of participants' questioning of the text demonstrates how independently-selected YA texts can be used to develop and strengthen students' critical thinking skills when it comes to making inferences and trying to figure out sections that might be confusing for them.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Carlos felt such a connection to Tyrell's voice that he expressed confusion, along with disbelief, when I told him that the author of *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006), Coe Booth, was actually female. He discovered this after I asked him why he thought the author wrote the book. He first responded, "I dunno" (Interview, 12/13/17), and so I rephrased the question, asking him what he thought her point was in the way that she wrote the book. He responded:

She, it's a girl? I never seen who wrote it [...] I thought it was a guy [...] Why she wrote that book? She don't got nuttin' to relate to it, or she's read it, wrote it to wrote it [...] I don't know. It's crazy. If she has somethin' to relate to, you know [...] that's why I thought it was a guy, because I thought he had something to relate to his book. (Interview transcript, 12/13/17, lines 440-450)

When I responded and asked him if he thought she might have something to relate to the book, he responded,

Yea. Well I do...I know females that been shot [...] Been shot, shoot outs, are homeless. (lines 454-456)

This implications of Carlos's response are interesting, because he clearly thought that females could be involved in the challenging situations that took place in the book, based on his own experiences seeing females getting "shot," being involved in "shoot outs" and being "homeless." However, he was shocked when he found out that *Tyrell* was written by a female author, because "she don't got nuttin' to relate to it" (line 448). It seemed that he was contradicting what he said in his later statement about knowing females who *could* relate to these situations. Based on how Carlos related himself over and over again throughout the interview to Tyrell, I wondered, based on this contradictory response, if he had difficulty visualizing a woman writing from Tyrell's perspective because it felt like she would actually be writing from *his* (Carlos's) perspective,

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

which did not seem plausible to him. He also said that the book “sounded like a guy” (line 459). It was clear that Carlos has pre-conceived ideas about what a “male” and “female” author sound like in the voices they create for their characters. Part of the reason might be his self-explained lack of reading experiences in his life. His realization that Booth is actually female could open the door for important critical examination of authorial voice in texts for Carlos.

Kyle, in discussing *Prince of Pot* (Kyi, 2017), referenced how he actively questioned the parts of the book throughout the course of his reading experience. I noticed that at different points of the interview, he would tell me questions he formulated in his mind as he was reading when he didn’t understand something or when something surprised him. In the beginning, he talked about how he chose to read the book:

[I]t did look interesting. And I was like, pretty intrigued about the guy and the girl and their...so I was like I wonder what the story line could be, or, whatever.

(Interview transcript, 12/20/17, lines 14-15)

He mentioned things he “wondered about” or “didn’t get” as he was reading. The ending also had him surprised and left him wondering:

I was, I was like, I didn’t know how to take [the ending], like I was, like, I was not expecting all this, I was expecting more like a smoooooth ending—not a freakin’ earthquake [...] mind-blowing ending that’s cliffhanger central [...] I read it and I was like WHY?! Couldn’t you just leave [the animals] on the property and go and leave ‘em? (Interview transcript, 12/20/17, lines 117-127)

Here, he was questioning why the characters had to kill all of the animals before they left their property. Kyle talked several times during this interview about how he felt bad when animals got hurt or killed, and the ending left him wondering why the killing of the animals was

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

necessary for the characters' relocation. He also mentioned that the ending was a "freakin' earthquake" and "cliffhanger central," implying that the ending left him with unanswered questions. Based on my discussion with him, it was evident that Kyle asked questions when he read and could recall those questions after reading; this demonstrated active engagement with the text. However, Kyle only completed two very short journal entries and two equally short artifacts in the duration of time he read this book in class. Those journal entries were not indicative of his engagement with and questioning of the text. For example, Kyle wrote one journal entry that just briefly described what was going on in the plot, without expressing any type of his own reactions or thoughts:

Discovers this "hiker" Names Sam Ko that he goes to school with neer [sic] the southside of their grow-up. And Mistakingly [sic] takes her to the waterfall on the other side of the property. (Journal entry, not dated)

The other journal entry and artifacts were similar in their length and surface-level substance included in them. This contrast between what Kyle articulated about asking questions as he read versus what he wrote in his journal and assignments is important to note because it could mean that he needs more support when it comes to transferring his thinking into written form. It might also mean that his understanding of the text could not be measured by his written work alone, which would be imperative for his teacher to recognize in her analysis of his reading comprehension abilities. There were several participants where this was the case, while others expressed themselves more openly in the journal entries than in the interviews.

One participant, Jacob, questioned whether or not the protagonist, Tyrell, in *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006), was making the right life decisions, which was evident in his journal entry:

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

I can't really tell if he is taking the right path because i don't know whats its like to live in the ghetto and have your father in jail all the time. (Journal entry, not dated)

Though Jacob's journal entry was similar to Kyle's in its brevity and lack of detail, it was clear that Jacob was expressing his questioning of whether or not Tyrell was making decisions that were in his best interest. However, unlike Kyle, Jacob did not want to elaborate more on this journal entry during our discussion, responding with "I dunno" (Interview transcript, 12/6/2017, line 73) when I asked him to explain what he meant when he wrote this. These disparate patterns could indicate that participants had different preferences and comfort levels in the modes in which they questioned the texts and expressed themselves. They could also indicate that particular students need more focused instruction and support in a specific area.

Questioning Aspects of Their Own Lives

Not only did participants question parts of their books in various ways as evidenced in the previous section, but they also questioned aspects of their own lives as they read about the lives of the characters. Kyle was frustrated wondering why Isaac, the protagonist in his book, *Prince of Pot* (Kyi, 2017), was not focusing on himself when he should have been:

Because, like, [Isaac] does have secrets, he does have everything that he keeps from Sam [...] like, he has all of that, but, like, he's also, like, a nice, a good kid, and, like, he doesn't want any part of the grow-op at all, but his dad makes him. [...] He's trying to do the best that he can, and, and, like, give the best to, to Sam and his father, and his mom, and his sister, all at once, but he's not focusing on himself. (Interview transcript, 12/20/17, lines 151-160)

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Kyle felt that Issac was “trying to do the best that he can” and give as much as he could to his family, and he also felt that Issac was a “nice,” “good” kid. He expressed his frustration with wondering why Isaac was not focused enough on himself, which was evident in the way he slowed down, increased his volume, and hit the back of one of his hands against the palm of his other hand as he said each of the words: “he’s not focusing on himself.” At this point in the interview, Kyle talked about himself also trying to do the best he could and wondering why he always focused so much on others, particularly those in his family, when they were not as focused on him. This was evident when he discussed the upcoming holiday season and how he did not want anything for himself and just wanted to make sure everyone else was happy:

Cuz, like, I buy everyone else stuff, and they, like, couldn’t even give a crap.

Like, why do I even stress out over it? Should I just focus on me, too? For,

like, real. (Interview transcript, 12/20/2017, lines 169-170).

The way he questioned Issac’s lack of focus on himself made him think about this aspect of his own life, as well.

After reading *This is Not a Test* (Summers, 2012), Dylan articulated how reading about the zombie apocalypse caused him to wonder about his own life and larger, more abstract concepts about time and place:

Like, everything all on earth has ceased, and I see that when I watch stuff like *The*

Walking Dead [a television show about a zombie apocalypse], like there’s, it’s

kind of a weird thing to say, but I always thought how cool it was how time

works, how when I’m sitting here at school, talking to you right now, my room is

just sitting there, not doing anything. (Interview transcript, 11/1/2017, lines 818-822).

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

He continued on to talk about what he wondered about in his home when he was not there to see what was going on:

Like, I wonder what happens in my room when I'm not there. And, my cat's just sitting on my bed right now, but what is he doing? [...] And I feel like that sparks all sorts of movies, like *Toy Story*, and like cats talking, and I'll go for shit like that [...] Cuz people just sit there like, "huh, I wonder what's going on in that home." (lines 823-826)

After talking about his own home, he then expanded to talking about the world, humanity as a whole, and the concept of time on a broader scale:

But, I can't imagine the world just stopping. [...] And, people ceasing to exist, and no power, no communication, no nothing. I wonder how a disease like that would transmit throughout the whole world. (lines 827-829)

Dylan then brought his train of thought back to an idea that was presented in the book: a phenomenon that could impact (and potentially destroy) all of humanity. He connected this to video games and a television show he was familiar with as he considered the implications of such a phenomenon:

I mean, I play games like *Play Yank* [?] and *Infection* and all that stuff, where you start a disease and evolve and spread it to the whole world, but what I cannot physically imagine is touching six billion people in the whole entire world. [...] Like, when you're watching *The Walking Dead*, you gotta think about, okay, that's in America what's happening, but what's happening in Africa [...] Like, Europe, Asia, or that's, that all really interests me, I think that's really cool. (Interview transcript, 11/1/17, lines 837-844)

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

These excerpts from the interview certainly included tangential, meandering trains of thought from Dylan, but I think it was important to see the type of thinking and questioning that reading this text set into motion for him. The circumstance of this YA text prompted him to wonder about the concept of time and how it keeps moving forward in different ways, depending on who is occupying a particular space (i.e. when Dylan was thinking about time moving forward in his room with only his cat when Dylan was not present). Then, he made connections to a movie (*Toy Story*), a television show (*The Walking Dead*) and video games he played (*Play Yank* and *Infection*). Finally, he transitioned into thinking about time and space in other countries moving forward as events are unfolding in America. It was evident to me that Dylan had been pondering these concepts and connections prior to the interview, because he was able to talk about them so easily and quickly. These ponderings could effectively open doors for other interdisciplinary inquiry and investigation. They could also allow for further unpacking of each layer of his connections and ponderings as he critically analyzed his own thinking in relation to reading the text itself.

During our interview, Carlos talked about the importance of the setting in *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006). When I asked him how he thought Tyrell would like living in Carlos's town of Colertown, he replied:

He would hate it. He's from New York City. In New York City, you could walk up to anything you wanna do. You could walk, you can drive, you can drive a bi—well you can drive (pauses) if you drive, you're bump to bump, cuz New York City is so packed. [...] So [Tyrell] proolly would lose it. He would proolly be, like, "Woah, I gotta go back to New York City."
He would proolly lose it. (Interview transcript, 12/13/2017, lines 345-351)

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

He then continued on to talk about his own town and how he felt about living in it in comparison to living in the city, where he had lived before:

You don't see one streetlight. I be like, "Damn, why don't I just put a street light on my leg" to make sure that I can see stuff. Cuz I go outside, like, two days ago I went outside, and it was a opossum like this big (indicates large size with hands)—[...] on my porch. I be like, "I'm not goin' out there, you crazy?!" Man, Tyrell made me think about how I even do it, yo. Like how am I even bein' here with that kinda shit? (Interview transcript, 12/13/17, lines 352-359)

Carlos could connect to the fact that Tyrell was comfortable in an urban setting, because Carlos was also more comfortable in that type of setting. He was able to easily put himself in Tyrell's shoes and assume (with certainty) that Tyrell would not like living in the suburban town of Colertown. He highlighted the fact that a person really cannot walk anywhere in Colertown like one can in New York City, and then he talked about the lack of street lights in Colertown and the presence of wildlife that seemed to freak him out a bit. Because of the connection Carlos felt to Tyrell's character, he could hypothetically make statements about how Tyrell would feel in certain situations (a new setting, in this case) because of how he himself felt. It was here where he thought about his own life and how he, a self-proclaimed "city" boy, felt living in a suburban town. Reading about Tyrell made him question, "How I even do it, yo" (line 359). The connection he made with Tyrell led to him question his own ability to adapt from the city to a suburban town and might allow for a critical analysis of the importance of setting, both in texts and in one's own life.

