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# Rigor and Relevance: A Teacher Research Study on Using Young Adult Literature in Detracked Secondary English Language Arts Courses

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores how three students who would not have qualified for honors-level curriculum under a tracked model performed in detracked English Language Arts (ELA) courses. Our teacher research study was guided by the following question: How can the incorporation of young adult literature (YAL) in a detracked ELA honors course affect the experiences of students who would not have qualified for honors curriculum under a tracked model? We found that the incorporation of YAL helped students explore diverse ideas and expanded their capacity to think, read, and write critically. This study has implications for broader conversations relating to detracking policies and initiatives. Providing rigor and relevance for all students in a detracked course is an important step in ensuring success for diverse student populations.*

This article explores how three students who would not have qualified for honors-level curriculum under a tracked model performed in detracked English Language Arts (ELA) courses. The study takes place at the University of Florida's public K-12 developmental research school, P.K. Yonge (P.K.). Prior to 2010, P.K.'s middle school students with a certain IQ score were tracked into Gifted ELA. This designation often followed our students into high school, where Honors English was offered to gifted students and certain others, typically those with a passable "developmental scale score" according to standardized, state-provided literacy achievement data. However, in 2010-2011, our high school ELA courses were detracked. For eleventh and twelfth grade, all non-AP students were scheduled in homogeneous honors classes, a striking institutional shift. Even more sweepingly, all ninth-grade and tenth-grade students—approximately 120 children per grade level—were homogeneously scheduled into five sections of ninth- and tenth-grade Honors ELA. In 2014-2015, middle school ELA was also detracked to match the high school program. These policy changes were made in an effort to provide equitable access to the highest quality of instruction for all students. Likewise, in 2015-2016, the eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-grade ELA teachers intentionally incorporated more young adult literature (YAL) to more accurately reflect the diverse interests and academic competencies of the student population we served. Our study, conducted within this context, was guided by the following research question: *How can the incorporation of YAL in a detracked ELA honors course affect the experiences of students who would not have qualified for honors curriculum under a tracked model?* We found that the incorporation of YAL helped students explore diverse ideas and expanded their capacity to think, read, and write critically.

This article is situated as a teacher research project. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) identify five quality indicators for teacher research: detailed information about the study site and context, an explanation of the “root” of the research question, a study design that incorporates a variety of data sources, learnings from the study, and implications for practice (pp. 221-25). These indicators frame our paper. First, we provide information about our school from the perspectives of schoolwide policy and individual classrooms. Second, we discuss the history of our collegiality and illustrate how scholarship on YAL and detracking guides our work. Third, we provide an overview of our research methods. However, the highlight of our project is our findings. We trust the student narratives provided will serve as a call to action for those with institutional power to liberate suppressed voices. We end the paper by outlining our next steps as well as implications for other teachers and school leaders.

### **Context for this Research and School Context**

The research outlined in this article comes from the 2015-2016 classrooms of our detracked eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-grade ELA courses. During the time of this project, Jen Cheveallier taught eighth, Cody Miller taught ninth, and Kate Yurko taught tenth grade. However, Jen started working at P.K. Yonge in 2008, teaching three sections of ninth grade Honors English and two sections of ninth grade “regular” English, distinctions that she questioned as being overly influenced by students’ socioeconomic statuses, racial identities, and past academic and disciplinary records. This was also a time when, as a school, we were not making Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) with our African American student population as defined by standardized achievement data. Jen wondered whether this phenomenon might be linked to institutional roadblocks that prevented equitable access to the best curriculum. After all, tradition dictated that students be scheduled into high school Honors English based on their elementary IQ scores, the prior year’s standardized state assessment scores, previous course grades, or parental intervention. Hoping to ensure all students received the state-designated benefit of a GPA boost as well access to the school’s best curriculum, Jen was able to point to the Florida Class Size Amendment as justification for homogenous courses and a single designation of students’ ELA status: honors. Fortunately, there seemed to be no more reasonable way to “even out” the numbers of our overcrowded, nebulously defined non-honors sections of “regular” English.

In 2011, Jen completed the inquiry project “Legal Problem; Pedagogical Solution,” which followed the experiences of four students in her homogenized honors courses who would not have qualified for honors under the old tracking

system. During focus-group style conversations, these students expressed pride from receiving the honors designation. In a survey, these students also communicated a positive shift in their self-perceptions as learners from the prior year to the current one. However, none of these students reported to enjoy reading, nor did they see the class as pertinent to their personal life goals. There was work to do in ELA.

In 2011, Kate was hired at P.K. to teach five sections of Honors English to our newly homogenized student body of approximately 120 tenth graders. Jen was assigned as Kate's mentor, and the two teachers worked together in an effort to streamline planning. Kate's expertise in literary theory provided a rich knowledge base. They developed a common set of ELA concepts essential to the exploration of literature and integrated these into each of their ninth-grade and tenth-grade honors courses. This collaboration provided high-quality curriculum for every student and established a valuable precedent in ELA.

Cody came on the scene as an intern in Jen's classroom in spring 2011. When Jen moved to eighth grade, Cody was hired as the ninth-grade ELA teacher, joining the team as a reformer interested in promoting marginalized narratives and empowering the disenfranchised. His personal experiences as a gay teenager in a small rural school district and as an ambitious teacher in a developmental research school have greatly contributed to contemporary school policy.

As the eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-grade ELA teachers, we met together frequently. We found time during our lunch, after mandatory meetings, and after school to discuss how we might work together to reform the structure, goals, and methods of our ELA instruction. During the 2015-2016 school year, we operated as a collaborative team, relying on our collective experience and leadership to develop a spiraling and rigorous ELA