Critical thinking and questioning what one reads go hand-in-hand. It was evident from the data that independently reading self-selected YA texts provided student participants with opportunities to question aspects of the book, as well as aspects of their own lives and world. These findings can help to guide alternative school teachers in aligning independent reading programs with the inquiry skills that go along with asking questions and navigating the processes by which to explore the answers.

Expressions of Negative Reactions

Over the course of the study, participants indicated that they had various negative feelings in response to what they were reading. Some of these feelings were comprised of anger or disapproval in relation to something a character or characters said or did. Others were feelings of frustration because of particular circumstances that a character was encountering in the text, and in some cases, how that frustration was compounded because a character's circumstance mirrored a participant's own life. These negative emotions are important to consider in the context of students' reactions to their reading, because they can provide educators in alternative schools insight into areas for which to be prepared as they incorporate independently-selected YA texts into their classrooms.

All participants were quick to express their feelings of anger about a character's actions if they did not agree with them. As he was reading *Some Assembly Required* (Andrews, 2014), Logan wrote in his journal about when Arin and Katie broke up. Arin and Katie both identified as transgender, and Logan reflected on their breakup, writing:

A lot of parts in this section that I read surprised me. Like when Arin and Katie broke up, Katie said, "But Todd [her new boyfriend] makes me feel like a woman. I need a man with a real penis." (223) I would never expect her to say something

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

like that to him, since she is trans herself. Not only did she cheat on him, she also told him he wasn't enough of a man for her to be with him. (Journal entry, 11/24/2017).

Logan, who identified as transgender himself and was, at the time of this study, going through hormone therapy, wrote that he was "surprised" that Katie would say something like "he makes me feel like a woman" and "I need a man with a penis," because Arin had the same insecurities about his genitalia as Katie did. When I asked Logan about this journal entry during our interview, it was evident that when he said he was "surprised," he also meant that he was angry that Katie would have the audacity to say something like that to Arin. Logan said it was "so messed up" (Interview, 12/2/2017, line 98). During this part of the interview, Logan looked visibly angry and kept shaking his head when he talked about how Katie said those insensitive things to Arin, indicating his disapproval. During an earlier interview, Logan had opened up about his own hormone therapy treatment he was undergoing, and I could tell from the way he shook his head and got angry about how "messed up" Katie acted toward Arin in their breakup that he felt an alliance with Arin. They both identified as transgender males, currently without male genitalia, and Katie's treatment of Arin struck a chord with Logan, causing him to respond with angry feelings.

Dylan expressed feelings of disapproval toward a character in his book, *This is Not a Test* (Summers, 2012), as well. In his case, it was toward the protagonist, Sloane's, father. As we discussed during our interview the poem Dylan wrote about Sloane's home life, Dylan reacted to Sloane's father hitting her:

I think it's not so much that he [Sloane's father] doesn't love her, but it's, like, when he wants something done, he wants it done, and he doesn't know how to do

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

it other than hitting her and taking his anger out on her [...] Now, I can't say that he didn't enjoy it, or he thought it was wrong, but she, I feel like after a couple times of hitting your daughter, you gotta realize that something's wrong. I don't think I could physically bring myself to just backhand my daughter, I can't do that to a normal person, like [...] that's just horrible. Especially something you made.

(Interview transcript, 11/1/2017, lines 471-481)

Dylan was referring to Sloane as the “something” that her father had “made,” and did not like that a father could harm his daughter the way he did, when he was actually part of “making” her. At this point in the interview, Dylan shook his head and expressed disapproval about the way Sloane's father treated her, and it was clear to me that he was trying to make sense of something that was not sensible (“you gotta realize something's wrong”). He continued on about her father:

[C]uz he's the father, and he's in charge. But I understand that, but that's to an extent. Like, there's arguments that I get in with my dad, like why, and he'd be like, 'Cuz I'm your father, you're gonna listen to me,' and I guess, yea, that's reasonable. I don't really have an argument for that [...] But now I'm 18, like I said, it's to an extent [...] But being trapped in a place like that, that's just fucked up [...] And, I, like I said, I can't imagine just hitting my daughter like that, it's horrible. (Interview, 11/1/2017, lines 499-508)

Dylan quickly made the connection to the relationship he had with his own father in this excerpt. Based on what he said, I gathered that there was some type of power struggle that existed between Dylan and his father. At first, Dylan talked about his father's “cuz I'm your father” rationale for following his rules, to which Dylan responded that he didn't “really have an argument for that.” To me, this showed that Dylan (at least to some degree) bought into the

traditional norm of parents (or at least the patriarch of the family) having the final say, simply because he is the father. However, Dylan then went on to say that he abided by that philosophy “to an extent,” now that he was 18 years old. This told me that in Dylan’s mind, once he reached this “legal adult age,” his voice had more power than it did before, despite the fact that he still lived under his father’s roof and nothing else had changed in addition to Dylan’s age.

As he was talking about Sloane’s father, Dylan continued on to talk about how he envisioned himself when he becomes a father one day. He said:

I’ve seen a lot of people make mistakes, and I’ve experienced a lot of things, not necessarily by myself, but I’ve watched people experience things, and I’ve been with people who experience things, and it’s, like, I try myself to distance myself from that person that I used to be as much as I can [...] Cuz I don’t wanna fuck up and make the same mistakes that all these people are making around me, especially for my father, er, especially for my daughter or my son or whoever it is. And I’m not, I’m not saying I’m gonna have both or I’m gonna have a buncha kids, I wanna have at least one of each, but that all depends on what my wife or my girlfriend wants. (Interview transcript, 11/1/2017, lines 512-521)

It was interesting to see how Dylan segued from talking about his disapproval of Sloane’s father’s abusive treatment toward her to his own experiences. In the above excerpt, he first referred to having seen “a lot of people make mistakes,” directly after talking about Sloane’s father and his disapproval for the way he treated Sloane. Reflecting back on the interview, it made me wonder if he was equating Sloane’s father’s treatment of her to “making a mistake.” This might insinuate that Dylan did not think her father was a bad person with immoral character, but rather, a man who was making a mistake. This was further evidenced when he

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

said (above) that it's "not so much that [Sloane's father] doesn't love her" and that he "doesn't know how to do it other than hitting her and taking his anger out on her." Here, Dylan did not realize it when he was talking, but in his words, he was taking the blame off of Sloane's father, almost justifying his actions as being a "mistake" because he "didn't know any better."

During the interview, the anger that Dylan felt toward Sloane's father was immediately met with a connection to his own life and attempting to justify this abusive action in the book that made him so mad. I could not tell if he was just trying to make sense of why Sloane's father hit her, or if he felt that he should figure out how to make excuses for this abuse because he himself, and/or someone close to him, had also made mistakes that he would not want to define his character forever. I was led to believe there might be a component of the latter at play, because he said he wanted "to distance myself from that person that I used to be as much as I can." He then stated the main reason he didn't want to "fuck up" was because of his future son or daughter. When he said this, he said it with agitation and conviction. It was not possible for me to tell if this anger was directed toward Sloane's father in the book or toward someone in his own life, but a teacher in that situation may use this connection Dylan made as a way to find out more about this anger in the context of the feelings he was expressing and how those might have an impact on him.

After Kyle read *The Prince of Pot* (Kyi, 2017), he talked about what he would say to the main character, Isaac, if he could give him advice. He chose to reference Isaac's girlfriend, Sam, and how Kyle did not approve of the way Isaac was changing who he was just because of Sam:

Cuz, like, there was some points where [Isaac and Sam] were in school, and Sam would do this kind of like, like, she'd wanna go to a party and [Isaac], he's not about it, like, [...] like he doesn't like going out and doing social stuff. So he

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

would be like, no, no. blah, blah, blah, and then she would be like please, and then he'd go with her for like ten minutes, and then they'd both be, like, let's get outta here [...] I, I didn't really get that, either. (Interview transcript, 12/20/2017, lines 328-335)

After explaining why he did not understand the way Isaac simply gave in to whatever his girlfriend, Sam, wanted, Kyle tried to work through attempting to figure it out:

Like, I was, like, I understand that she wants, like, to make him happy, but, like, I understand that she also wants to be there [...] Cuz, like, all her friends are there, she's more of a popular girl. He's not really anybody, like he's, he's pretty much just, just a student, just an average student, and she's like a popular girl and hangs out with that clique, all that. (Interview transcript, 12/20/2017, lines 336-340)

The interview transcript itself did not capture the emotion in Kyle's words when he was explaining his frustration with Isaac conforming to the person his girlfriend wanted him to be. However, he said all of this with obvious disgust, like he was appalled that Isaac would change for a girl. He also said the words "popular girl" and "*that* clique" (emphasis added) in a way that led me to think that he himself has a very strongly opinionated view of the "popular" crowd. This might have been part of where the resentment in his voice was stemming from. This idea of being true to one's self versus following along with the crowd (or a romantic interest) is often central to adolescence. The fact that Kyle brought this up as the advice he would give to Isaac tells me that the concept of identity and what it means to "be yourself" is at the forefront of his mind. Books like *The Prince of Pot* (Kyi, 2017) might provide an avenue to explore these feelings about identity in a productive, non-threatening way.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Participants also expressed frustration about characters' situations or circumstances. I found that many times, when they talked about these places in their books that frustrated them, their experiences connected to frustrations they had experienced or were experiencing in their own lives. After reading *This is Not a Test* (Summers, 2012), Dylan talked about the frustration he felt when Sloane's sister left home without telling Sloane:

I kind of related to [Sloane] because [my brother] left me when I was a kid. We were living at my house that we do now, and he didn't like my dad's rules, didn't wanna go to school, didn't like jobs, didn't like a trade, and just, like, left, and went to go live with his cousins. Three years later, when I'm old enough to understand that he actually left, he called my mom and said that he was living in his car in West Hartford. [...] So, after all that bullshit my grandma passes away, unfortunately [...] And he can just not, he is just not able to sit downstairs, apparently, when [his grandmother is] not there. Like to a certain extent, I can understand that [...] But that's not an excuse for leaving again, because he did. And he's gone. In Florida. [...] And he didn't even say goodbye. Again. No "I love you," no "I'll see you soon," no anything. And, it hurt! [...] But, I wasn't like sad, or like—I was pissed! Again? You're doing this to me again?

(Interview transcript, 11/1/2017, lines 683-714)

Dylan started out by saying he related to Sloane because her sister left, and this connection transitioned immediately to venting about his familial situation and his brother leaving him when he was young (and then again when he was older), which clearly has had a significant impact on Dylan. As the interviewer, I found it difficult to get a word in when he was delving into the frustrations about his brother, because he was so impassioned in the way he was speaking.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

While I initially tried to bring the conversation back to the text, I recognized the importance of allowing Dylan to vent about his frustrations regarding his sibling and family. The initial frustration that he felt about Sloane's familial situation translated into him unpacking some of the feelings he was harboring about his own brother.

Dylan also expressed frustration about the way characters in the book were handling the zombie apocalypse situation in which they found themselves. In his journal entry, he wrote:

There are a couple things frustrating me in the book right now. First of all, everybody is acting like what's happening outside is completely normal. The setting is the character's former high school after a zombie apocalypse reaches their small town. Nobody wants to accept that they are actually "zombies" and are just procrastinating as much as they can until they have to deal with what's going on outside the school [...] Another thing that frustrates me is they don't do supply runs or anything. If I was stuck inside a school that has dwindling supplies, I would arm myself then go out and scavenge. Now, if there was some kind of apocalypse, there would be a lot of looted stores and empty places, but there is also a lot of things that would be untouched. For example, let's say a zombie apocalypse strikes Colertown, fast and hard. People wouldn't be able to react quickly enough, and although some would survive, many would die. (Journal entry, 10/16/17)

Dylan was frustrated because he did not feel that the characters in the book were handling their situation in the way that Dylan would if the zombie apocalypse were going on in his town. Based on this journal entry, it was evident that he had thought about his own town and community (the stores, gas stations, residential areas, etc.) and how he and others would react if

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

an apocalypse happened there. Dylan was making connections to the situation in the text hypothetically happening in his own town. This showed that he did feel connections to the characters, because he was comfortable making that jump from the fictional text to his own reality.

Carlos expressed frustration in a different way when he was reading *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006). When he was reflecting on Tyrell's challenging life, he indicated that he was frustrated by the way others viewed Tyrell:

I know he's gonna pull through it, you know. That situation, it's like somebody never been through that situation could be like, "Yea, that's a tough situation, blah, blah, blah," but to really get yourself into that situation, put yourself in that man's shoes, is not easy [...] It's hard. It's not easy. So you gotta, you just can't be like, "Oh, that's nothing." Like a person got money, and your person don't got money, and some people wit money look at that person, right, and they be like, "Aww, he's lame," or "He's a bum." Nah, he's not a bum, you know; he's just tryin' ta get hisself [trails off] There's some people out there who don't wanna get theirselves good, and then there are some people that don't, they don't give a f—like, they don't just care. (Interview transcript, 12/13/17, lines 632-642)

In this part, he made general statements about how people might view someone in a challenging situation, referring to the person as "lame" or "a bum." Based on what he disclosed to me earlier in the interview, I knew he had lived on the street and had been through extremely challenging circumstances. When he made these generalities, he was speaking from a place of experience, as someone who has been viewed in the way that Tyrell has. Unlike Dylan, who had difficulty transitioning back to talking about the text at times, Carlos steered the conversation back to the

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

text on his own. Here, he began with more general statements that could apply to any person in the position he described, and he then turned the conversation back to Tyrell, specifically:

Some people are, like, like he's, like Tyrell, he's, like, in that situation, he's got no money, and he's still tryin' ta put up to his family, you know. [...] He has no place to live, so he's like, "Damn, I gotta make this, I gotta make this work out, so what's my plan. Imma go shoot this guy, Imma go get this money. What Imma do, Imma go rob a store, what Imma do, you know?" When you're at that predicament, and you're just like, "Damn, should I go rob the plug, should I go rob this guy, one of these [Gang name has been removed], and now I gotta beef with him," you know, it's just like crazy stuff [...] He's a survivor. (Interview transcript, 12/13/17, lines 642-653)

In the midst of his frustration with how others viewed Tyrell (and how others viewed Carlos when he was in a similar situation), Carlos also demonstrated a deep, real understanding of what Tyrell was going through and how Tyrell felt in his challenging circumstances. Carlos was able to articulate clearly exactly the type of thought process that might be going through Tyrell's mind, debating whether to make decisions that others would deem as "wrong" (e.g. robbing a store; shooting a guy; robbing a guy) in order to simply survive. Because of what he himself had been through, Carlos likely recognized more about the characterization of Tyrell than a student who might have been a much stronger reader but had not had similar experiences. As a result, Carlos brought a unique understanding to this text through his funds of knowledge. Each of the participants had his own funds of knowledge based on what he had to do in his outside-of-school life in order to survive and, to varying degrees, thrive. The data showed, as illustrated by Carlos in this instance, that participants brought their knowledge and experiences to the texts they read,

which influenced the ways in which they felt frustrated with different characters and situations in their books.

Reactions Related to the Act of Reading

It was evident that participants all had, in some capacity, thought about their own reading identities and the role that reading did or did not play in their lives. Frequently, I saw this through the ways they reacted to the act of reading as we discussed reading and books during their interviews. Based on the data, I understood that two of the participants, Dylan and Logan, considered themselves to be readers. Dylan first articulated, “I loved the book” (Interview transcript, 11/1/2017, line 182) when referencing *This is Not a Test* (Summers, 2012). He could also quickly and with certainty tell me the type of book he typically liked, saying, “I like post-apocalyptic books, I like violent books, I like strange, twisted stuff like crime books, I like war books, all that stuff” (lines 184-185). In this description, he named several types of books that he liked, which indicated to me that reading had at least some type of role in his life, and also that he had read enough to feel confident in the type of books he liked. Later on in that interview, he told me, “Well, I’ve read two books in the last three days” (line 910). He said that he was snowed in during a snowstorm at his house when he read those books, but it still showed me that reading was something he chose to do over other activities. In telling me about one of the two books he recently read, he mentioned that there was a sequel, saying, “Then there’s a second book, which I *need* to read” (lines 934-935). He was clearly excited over the prospect of reading, even calling it a “need.”

When I made the observation that it sounded like Dylan read a lot, he responded, “Mmhmm. My mom does, too. [...] My mom *loves* Stephen King” (lines 1016-1018). When referencing that snowstorm, he said that he and his mom read the whole time, explaining, “That’s

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

all we did when the power was out. [...] I come in and she's reading, she comes in and I'm reading by the candle, and I'm like, 'I can't see. I just wanna read!'" (lines 1021-1023). I could see that reading was not only an important part of Dylan's life, but also had a role in his household, particularly with his mother. Dylan talked about reading and books with an ease that demonstrated his own positive reading identity.

Logan did not talk as much as Dylan did about the role of reading in his life, but I still got the sense that reading did play a role in his life, as well, through the more subtle comments he made in his interviews. For example, when I asked Logan about the type of person to whom he would recommend *Dime* (Frank, 2015), he replied, "I'd recommend it to someone that, like, is *also* into, like, reading and stuff, like they could stay with a book, even if it gets like that. But like, cuz it can, like, teach people stuff and it will open, like, a lot of people's eyes to things like this" (emphasis added, Interview transcript, 10/25/2017, lines 158-160). He said the person would have to "also" be into reading, which implies that he views himself as being "into reading," as well. Later on, I asked him how he typically picks out a book to read, and he told me, "I usually, like, read the little blurb it has about the book and then I see the cover" (line 222). This showed me that he felt he had a process with which he felt comfortable when it came to picking out a book to read. He did not have to stop and think when I asked him about this process; he was able to convey exactly what he typically did.

Kyle and Carlos, on the other hand, did not appear to feel as confident in their reading identities as Dylan and Logan seemed, but they did seem open to reading books that held their interest. When I asked Kyle about where he read his book, he answered, "Yea, I read it in school. That's really only where I read" (Interview transcript, 10/4/2017, line 22). Therefore, I could tell that even though he was engaged in discussing the books he read in school, he did not

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

see the act of reading as transferring to his out-of-school life. While this was the case, he was able, like Dylan, to articulate the type of book he typically likes, saying, “I like books that I can relate to, not ‘out there’ books” (line 418). Kyle felt confident in describing the type of book he typically enjoyed, and he engaged readily in conversation during our interview about the books he read.

Carlos also animatedly engaged in discussion about *Tyrell*, even though he told me it was the first book he had ever read and enjoyed. He told me, “I never read before; I never did any work and stuff like that” (Interview transcript, 12/13/2017, lines 97-98). I could tell he associated the act of reading with his school academics, because he continued on to say:

Like, at my school would never, like, I got 16 suntin’ credits; I don’t know how I ever got that. I thought I had zero credits when I came here. The teachers would tell me, like, when we went to the meeting, the teachers would, like, “You got 16 credits,” and I’m like, “What? What is that” (laughs) “What is credits—I don’t know what that is!” And, they would just, like, “You got 16 credits, I dunno,” and I’m like “Aight.” (lines 200-205)

When I asked him what changed and caused him to pick up a book and read it, he replied, “I gotta work for this [...] It’s like, you gotta work for it, you know?” (line 208). Hearing him talk about the challenging experiences he had gone through and how he wanted to graduate high school led me to believe that part of the motivation for reading came from associating reading with “working for it,” with “it” appearing to equate to “success” in Carlos’s eyes. With his reactions to reading *Tyrell*, such as when he talked about how much he connected with *Tyrell* and how much he enjoyed reading the book, as detailed in the previous section, I could tell that it surprised him how much he liked reading a book and how accomplished it made him feel.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Unlike Dylan, Logan, Kyle, and Carlos, however, there were two participants who very clearly did not want to be identified as readers. I found it difficult to get these two participants, Ryan and Jacob, to talk about any type of reaction they had to their books, aside from short, negative generalizations about books and reading. Ryan, for example, did not say anything positive about reading or about the book he had finished, *The Scar Boys* (Vlahos, 2014). When I asked him why he chose to read that particular book, he responded: “Cuz I had to read a book, and didn’t really care” (Interview transcript, 12/13/2017, line 12). When I questioned him further and asked if there was anything about the cover or what he thought it may be about that enticed him to read it, he answered: “No, just needed a book, grabbed one” (line 14). I noticed that he did not leave much room for follow-up questions. It was as if he was shutting down any type of conversation that might have casted the book in anything but a negative light; he told me: “I’m not really that into books to begin with” (line 32). I tried asking him some questions to find out what the book was about, but he did not give me much information. For example, when I asked him what the main character’s name was, he replied: “I don’t even remember” (line 40), and when I asked him if the protagonist’s family played a role in his life, he said: “I don’t think so. I can’t remember. I know there was one part about his dad, but I don’t remember what it said” (lines 51-52). As the interviewer, I was trying to determine if he genuinely did not know the answers to the questions or if he was just refusing to engage in conversation about the book. My instinct told me it was the latter, especially because of the immediate responses Ryan gave; he didn’t pause and think about what I was asking. Rather, he had an “I don’t know” or “I can’t remember” answer on the tip of his tongue, ready to spit out as soon as I finished a question. I knew from anecdotal conversations with the teachers and social worker in the school, as well as from my own observations of the class, that Ryan tended to both isolate himself and instigate

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

others, and that he also had a challenging home life. I wondered after the interview if he did not want me to see him as a reader, to the point where he did not even want to talk about the book he just finished, and it made me question why this student had such negative feelings about not being labeled as a reader by this outsider (me).

In another part of the interview, Ryan did say that he did not feel that he could relate to the protagonist at all. When I asked him if he saw himself as alike or different from the main character, he replied: "I would say different" (line 44). When I asked him about what ways he felt different, he answered: "I don't know, I don't have a burnt face" (line 46). The protagonist in this book had scars on his face from a severe burn, and Ryan said he could not relate to him because Ryan does not have scars on his face. One might interpret that answer as Ryan only thinking about outward appearances and very surface-level comparisons. However, Ryan had a smirk on his face when he said, "I don't have a burnt face," which led me to believe that he recognized he was saying something that was barely scratching the surface of what I was asking him.

Later on, I asked Ryan what three words he would use to describe the book. After I asked him, the conversation went as follows:

Ryan: I (pauses) don't know.

Researcher: You can think for a minute. (pauses)

Ryan: Yea, I don't know.

Researcher: Could you think of one word?

Ryan: No. (lines 96-100)

After that, I asked him why he thought the author wrote the book, and he replied: "I don't know, make money?" (line 105). When I followed up and asked if he thought the author wanted to

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

show the reader anything, he answered: “I would say personal, people should, like, not let the way that your outside looks define who you are [...] [s]omethin’ like that” (lines 108-111). It seemed to me that when he answered that follow-up question, Ryan let his guard down with me for just a moment, allowing me to see that he really was able to articulate one of the significant themes in the book; however, after that answer, he went right back to answering me with one-word responses that did not give me any insight into his thinking. His body language (leaning back, looking around in an disinterested way) and how he answered in ways that made follow-up questions difficult insinuated to me that he was choosing not to give me more information about the book or his reactions to it, even though he may have had it within him.

I saw similarities to Ryan in the ways Jacob engaged with me during our interview about *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006). He told me the only reason he picked *Tyrell* to read was “[c]uz [the teacher] told me to read it” (Interview transcript, 12/6/2017, line 12). This is a contrast to the way Dylan and Kyle were both able to articulate the types of books they liked and how they went about picking a book to read. I then asked Jacob if he trusted his teacher’s recommendations, and he said, “At the time, I mean, she just told me to start reading it” (line 14). I got the sense that he did not want to tell me he did not trust her recommendations (because he *did* read the book she recommended), but he also was not about to admit that he *did*, in fact, trust his teacher’s recommendation when it came to books. As far as reading in general, Jacob told me that he “doesn’t read much outside of school” (line 24). When I asked him if he connected to anything personally in *Tyrell*, he replied: “Not really, no” (line 29).

Unlike Ryan, however, Jacob was able to summarize the plot of the book as being about “[u]m, a kid tryin’ ta, just tryin’ ta make a living in his home” (line 32) and talk about his reactions to the protagonist’s character, saying, “he seemed pretty chill” (line 37).

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

In reflecting on the interview, I sensed that Jacob did not have confidence in himself as a reader, which is why he might have seemed disinterested in reading or talking about reading. Unlike Ryan, I did not get the sense that Jacob had intentions of answering questions in ways that would put an end to the interview sooner; rather, I felt that he might not have felt confident in his responses, which could have been why they were short and why he seemed unsure of himself. In answering questions such as “What type of book do you usually like?” Jacob clammed up and responded: “It doesn’t matter, really” (line 211). I followed up by asking him if he thought the next book he read would be similar to *Tyrell* or not, and he just said, “I don’t know” (line 214). I could tell he really did not know how to respond to these two questions.

As I thought about the data gathered from Ryan and Jacob, I recognized that it might be difficult for a student who does not identify as a reader to answer questions regarding what type of book he likes or what he envisions himself reading next. If one does not see one’s self as a reader, how is one supposed to talk about a “typical” type of book one enjoys? And by the same token, how can a self-identified “non-reader” talk about what one’s next book will be? These are important questions with which to grapple for teachers of students in alternative school settings as they plan their independent reading programs. Both Ryan’s and Jacob’s interview responses could be the result of a lack of a reading identity aside from “non-reader.”

Chapter Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this interpretative qualitative study was to explore the experiences that students in an alternative high school had while reading self-selected YA texts. The study sought to gain a deeper understanding about how these adolescent students reacted to what they read in their books.

The study was based on the following research question:

How do students in an alternative high school react to self-selected YA texts they read independently in school?

Chapter Four presented the findings that were generated by organizing them into four overarching thematic categories: Expressions of Empathy for Characters; Expressions of Wonder and Questioning; Expressions of Negative Reactions; and Reactions Related to the Act of Reading. This chapter provides a summary of the findings; limitations of the study; a discussion and conclusions; implications for programmatic and curriculum design and instructional practice; and implications for future research.

Summary of Findings

Throughout a 12-week period, from September through December of the 2017-2018 school year, I conducted an interpretive qualitative study during which I interviewed students in an alternative high school about their reactions to self-selected YA books, as well as examined the journal entries they wrote and the artifacts they created in conjunction with these texts. I analyzed my data using inductive analysis, in which categories and themes were generated organically from the data, rather than from any pre-formed ideas, assumptions, or models

(Thomas, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The findings of the analysis were that participants reacted to their reading through expressions of empathy for characters, expressions of wonder and questioning, expressions of negative reactions, and reactions related to the act of reading.

Limitations of Study

In terms of limitations, this study took place in one location, so it cannot necessarily be generalized to all students in alternative school settings. However, I am hopeful that the findings and analysis will provide alternative school teachers support in thinking about ways in which they might effectively incorporate YA literature into their classrooms. I also hope that further questions grow from my study that other researchers in the field and I can take up in future studies to further investigate the possibilities of YA literature in alternative schools and in helping to support students.

Another limitation of this study can be seen in the Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data Triangulation (Appendix C). As evidenced by this matrix, most participants expressed much more and elaborated in more detail during their interviews than in their journal entries or other artifacts. While some participants made deeper connections in their written work, many of them did not write an extensive amount in their journal entries and assignments. This may have been the result of several different issues. First, truancy was a significant issue for a majority of participants, and many did not make up the work they missed when they were not present in class. Additionally, many of the participants struggled with being motivated to complete assignments that were more self-directed, such as journal writing, for a variety of reasons that may have included: a lack of confidence; a desire to be perceived as a “non-reader”; or difficulty with a particular skill(s). This was something on which the teacher had to continually work with students. As such, many of the data came from the interviews with participants, where they had

the space carved out to discuss their reading and related thinking. While this is a limitation in the triangulation of data for some of the subcategories, it is also a finding in and of itself, in that completing an ample number of assignments connected to independently-selected YA books was inherently challenging for these students.

Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of this study's findings through the theoretical lens of Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory contributes to the discussion regarding the use of YA texts in alternative school classrooms. Findings were generated and categorized into participant expressions of empathy for characters; expressions of wonder and questioning; expressions of negative reactions; and reactions related to the act of reading. These are important expressions for us to consider as we think about the identities of adolescent students and the different ways they react to texts they read. In recognizing and working toward understanding these multiple types of expressions, teachers are taking the initial step toward developing meaningful strategies to most effectively support their alternative school students as readers. In the following sections, I discuss how this study adds to and forwards research in the following areas: engaging with texts through personal connection; examining reading experiences in relation to adolescent identity development; exploring adolescents' feelings of empathy for characters; and developing positive adolescent reading identities.

Engaging with Texts Through Personal Connection

Adolescents in alternative schools may find it challenging to express their emotions outwardly for a variety of reasons (Self-Brown et al., 2012). Participants talked openly about their emotions within the context of discussing their books. They expressed their own emotions by telling me what made them happy, frustrated, sad, or confused, and the YA books provided

space for them to reflect on their own lives as they thought about the lives of the protagonists and other characters in the novels (Hamilton, 2002). As Rosenblatt (1938) asserted, the connections the participants made to the characters in the texts could serve as a way to express emotions for adolescent readers. In line 670 of his interview, for example, when Dylan appeared to unintentionally shift from third person to first person perspective when talking about the protagonist, he seemed to be aligning himself with the protagonist and expressing his own emotions in his discussion of the book. Because personal factors (both past and present) affect the outcome of what happens in the interaction between the person and the text, Dylan appeared to naturally focus on those components that related most closely with his life (Rosenblatt, 1938). Within the context of the alternative school, discussion and creation of journal entries or artifacts related to reading are safe and seemingly constructive outlets for this type of expression of emotion.

Carlos, Kyle, Logan, and Dylan all expressed feelings of connection and solidarity to the protagonists in their respective books. Reading books to which they can relate has the potential to encourage adolescent engagement with literature, as well as feelings of enthusiasm about reading as they think about aspects of their own world and lives, which was evident across those participants (Johnson, 2011; Wopperer, 2011). Carlos, who claimed he had never read a whole book prior to the one he read when this study took place, had a list of books he wanted to read next after his engagement with *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006). Based on interview discussions about the importance of being able to relate to the characters, I do not believe this level of engagement would have been achieved if the teacher had been using whole-class, canonical text with participants. Despite the “staying power” of more canonical texts, that power means little “unless it has human significance today” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 236). As Bell (2011) found, many

canonical texts that feature young characters that grow up in cohesive communities do not speak to adolescents in terms of the multiple spaces in their lives and their negotiation of varying, provisional communities. The engagement participants had came from their feelings of connection to, and intrinsic interest in, the characters, plots, settings, and themes in their books, not in when their books were written or how widely-read they were, and also not because of a “reading level” that might have been assigned to participants based on a standardized test. Carlos’s own funds of knowledge and experiences were what drew him to Tyrell emotionally, more so than perhaps other students who might read the book. This was not because Carlos was a stronger reader than other students; rather, it was because of what *he* brought to the text. Similarly, when talking about family dynamics and the connections Dylan made to the protagonist, Sloane (Interview transcript, 11/1/2017, lines 499-508), I had clear insight into one of the ways Dylan thought about the role of a father. Moments like this would allow for a teacher to get a glimpse into how a student like Dylan conceptualized family roles and family rules. These interpretations might also influence his views about other authority figures in his life, like his teachers, for example. As teachers, we must realize (and not underestimate) the *power* that lies in what a reader brings to the text. A door opens to a whole world of curiosity, criticality, and self-reflection when a student connects to a text the way that Carlos did. Part of not only recognizing, but honoring and celebrating what a reader brings to a text is to also make space in the classroom for critical conversations that might not appear to be directly connected to “school reading,” such as the conversations students in this study were having about their anger about Donald Trump and his philosophies surrounding immigration. If students feel validated in their concerns about issues they feel are important in their lives and in their world, they will feel more comfortable discussing their reactions to their reading, because they will feel that their

voices matter and are being heard (Noddines, 2003). On the other hand, if they feel like topics and issues that are important in their lives are not allowed to be discussed in the classroom, it could potentially lead to closing off opportunities for meaningful discussion.

Carico (2001) found that participants in a study negotiated meaning of a text based on their own experiences, reading habits, and lives outside of school. This included finding humor in a text. Onofrey's (2006) study focused directly on student participants finding humor in YA literature, finding that readers' individual responses to what they were reading dictated whether or not they found humor in the text and/or engaged with humor presented in the text. Carlos's experience with reading *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006) was illustrative of the fact that a student's existing schema directly relates to whether or not that student finds humor in a text. Because of Carlos's life experiences, along with his never having finished a book and being a self-defined "non-reader," he found parts of the book to be "funny," when most others would not find any humor in them. As Onofrey (2006) found, humor, though it is often incorporated into a book purposefully by the author, can be interpreted in many different ways, depending upon what each reader brings to the text. Additionally, the concept of humor must be broadly defined, as there are many different forms (e.g. satirical, slap stick, irony). In Carlos's case, it was humor that stemmed from disbelief at the parallel between his own challenges and those of the protagonist. Each time Carlos mentioned that something Tyrell was experiencing was "funny," it was a circumstance, event, or feeling that paralleled Carlos's own life. His experiences shaped his interpretation of those aspects of the text as "funny," when others might not have agreed. Other readers might think different aspects are "funny," based on their own lived experiences they bring to the transaction between themselves and the text.

Carlos found humor in seeing reflections of his own life in Tyrell's when reading his book. As he read, he rooted for Tyrell's success as if he were a real person. As Miller (2014) explained, when adolescent readers are able to see themselves in the stories they read, they realize they and their experiences matter. The case of Carlos is important for teachers, because if he were to react to a class reading of this book by laughing at the parts he described as "funny," it may earn him a reprimand or some type of disciplinary consequence for being inappropriate. However, such student reactions may need to be unpacked and more closely examined. Not only might Carlos's laughter be misinterpreted, but it might also be overlooked, which could result in a missed opportunity to connect with him and learn more about *why* he finds particular parts to be humorous. This might lead teachers to ask important questions of their alternative school students: *Why is this funny to him? Is it actually funny to him? What can I stop and do, as the teacher, to further understand my students' reactions to this?* By looking for ways to answer these questions, teachers in alternative schools can use YA literature as a way to better connect to their students. This is possible because of the ways in which students, like the participants in this study, engage with YA texts.

Lesko (2012) spoke to engagement in her discussion regarding the capabilities of adolescents when it comes to deep and careful thinking. The findings in this study support Lesko's claims. Participants demonstrated careful, meaningful thinking in the ways they expressed their reactions about what they read. This critical and many times emotional thinking was initiated by their engagement with what they were reading. If they did not feel engaged with what they were reading, they would not have had such strong reactions and feelings in their interviews and completion of artifacts in relation to their books. Teachers might use this knowledge of student engagement to ask questions such as: *Why does she refuse to read this*

part? Why do they seem angry at this point in the text? What can I stop and do, as the teacher, to further understand my students' reactions to this? Students in alternative schools *are* capable of this deep thinking through their engagement with texts. They need to have access to these texts, rather than being limited by curricula that does not include access to YA texts.

Examining Reading Experiences in Relation to Adolescent Identity Development

Adolescence is a time of personal identity change but also social identity and stability development, as individuals in this phase of life question who they are and how others view them (Tanti et al., 2011; Kilmstra, 2009; Carroll & Rosenblum, 2000). As participants reacted to the YA texts they read, the data showed that they were grappling with ideas relating to identity and the role of others in perceptions of one's identity. Kyle, for example, thought about advice he would give to the protagonist, Isaac, in *The Prince of Pot* (Kyi, 2017) regarding "being himself" versus following what someone else (in this case, Isaac's girlfriend) wanted him to do. The concept of following one's own beliefs and values versus doing what others' want is a central conflict for many adolescents, and the YA texts participants in this study read provided non-threatening spaces to explore this tension in critical ways, as was the case with Kyle (thinking about Sloane), Carlos (thinking about Tyrell), and Logan (thinking about Arin), for example.

Because many students in alternative schools face additional challenges, the time period of *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000) is often experienced by these students as *accelerated adulthood*, where they have to enter into the world of adulthood more quickly than their mainstream-school peers, so having these safe spaces to explore constructions of identity is especially important for them. Carlos, for example, was thrown out of his home at only fifteen years old, which accelerated him into adulthood responsibilities at a much earlier age than most. By reading *Tyrell* (Booth, 2006) and exploring how Tyrell worked through challenging

experiences and had to figure out who he was and what he stood for in terms of his values and beliefs, Carlos could work through some of those difficult topics in a way that felt comfortable to him, such as when he talked about getting thrown out of his mother's home. He did so through comparing his own situation to Tyrell's, and it was evident through his body language and tone that he was calm and comfortable, rather than agitated or uncomfortable. He could place himself outside of the text to understand his own situation and motivations from a more objective standpoint (Rosenblatt, 1938), but he was also comfortable talking about Tyrell's decisions in comparison to his own in a more subjective way. The culture of caring (Noddings, 2003) and sense of belonging that was unique to this context might have played a role in Carlos's comfort level when it came to thinking and talking about his own experiences in relation to Tyrell's. If he were in an environment where he did not feel accepted and valued, he might not express his feelings and emotions so readily. The context of this school, and class in particular, provided Carlos and other participants and students with a safe space to talk openly.

Research has shown that students in alternative schools oftentimes internalize the stigma that goes along with being in an alternative school, versus in a mainstream school with the rest of their same-aged peers (Swain & Noblit, 2011; Vanderhaar et al., 2014). This has the potential to impact both personal identities and reading identities of adolescents in these environments. However, the findings in this study pushed back against this perceived internalization of stigmatic feelings in an alternative school setting when it came to this particular group of participants. When participants discussed the Big School and their experiences there, they had negative things to say about the way they felt when they were there, enough to warrant the argument that stigmatic feelings were present. In several cases, their feelings were so negative

that they chose not to go to school, which was one of the contributing factors to their enrollment in the alternative school in the first place.

Conversely, when talking about their experiences in the alternative school, the feelings participants described were much more positive. For instance, Logan, Carlos, Dylan, and Ryan all commented on how they started coming to school on a more regular basis once they were enrolled in the alternative school because they felt so much better there than at the Big School. Since participants did not feel stigmatized like they did at the Big School, it was possible that their school setting affected their level of engagement with the texts, since the texts themselves and their reading experiences were part of their alternative school environment. As Rosenblatt explained, Reader Response Theory frames the experience of reading a book as a means of “explor[ing] [one’s] own nature, becom[ing] aware of potentialities for thought and feeling within [one’s]self, acquir[ing] clearer perspective, develop[ing] aims and a sense of direction” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. x). Reading *Some Assembly Required*, for instance, provided Logan with a low-risk environment to explore more about the topic of gender dysphoria. The feelings of belonging and acceptance he felt at the alternative school provided a space to reflect on his own coming-out experiences with his family in relation to Arin’s experiences. Logan, who told me he previously refused to go to school when he was at the Big School because he felt uncomfortable with people refusing to stop calling him by his birth name, had much better attendance at the alternative school and engaged actively in the reading process within that context and environment. At the alternative school, Logan openly talked to his teacher about his hormone therapy treatment he was undergoing at the time of the study, and he felt comfortable discussing challenges he was having at home with her, as well. This level of comfort might have played a role in Logan’s willingness to discuss his own experiences in connection to the book he

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

was reading. The school was clearly a place where he felt he could be himself and where he was accepted for who he is, which likely contributed to the way he could comfortably explore aspects of characters' identity in relation to his own thoughts and experiences.

This study's findings do connect to Moorman's (2007) study, in which a participant, Aurora, at first refused to read a book during the Upward Bound Program at Trinity University. After connecting with the protagonists in several of Sarah Dessen's novels, however, she began to identify herself as a reader. Her perception of herself as a reader began to shift as she found herself enjoying what she was reading because of the way she connected to the characters. Identifying with the teenage protagonists was imperative for Aurora's progression and identity shift, as she began to identify herself as a reader over the course of the program. Logan made the realization through reading this self-selected book that he enjoys reading books where he can understand how the protagonist feels. He also realized that a book could help him to think about his own life and experiences in a new light.

When students in an alternative school make realizations about their own lives through reflecting on their reading and connecting with the characters in their books, this has the potential to impact their identity development, both as readers, and as people. Marcia's Identity Status Theory (1966), which focuses primarily on adolescent development, is built upon the foundation of Erikson's (1950) theory of psychosocial development, which breaks a person's lifespan into eight different stages of psychosocial (ego) growth, based on approximate age (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). The movement from one stage to the next progressive stage is based upon the assumption that the previous stage was resolved successfully, which should happen fairly automatically given "an average expectable environment" (Marcia, 1993, p. 7). A likely issue with students that are receiving their education in alternative schools, however, is that they

likely do *not* have an “average expectable environment,” which can result in an atypical path to identity construction. Since adolescents, through reader response, can place themselves outside of their own bodies with a level of detachment, it was evident in the data that through reading these texts, participants had opportunities to feel supported in their identity development process. In this way, there was the potential to better reflect on and critically examine their own lives, through their perceived meaning of the text—reflection and critical thinking that might not have been possible otherwise, which was evident in Logan’s case. Alternative school teachers can use knowledge as they think about book recommendations for their students.

Participants might not have had the same type of emotional reactions, or might not have felt as comfortable expressing these emotional reactions, if they did not have that positive relationship with their teacher or feel that sense of belonging in their classroom and school. As teachers in similar contexts think about their rationales for incorporating YA texts into their curricula, they should consider how they are framing reading in terms of being academic, therapeutic, or both, and how that affects the reading experiences for their students, as this could potentially have implications for not only how students think about and react to reading (both individual texts as well as the act of reading itself), but also how reading might play a role in their own personal identity development processes. The effectiveness of using therapeutic reading in a classroom context such as this will also likely depend on the sense of community and belonging that is created in that school setting. If students feel comfortable expressing their feelings and emotions in relation to their reading, using reading practices that are more therapeutic in nature will likely be more successful than if students do not feel this level of comfort.

The identities of adolescents are also impacted by the physical spaces of alternative school settings. However, the type of impact that the alternative school environment had according to the data in the study was different than the focus on alternative school classroom spaces in the related literature. The physical structure and the (lack of) resources available to the students in this study were representative of the majority of alternative school settings (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999; Watson, 2011; San Martin & Calabrese, 2011). Several of the participants compared being at the “Big” (mainstream) high school to being at the alternative school, often referring to themselves at the “Big School” as seemingly different individuals than themselves at the alternative school. However, I found that their focus was never on the negative aspects of the alternative school (old building, lack of resources, etc.), but rather, on the positive relationships they had in the alternative school (with the teachers, social worker, and each other), which they did not feel they had at the “Big School.” So, participants focused more on the positive aspects of the school, such as the feelings of belonging described previously, that didn’t deal with the physical spaces or resources, rather than the negative parts of the physical space. This aligns with what Bell (2011) said in regards to YA texts: that they are less about finding a geographical *place of belonging*, and more about finding *a way to belong* in diverse and fragmented societies (p. 30). Participants felt a sense of belonging in the alternative school that they did not feel when they were attending the mainstream high school, and five out of six participants also found this feeling of belonging in the YA texts they were reading. This challenges Duke and Griesdorn’s (1999) findings that stressed the negative impact on adolescents of less-than-ideal physical spaces for alternative school. Instead, my findings demonstrate the emotional environment of acceptance as having greater importance and impact than the physical environment. In this study, the physical environment and resources left much to be desired, but the emotional

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

environment was so positive that students were not focused on the negative physical elements of the classroom and school.

Studies have shown that reading YA literature can provide adolescents with a means through which to work on developing their own identities (Goth & Clark, 2013; Greinke, 2007; Moorman, 2007; Thomas, 2011). While there were many instances in the data where participants thought about characters' identity construction and the factors that impacted it, as well as made connections to their own lives, there were only a few concrete examples of participants thinking about their own identity development processes as a result of reading these self-selected YA texts. I do not necessarily believe that this is because there were no instances of this as they reacted to reading the books, but rather, there were other factors that might have impacted this not appearing in the data. First, I did not know the participants prior to the study, so I knew nothing about their personal identities until I began working with within the context of the study. There were also no questions or prompts that dealt explicitly with their personal identity development, as that was not the primary focus of this study. Further research should be conducted to more closely examine the potential links between YA texts and the identity development processes of students in an alternative school setting.

Exploring Adolescents' Feelings of Empathy for Characters

The majority (five out of six) of the participants were most likely to discuss and write about characters to whom they could relate, according to the data. Participants expressed feelings of solidarity with the characters (most frequently the protagonist, but occasionally with other secondary characters) and oftentimes put themselves in a character's shoes when they were explaining how they (the participant) felt about a given situation and/or how they might act or react if they were a specific character. Based on the findings, many of those feelings of

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

empathy stemmed from participants connecting to their characters because of similar life experiences and/or character traits.

Dylan articulated that people read the same book in different ways, depending on the experiences they have had, which is one of the foundational tenets of Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory. Dylan's comments build upon what Greinke found in his 2007 study of a program in a Juvenile Detention Center that was designed to immerse adolescent defendants in an intensive reading program that centered on YA literature, specifically books that dealt with difficult topics to which participants were likely to relate. He found that, by reading these texts that contained characters to whom participants could relate, they were more easily able to discuss issues relevant to their own lives and critically examine the choices they had made. Dylan went a step further than just finding similarities between himself and the protagonist in his book. He also hypothetically put himself in her shoes to think about the choices she made and what caused her to make those choices. In doing so, he also thought critically about his own perceptions and values and how they related Sloane's, which was the case in more than two thirds of the participants in this study.

Since it is known that students in alternative schools are generally aware of the deficit perspective from which they are viewed by others (San Martin & Calabrese, 2011), it is beneficial for teachers in alternative school settings to recognize that students like Dylan and other participants in this study instinctually empathized with the characters in their books, particularly if they felt a connection to them in some way, as Dylan did to Sloane. For this population of students who oftentimes feels marginalized or isolated (Watson, 2011), YA texts can provide a space for expressing and building feelings of empathy. Feeling that he could relate to a character in such a meaningful way has the potential to make Dylan feel less alone in

his challenging familial circumstance (Smith, 1999). Teachers might use this knowledge to plan assignments that focus on putting one's self in the shoes of a character in order to closely examine not only the character and what is going on in the book, but also to look at one's own role in interpreting what that character is feeling and why.

Empathizing goes hand-in-hand with other social skills that are often taught in alternative schools, such as: navigating roadblocks to effective communication; managing stress and anxiety; and practicing positive self-talk. The empathy participants in this study felt toward the characters in their YA texts also led to creative expressions of their feelings and their analyses of various facets of their books, which align with skills taught in English Language Arts curricula. As teachers and administrators in alternative schools critically examine the ELA curriculum, it is important to ask whether or not the proscribed reading and ELA programs students are doing in many alternative schools are providing them with the same opportunities to empathize with characters as YA texts have been shown to provide, as evidenced by this study. If not, I would argue that there are grounds for incorporating YA literature into the curriculum in a much more substantial way.

Developing Positive Adolescent Reading Identities

While the findings of this study lead to productive conclusions and discussion around the ideas of engagement with YA texts, adolescent identity development, and the fostering of empathy, it is imperative also to acknowledge and discuss the danger of viewing the act of reading as “doing good” in its own right. In other words, when we view reading as a universal solution for any and all problems that may resonate with adolescents, we run the risk of perpetuating the views and ideals of those groups in positions of power, through the messages we send to adolescents.

Sjödin (2018) conducted a study of juvenile detention homes in Sweden, in which she analyzed an action plan authored by the Swedish National Board of Institutional Care. In her analysis of this document, Sjödin found that reading was positioned in an “educentric” way, as it related to marginalized people; education, and literacy in particular, were described as being inherently linked to moral improvement. Sjödin explained that “when reading and literacy are understood and treated as autonomous and transferable basic skills, they are ‘blackboxed’” (Latour, 1987, as cited by Sjödin, 2018), in the sense that the skills become naturalized, hiding the fact that those skills are defined and influenced by powerful groups” (Sjödin, 2018, p. 887). In this action plan, reading was “a boundary object: a plastic concept that is loose enough to unify different social worlds. This plasticity situates the idea that ‘reading does good’ in a hegemonic position [...] Reading becomes an omnipotent solution to a disparate set of problems” (p. 896). It can be argued that there was an element of this sentiment in the classroom where the current study took place, and, in my opinion, also in the majority of language arts classrooms, both in mainstream and alternative school settings. English teachers have seen the positive outcomes associated with reading, and it is natural for them to turn to reading to “help” students with a plethora of different challenges. But is the way reading is being used in classrooms always “fixing” what teachers intend it to remedy? According to the data, a majority of the participants did display positive reactions to reading self-selected YA texts: engagement with the books; realizations about identity development; and feelings of empathy. However, for Ryan and Jacob, I cannot argue that that was the case. Ryan did not want to answer any of the questions, and he made it clear that he only read the book because he felt he “had to and didn’t really care” (Interview transcript, 12/13/17, line 12), and Jacob also did not discuss his reading experience in positive ways.

The explanation of findings in the Chapter 4 section titled “Reactions Related to the Act of Reading” illustrates some of the potential issues with reading (as conceptualized and utilized by the teacher) being used as a “fix” for challenges that adolescents face, particularly in the context of an alternative school classroom, or in a detention home, as was the case in Sjödin’s study. As evidenced by the data, Ryan and Jacob clearly saw reading as something that they were being “forced” to do, and as a result, they were resistant to its potential benefits. These types of negative feelings about reading must also be considered in regards to these readers in school and beyond, particularly when it comes to their curiosity and criticality in the way they approach learning and the world. So much of learning, both in and out of school, is directly connected to reading, in a variety of capacities. Deeply ingrained negative feelings toward reading could hinder one’s curiosity because reading might actually serve as a roadblock for enthusiastic, intrinsically-motivated learning. This could also limit critical thinking as it relates to what one reads; if an individual is not curious and invested (and interested) in what they are reading, the likelihood of deep, critical thinking occurring is not as high, which could be limiting for those individuals. If adolescents in alternative schools see reading as something that is being thrust upon them by those in positions of power (similar to the scripted online curricula that many of them have to work through each day), there is a likelihood not only that they might be resistant to it, but that it might put a divide (or serve to expand an already-existing divide) between individuals and their teacher, the one who is theoretically supposed to support them as they grow academically and personally.

One aspect of the way reading was implemented in this study that seemed to be problematic for two of the participants was the element of choice when it came to self-selecting their own texts. Both Ryan and Jacob did not discuss their processes for selecting their texts to

read, other than Ryan saying, “[J]ust needed a book, grabbed one” (Interview transcript, 12/13/2017, line 14) and Jacob saying that he picked a book “[c]uz [the teacher] told me to read it” (Interview transcript, 12/6/17, line 12), which shows that his “self-selected” text, in actuality, was not self-selected. Goth and Clark’s (2013) work discusses the importance of including choice when it comes to reading, specifically in students’ self-selection of texts; their findings illustrate how self-selection helps support identity construction and development for adolescents. However, with Ryan and Jacob, that did not appear to be the case. Because Ryan and Jacob did not talk about their text selection process, it might have been because either they were not confident or entirely sure about why they chose the text they did, or, it might have been because they did not feel that they actually *did* select their own book, such as when Jacob told me the teacher picked his for him. I inferred from the data that either self-selection of text was not a constant or required component of the reading experience in the class, and/or else certain students did not want to select their own books.

Based on how Ryan and Jacob did not appear to want me to identify them as readers and how negatively they framed the act of reading, I wondered if self-selection of text was actually a positive thing, as Goth and Clark (2013) asserted, or if in this case, it was actually a hindrance or stressor for these two participants. While research has shown that self-selection of text has positive benefits for adolescents, the findings in this study show that choice might not be inherently positive for some students, particularly those who do not have positive reading identities. These students might need support, modeling, and scaffolding when it comes to feeling comfortable and autonomous in self-selecting a text to read. This is something teachers in alternative schools must consider when implementing reading programs with their students.

Hall (2010) conducted a multiple case study in a middle school that analyzed students' interactions with classroom reading tasks. She found that how they approached and interacted with reading tasks was based on how they identified themselves as readers, as well as on how they might prevent their peers, teachers, or family members from constructing their (participants') identities as poor readers. I would argue that both Ryan and Jacob's approaches to reading in the classroom were heavily influenced by how they identified themselves as readers (or, in this case, as non-readers). One difference with Hall's study, however, is that based on Ryan and Jacob's interviews, I could tell that they did *not* want me to identify them as a "reader" (or a "good" or "strong" or "interested" reader). While Hall's participants were concerned about being perceived as poor readers, Ryan and Jacob did not want to be thought of as readers at all.

While on the surface, it might be assumed that these two participants simply did not like reading and therefore did not want "reader" as part of their externally-ascribed identity, research has shown that there is likely more to it than that. Glenn, Ginsberg, and King-Watkins (2018) detailed a phenomenological case study that explored the external challenges to positive reading identities growing from participants' experiences in a YA literature course. In comparison with their regular English course, participants had positive experiences in the YA literature course and were able to enact agency over externally-ascribed identities that conflicted with their desired, more positive reading identities. However, it is imperative to note that these participants were most vulnerable to school-ascribed reading identities that they defined as negative. So, they were able to better overcome any type of negative identity ascribed to them by someone in their family or peer group; however, when it came to a negative reading identity that was ascribed by teachers or others in power within their school system, it was much more difficult for them.

This speaks to the level of influence that teachers have in shaping students' reading identities. Both Ryan and Jacob have had challenging educational experiences thus far, particularly at the mainstream high school before making the transition to the alternative high school. Both were not successful in their English classes prior to transitioning to the alternative school. I cannot assume that these negative experiences directly resulted in their negative reading identities, but based on related research, I can infer that there is a strong possibility that some of those negative perceptions about themselves as readers, as well as negative perceptions about being labeled a "reader" in general, might have stemmed from negative reading identities that were school-ascribed. How students in an alternative school see themselves as readers has an impact on the way they approach reading, and how these students perceive the ways their *teachers* see them as readers affects their own internalized identities (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Glenn, et al., 2018; Hall, 2010; Hall, 2012). This is important for alternative school teachers to recognize as they consider how to support their students in developing more positive reading identities.

Thus, the challenge remains to find ways for adolescents in alternative schools to take ownership of their reading identities and have true autonomy when it comes to text selection and ways of thinking about the books they are reading. The majority of participants did engage productively with the texts, in how they empathized with characters, critically questioned the text, and expressed their emotions in reaction to the text. These participants might have found that the journal entries, assignments, and texts themselves had meaning for them as individuals, which was evident in the data. However, according to the data, the remaining participants did not find that same meaning, and therefore had much more negative reactions than did the others. It seems that reading should not be used as a "blackbox" solution to all challenges that face

students in alternative schools; rather, the proven positive effects that reading can have need to be available to students in individualized ways that make sense for each student—not only in their areas of need, but also in their areas of strength.

Hall (2012) explored how a teacher could help support students as they developed their own reading identities through a case study of one middle school teacher and her students. Her findings indicated the importance of making the concept of identity explicit to students and also of students taking ownership over their reading identities. Hall found that students initially believed teachers should tell them what kind of reader they were (i.e. good or poor), rather than having autonomy over who they are as readers. The teacher in this study worked in a partnership model with students over the course of a school year to support them as they developed their own reading identities; in this way, they set their own goals and made their own decisions about texts. As a result, they no longer viewed who they were as readers as decided solely by the adults in power. This creation of reading partnerships might be one way to begin to counter the danger of the “blackbox” one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction.

Implications for Instructional Practice in Alternative Schools

There are several implications for instructional practice from this research study that can be implemented by teachers in alternative school settings. In this study, tardiness and truancy were significant issues as they impacted the amount of in-class reading time students had. When students returned after being absent, Readers’ Workshop time was often used to catch up on other assignments, rather than reading participants’ self-selected YA text. While there is value in catching up on other work, teachers should be aware of the implicit messages this might send students: reading is not a top priority, and reading time is not as valuable as time devoted to other subjects or assignments. A majority (four out of six) of participants told me they did not read

outside of school, and, in fact, many left their books in the classroom so that they would have them there to read, because they did not bring materials out of the classroom for fear of forgetting or losing them outside of school. If the only reading students do is in class, then that reading time has to be prioritized when possible.

Another challenge for teachers in alternative schools is the tension that exists between compliance and innovation (Hemmer et al., 2013). In my study, the classroom teacher had autonomy in her classroom and was able to implement her Readers' Workshop program in ways that she felt were best for her students. However, according to the literature, that is not the case in many alternative school settings (Hemmer et al., 2013; Watson, 2011). Teachers should have clear rationales that contain empirical evidence, like the findings in the present study, to defend the need to infuse YA literature into their curricula and program design in alternative schools. Students in this study were able to move at their own pace in their respective novels, and the assignments were individualized in many ways (e.g. student choice). Thus, it has a place in classrooms that contain multiple grade levels, skill levels, and interests among students. Individualized computer-based programs are *not* the only way to reach different students. Additionally, as evidenced by this study, YA texts have the potential to engage students, prompt them to think about identity development, and support them in expressing and developing empathy. I would argue that the scripted academic programs likely do not boast these same positive outcomes.

Teachers can also use YA literature as a means for discussing emotions, particularly through students connecting to characters in their books. I saw first-hand the number of outside-of-school issues that students in an alternative school carry into the classroom, and many of those issues were not ones that are easy for most kids to discuss (e.g. gun violence; familial turmoil;

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

substance abuse; homelessness). Teachers can look at these issues that “lie at the heart of human existence” (Noddings, 2003) as windows into how to educate the whole child. YA books can serve as a platform for important thinking and conversation around these issues to take place through journaling, other assignments, and discussion, as was evidenced in this study. These connections can help students think about their own lives through their empathy for the characters in their texts.

The data showed that participants had positive feelings associated with connecting to characters’ negative experiences, which is important for educators to recognize, as it could provide a rationale for including YA texts that contain characters in these types of seemingly dire situations in curricula and/or classroom libraries. It is also important for teachers to understand, as evidenced in the data from this study, that there might exist a thoughtful connection between reading, writing, and speaking when it comes to students expressing their reactions and thinking processes about a text. For example, many participants were able to talk about connections they made to the text in deeper, more meaningful ways after the interviewer referred to a journal entry or written artifact the student had completed prior to the interview. Even though the student’s writing might not have been substantial, it was still enough to get them to speak in greater depth and with more elaboration and criticality. As such, educators might consider giving students space to respond in writing before engaging in conversation around a text.

Because students in alternative schools oftentimes have challenges they are facing outside of school, teachers should be aware of the importance of unpacking students’ reactions to both what they read, as their reactions can give their teacher insight into their lives, and how that teacher might best support them. In the case of Carlos finding Tyrell’s challenging circumstances to be “funny,” a teacher might unintentionally write that reaction off as Carlos

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

trying to mock the book. However, upon closer examination, we learned a lot about Carlos's connection to Tyrell through his disbelief (expressed as the book being "so funny") about their similarities. Teachers should also recognize that some students cannot or do not express all of their thoughts comfortably in writing, so additional oral conversation might be necessary in order to uncover a student's deeper thinking. This was evidenced by Jacob, as he required oral follow-up questions to uncover more about his thought processes in relation to his reading. This would be important for his teacher to recognize as she confers with him about his reading and as she crafts assignments that aim to have him react to and critically analyze what he is reading.

It is also important for teachers to unpack students' reactions to the act of reading in general. There may be underlying reasons why students may be resistant to reading, or maybe the way reading time is facilitated in the classroom is not comfortable for some students. The way Readers' Workshop time was structured in this particular classroom seemed to work for four of the six participants. However the other two were very resistant to the format and to reading. While research has shown the importance of adolescents feeling a sense of belonging (Bell, 2011), as well as the positive impact of adolescent readers selecting their own texts (Goth & Clark, 2013), it was evidenced in this study that these two elements alone do not necessarily result in students having positive reading experiences. Teachers must be cautious about the act of reading being "blackboxed" (Latour, 1987, as cited by Sjödin, 2018), and used as a "fix all" for students, whether students have any say in it or not. An alternative school teacher might begin the year by asking for student input to help shape the role of reading in the classroom, and student choice and autonomy should be of utmost importance. Teachers should seek to find ways to support students in designing their own reading experiences in ways that work for them. Some examples might include (but are not limited to): reading on a Kindle or computer; listening

to the audio version of a book while following along in the text; reading in various locations in the classroom; choosing their own book; selecting their assignments they complete in conjunction with their reading; and incorporating different types of journaling. By giving students choice and autonomy, reading becomes malleable and less “plastic” (Sjödin, 2018), making it more authentic and accessible for students in this type of setting.

It is also imperative that teachers in alternative schools know (and believe) and are able to communicate to their superiors (e.g. administrators) that their students are capable of deep, critical, creative thinking and modes of expression, particularly (as indicated by this study) when it comes to thinking about what they read in YA texts. This critical thinking can be inspired by YA texts and can be foundational for student writing. In Muhammad’s 2015 study, she found that participants were able to use their connections to the characters to generate and inspire ideas for their own writing, which is what happened in Logan’s case. He was so moved by the empathy he felt for the protagonist that he created a poem to express how he believed she felt about her circumstances. I found it telling that participants chose to express their reactions to characters’ feelings and thoughts through a creative form, such as through poetry. Providing students with elements of choice in how they respond to their reading allows them to take ownership of their choice of expression. This has particular relevance to students in alternative schools, since they typically have trouble adjusting to traditional classroom environments and oftentimes have disciplinary issues in regular classrooms (Lehr & Lange, 2003). When students in an alternative school setting have options for expressing their feelings of empathy for the characters in the books they read, it allows them to creatively express themselves in a way that makes sense for them, as Logan did.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Logan, as well as the majority of participants in this study, expressed openly their feelings of belonging in the alternative school, versus feeling like outsiders when they were at the “Big School.” While related scholarship focuses on the feelings of isolation students in alternative schools often feel, teachers in alternative schools can use the findings in this study, which challenges this idea, to build both their classroom communities and their communities of readers. If students in an alternative school already feel a deeper sense of belonging in their alternative school setting, teachers can think about how they can use YA texts to further develop this feeling of belonging. This might take the form of independent reading time (as was done in this study), literature circles, book clubs, for example. This also might include making connections between students’ reading experiences and other social emotional skills that are taught elsewhere in the school curriculum. In this case, the Teen Issues/Life Skills course that was taught likely provided students with the language they might need to talk in meaningful ways about their emotions in response to their reading, as well as about the characters and their emotions and challenging experiences. Teachers might consider ways to explicitly teach this language to students so they have a “tool box” of words relating to emotions, relationships, communication, and other aspects of social and emotional human development and existence. Having this language at their disposal would also help both the teacher and students to develop a community where students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.

While feelings of belonging and the unique role of the teacher and her emotional support for students played a role in a majority of participants’ feelings of belonging and comfort levels in openly expressing their emotions in response to the text they were reading, alternative school teachers also must recognize that providing students with choice might not be an inherently productive strategy for all students, particularly if adequate support and scaffolding is not

provided. If students do not feel confident or comfortable in their reading identities, having to self-select an independent reading text or assignment to complete in connection with a text might be daunting at best and anxiety-inducing and stressful at worst. Teachers should commit the time and effort it takes to work on supporting students in developing their positive reading identities. This might mean teachers have to model and explicitly teach students steps they can take in successfully selecting books. This might include taking interest surveys; utilizing online resources such as Goodreads.com to match interests to book choices; modeling how to read the back of a book and the first few pages and gauge whether or not a text is a good fit for a reader; or creating a “book recommendation wall” that students can create as a class and refer to when it comes time to select a book. These strategies might be useful to lessen the stress that might accompany the requirement of making a choice for some students.

Implications for Further Research

This research study provided an initial exploration into the reactions that students in an alternative school had to the self-selected YA texts they read. The study used the lens of Rosenblatt’s Reader Response Theory (1938) to examine these reactions. Future research could further inform teacher practice and ELA program design in alternative school settings. First, there could be deeper exploration into the connection between this population reading YA literature and their own identity development. It was evident in the present study that participants were thinking about facets of identity (both the characters’ and their own), but the connection between the two was not the central focus. An intervention study could be designed that specifically focuses on personal identity using YA texts as a way to have students critically examine their own identities.

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Additionally, further research could be conducted to explore and evaluate the different ways YA literature can be used in the alternative school classroom. The teacher in this study used Readers' Workshop in her classroom to facilitate students' reading experience. Studies might be designed that investigate different instructional approaches that incorporate YA literature into alternative school classrooms. These studies might be conducted in isolation, in which each focuses on a different instructional format or strategy (e.g. book clubs; literature circles; class book blog; etc.). Alternatively, one study could be conducted that comparatively examines several different approaches to see the strengths and potential areas of weakness or challenges for each. It is my expectation that different types of instruction might work for different classrooms, depending on the students. Having data about strategies and models for reading that might work effectively with different students would be beneficial to teachers as they think about designing their ELA curricula and instruction.

Finally, there could be further research into the ways that reading currently might be "black-boxed" in alternative school settings. A study might be designed that examines reading in multiple alternative school classrooms in different types of settings (urban, suburban, rural). This study could focus on how reading is positioned and utilized in the classroom and what the implications of those positionings and structures might be for students in these classrooms. Critical examination of ways that reading might be black-boxed in these settings would likely serve to inspire future studies and conversation around how reading could be moved *out* of that box in ways that would make it more meaningful for students as they navigate the process of developing their own personal reading identities.

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Note: During the interviews, students had access to the daily reading log (kept by the teacher), their reading journal, all artifacts for the book being discussed, and the text they read. I told participants they could use and refer to any or all of those as they answered the interview questions.

1. Please tell me about the book you chose to read and why you chose it.
2. What did you think about the book?
3. What was it like when you started/during/after reading this book? How did you feel?
4. Talk to me about your journaling process.
5. Is there something you connected to personally or in your own life during your reading? (Please explain/refer to the text/journal/artifact.)
6. If you had to choose an artifact you completed/created as the most important to you, which one would you choose and why?
7. If you had to choose a journal entry that is the most important, which one would you select and why?
8. How might your experience of reading this book be unique to you?
9. Do any of the characters remind you of anyone you know? How so?
10. Do any of the events in the book remind you of any experiences in your own life?
11. Is there anything you wish I asked you about but didn't or anything additional you'd like to talk about in regards to your reading experience of this book?
12. What's your take away from the book?
13. What did you learn from reading the book?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions (Continued)

14. What do you think the author hoped you learned from reading the book?
15. Would you recommend this book to someone? (To whom? Why?)
16. What words would you use to describe the book?
17. How did the book make you feel?
18. Were there any points when you wanted to stop reading the book? Why?

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Appendix B

Code Mapping Explanation Tables

Context of Study (descriptions of the school, classroom, and Readers' Workshop time)

(SECOND ITERATION: PATTERN THEMES)

Physical environment/resources in school and classroom	Influences on school environment for students	What students do during Readers' Workshop time in class	Instruction/Assignments	Student/teacher interaction	Other
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(FIRST ITERATION: INITIAL CODES/SURFACE CONTENT ANALYSIS)

1A Support services in school	2A Disruption to student learning	3A Students using cell phones	4A independent reading assignments	5A Strength of student-teacher relationship	6A Student background info
1B Physical set up of classroom (include diagram here)	2B Interruption due to student issues outside the classroom	3B Students with headphones	4B Kindles	5B Teacher as parental figure	
1C School is short-staffed	2C Tardiness or truancy issues	3C Discussion about books among students	4C Student choice	5C Student defiance of teacher	
1D Buddy the dog's role in the classroom		3D Active student reading	4D Individualized instruction	5D Students engaging with teacher about books	
1E Number of students present		3E Student sleeping		5E Positive reinforcement by teacher	
		3F Students doing other work during Readers' Workshop time			

RUNNING HEAD: REACTING TO YA LITERATURE

Data Codes and Themes

(SECOND AND THIRD ITERATIONS: PATTERN THEMES **INDICATED IN BOLD** AND THEME CATEGORIES IN *ITALICS AND IN BOLD*, RESPECTIVELY)

(FIRST ITERATION: INITIAL CODES/SURFACE CONTENT ANALYSIS)

<p>Expressions of Empathy for Characters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Felt empathy for character(s) or situations *Connection to characters' negative/challenging experiences *Connections to friends' lives *Connection to family life *Connection to relationship with significant other *Connection to general realizations about people or humanity *Connection to TV show, movie, or video game *Connects own life and community to the characters and situations in book hypothetically *Connection to personal reading and/or writing outside of this experience *Connection specifically to the "big" school vs. alternative school *Connection to school *Finds humor in book *Decision to read the book *Likes book because of personal connection(s) *Connects character's personal attributes to self *Book sparked desire to learn more about a topic *Desire to read books told from perspectives different than one's own *Expresses desire to read violent, twisted, strange, psychological books that make you think *Book makes participant want to find answers outside the text *Creative expression of empathy *Poem format 	<p>Expressions of Wonder and Questioning</p> <p><i>Questioning aspects of the book</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Book elicits feelings of surprise or disbelief *Not understanding why something occurred <p><i>Questioning aspects of their own lives</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Book causes participant to wonder about aspect of own life *Questions own choices because of connection to book 	<p>Expressions of Negative Reactions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Anger at cruelty *Anger at immorality of character's actions *Dislike of ending causes anger in participant *Disapproval of character's actions *Frustration regarding character's circumstance *Difficulty continuing on with a book because of disturbing connection *Anger at injustice *Feelings of frustration as a result of empathy. 	<p>Reactions to the Act of Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Lack of connection=lack of interest *Lack of connection because of gender *Only read the book because participant had to *Expresses dislike of reading *Lack of connection to the book *Expresses disinterest *Enjoys reading *Family members as readers
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Appendix C

Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data Triangulation

Research Question: How do students in an alternative high school react to self-selected YA texts they read independently in school?

	<i>Source of Data</i>			
<i>Major Finding</i>	Interview	After-thoughts	Journal Entry	Artifacts
Category 1: Expressions of Empathy				
Thinking about one's own life because of empathy for character				
Felt empathy for character(s) or situations	x	x	x	x
Connection to characters' negative/challenging experiences	x	x	x	x
Connections to friends' lives	x			
Connection to family life	x	x	x	x
Connection to relationship with significant other	x			x
Connection to general realizations about people or humanity	x		x	
Connection to tv show, movie, or video game	x	x		
Connects own life and community to the characters and situations in book hypothetically	x	x	x	
Connection to personal reading and/or writing outside of this experience	x	x		
Connection specifically to the "big" school vs. alternative school	x	x		
Connection to school	x	x	x	
Finds humor in book	x	x		
Decision to read the book	x			
Likes book because of personal connection(s)	x	x		
Connects character's personal attributes to self	x	x	x	
Creative expression of empathy	x	x	x	x
Poem format	x	x	x	x
Book sparked desire to learn more about a topic	x		x	
Desire to read books told from perspectives different than one's own	x	x	x	
Expresses desire to read violent, twisted, strange, psychological books that make you think	x		x	
Book makes participant want to find answers outside the text	x	x	x	x
Category 2: Expressions of Wonder and Questioning				
Questioning aspects of the book				
Questioning events in the book	x		x	
Book elicits feelings of surprise or disbelief	x		x	
Not understanding why something occurred	x	x	x	
Questioning aspects of their own lives				
Book causes participant to wonder about aspect of own life	x	x		
Questions own choices because of connection to book	x			

Table 5: Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data Triangulation (Continued)

	<i>Source of Data</i>			
<i>Major Finding</i>	Interview	After-thoughts	Journal Entry	Artifacts
Category 3: Expressions of Negative Reactions				
Anger at cruelty	x	x	x	x
Anger at immorality of character's actions	x		x	x
Dislike of ending causes anger in participant	x			
Disapproval of character's actions	x			
Frustration regarding character's circumstance	x	x	x	x
Difficulty continuing on with a book because of disturbing connection	x			
Anger at injustice	x	x	x	x
Feelings of frustration as a result of empathy	x	x		
Category 4: Reactions Related to the Act of Reading				
Reader identity	x	x		
Family members as readers	x			
Reading outside of school	x	x		
Likes reading	x	x		
Lack of connection=lack of interest	x	x		
Lack of connection because of gender	x			
Only read the book because participant had to	x	x		
Expresses dislike of reading	x	x		
Lack of connection to the book	x	x		
Enjoys reading	x	x		
Family members as readers	x	x		

Appendix D

Example Readers' Workshop Assignment (given by teacher during researcher's classroom observations)

Assignment: Take Away (Use for Midterm)

Name:

Using any of the books you have read (or partially read) this semester, explain an important aspect of your novel and what you have taken away from reading the book. Be sure to include the following: What did you "take away" from this book? What has changed in/about you by reading this book? (this can be ANYTHING that has changed i.e. an awareness, an opinion, empathy, sympathy, understanding, acceptance etc.) Explain the "before" and "after" of this change. How did the author (state author's name in your writing) give this lesson to you? Give specific examples from the book where the author brought about this "take away." Again, explain how what the author presented made you think/feel/know differently.

10

8.5

7.5

6.5

5

Score:

I. COMMUNICATE IN A VARIETY OF METHODS

Advanced Achievement

Exceeds Standards

Meets Standard

Approaching Standard

Working Toward Standard

Content-answer the question completely w/ examples from book

"Take Aways" x 2

Exceptionally engaging and focused work results in an extremely high quality product.

Purpose and focus leads to insightful and engaging product with compelling support. Establishes a purpose and maintains a focus with supporting evidence throughout the product.

Establishes a purpose but does not maintain a focus. Support is limited or inappropriate.

A clear purpose is not established. Focus and support are undeveloped.

Organization

Exceptional fluency and clarity result in a clear and well-developed product.

Effective use of fluency and clarity strengthens the structure of the product.

Demonstrates fluency and clarity in a structured product.

Limited use of fluency and clarity weakens the structure of the product.

Lack of fluency and clarity compromises the structure of the product.

Example Readers' Workshop Assignment (Continued)

Interpretation- connect to what you read in your text X 2

Clearly demonstrates an exceptional ability to make connections and interpretations regarding a text using details from the book

Uses details and connections to convey the figurative meaning and supports ideas with evidence from the work.

Effectively conveys the figurative meaning and supports ideas with evidence from the work.

Demonstrates a limited understanding of the figurative meaning with minimal evidence from the work.

Does not form connections between literal and figurative components in a work.

Mechanics

Demonstrates exemplary use of language, spelling, mechanics and MLA format
Demonstrates above average use of language, spelling, mechanics and MLA format
Demonstrates adequate use of language, spelling, mechanics and MLA format
Demonstrates inconsistent use of adequate language, spelling, mechanics and/or MLA format
Demonstrates limited or no use of adequate language, spelling, mechanics and/or MLA format

____/30

Appendix E

Young Adult Literature Read by Participants*

Andrews, A. (2014). *Some assembly required: The not-so-secret life of a transgender teen.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Seventeen-year-old Arin Andrews shares all the hilarious, painful, and poignant details of undergoing gender reassignment as a high school student. In this revolutionary first-of-its-kind memoir, Arin Andrews details the journey that led him to make the life-transforming decision to undergo gender reassignment as a high school junior. In his captivatingly witty, honest voice, Arin reveals the challenges he faced as a boy in a girl's body, the humiliation and anger he felt after getting kicked out of his private school, and all the changes—both mental and physical—he experienced once his transition began.

Some Assembly Required is a true coming-of-age story about knocking down obstacles and embracing family, friendship, and first love. But more than that, it is a reminder that self-acceptance does not come ready-made with a manual and spare parts. Rather, some assembly is always required.

Booth, C. (2006). *Tyrell.* New York, NY: Scholastic Press.

Tyrell is a young African-American teen who can't get a break. He's living (for now) with his spaced-out mother and little brother in a homeless shelter. His father's in jail. His girlfriend supports him, but he doesn't feel good enough for her—and seems to be always on the verge of doing the wrong thing around her. There's another girl at the homeless shelter who is also after him, although the desires there are complicated. Tyrell feels he needs to score some money to make things better. Will he end up following in his father's footsteps?

Donnelly, J. (2015). *These shallow graves.* New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Jo Montfort is beautiful and rich, and soon—like all the girls in her class—she'll graduate from finishing school and be married off to a wealthy bachelor, which is the last thing she wants. Jo dreams of becoming a writer—a newspaper reporter.

Wild aspirations aside, Jo's life seems perfect until tragedy strikes: her father is found dead. The story is that Charles Montfort shot himself while cleaning his revolver, but the more Jo hears about her father's death, the more something feels wrong. And then she meets Eddie—a young, smart, infuriatingly handsome reporter at her father's newspaper—and it becomes all too clear how much she stands to lose if she keeps searching for the truth. But now it might be too late to stop.

The past never stays buried forever. Life is dirtier than Jo Montfort could ever have imagined, and this time the truth is the dirtiest part of all.

Frank, E. R. (2015). *Dime*. New York, NY: Anthenium Books for Young Readers.

The realities of teen prostitution are revealed in this eye-opening, heartbreaking story from the author of *America*, which *Booklist* called “a piercing, unforgettable novel” and *Kirkus Reviews* deemed “a work of sublime humanity.”

As a teen girl in Newark, New Jersey, lost in the foster care system, Dime just wants someone to care about her, to love her. A family. And that is exactly what she gets—a daddy and two “wifeys.” So what if she has to go out and earn some coins to keep her place? It seems a fair enough exchange for love.

Dime never meant to become a prostitute. It happened so gradually, she pretty much didn’t realize it was happening until it was too late.

But when a new “wifey” joins the family and Dime finds out that Daddy doesn’t love her the way she thought he did, will Dime have the strength to leave? And will Daddy let her?

Kye, T. L. (2017). *Prince of pot*. Toronto, Canada: Greenwood Books.

Isaac loves art class, drives an old pickup, argues with his father, and hangs out with his best buddy, Hazel. But his life is anything but normal. His parents operate an illegal marijuana grow-op, Hazel is a bear that guards the property, and his family’s livelihood is a deep secret.

It’s no time to fall in love with the daughter of a cop.

Isaac’s girlfriend Sam is unpredictable, ambitious and needy. And as his final year of high school comes to an end, she makes him consider a new kind of life pursuing his interest in art, even if that means leaving behind his beloved home in the Rockies and severing all ties with his family.

For a while he hopes he can have it all, until a disastrous graduation night, when Sam’s desperate grab for her father’s attention suddenly puts his entire family at risk.

Smith, C. B. (2017). *Mr. 60%*. New York, NY: Crown Books for Young Readers.

Matt Nolan is the high school drug dealer, deadbeat, and soon-to-be dropout according to everyone at his school. His vice principal is counting down the days until Mr. 60% (aka Matt) finally flunks out and is no longer his problem. What no one knows is the only reason Matt sells drugs is to take care of his uncle Jack, who is dying of cancer.

Meet Amanda. The overly cheerful social outcast whose optimism makes Matt want to hurl. Stuck as partners during an after-school club (mandatory for Matt), it’s only a matter of time until Amanda discovers Matt’s secret. But Amanda is used to dealing with heartbreak, and she’s determined to help Matt find a way to give life 100 percent.

Summers, C. (2012). *This is not a test*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin.

It's the end of the world. Six students have taken cover in Cortège High, but shelter is little comfort when the dead outside won't stop pounding on the doors. One bite is all it takes to kill a person and bring them back as a monstrous version of their former self.

To Sloane Price, that doesn't sound so bad. Six months ago, *her* world collapsed and since then, she's failed to find a reason to keep going. Now seems like the perfect time to give up. As Sloane eagerly waits for the barricades to fall, she's forced to witness the apocalypse through the eyes of five people who actually *want* to live. But as the days crawl by, the motivations for survival change in startling ways and soon the group's fate is determined less and less by what's happening outside and more and more by the unpredictable and violent bids for life—*and* death—inside.

When everything is gone, what do *you* hold on to?

Vlahos, L. (2014). *The scar boys*. New York, NY: Egmont USA.

A severely burned teenager. A guitar. Punk rock. The chords of a rock 'n' roll road trip in a coming-of-age novel that is a must-read story about finding your place in the world...even if you carry scars inside and out.

In attempting to describe himself in his college application essay—help us to become acquainted with you beyond your courses, grades, and test scores—Harbinger (Harry) Jones goes way beyond the 250-word limit and gives a full account of his life.

The first defining moment: the day the neighborhood goons tied him to a tree during a lightning storm when he was eight years old, and the tree was struck and caught fire. Harry was badly burned and has had to live with the physical and emotional scars, reactions from strangers, bullying, and loneliness that instantly became his everyday reality.

The second defining moment: the day in 8th grade when the handsome, charismatic Johnny rescued him from the bullies and then made the startling suggestion that they start a band together. Harry discovered that playing music transported him out of his nightmare of a world, and he finally had something that compelled people to look beyond his physical appearance. Harry's description of his life in his essay is both humorous and heart-wrenching. He had a steeper road to climb than the average kid, but he ends up learning something about personal power, friendship, first love, and how to fit in the world. While he's looking back at the moments that have shaped his life, most of this story takes place while Harry is in high school and the summer after he graduates.

*Note: All book summaries were acquired from Amazon.com.

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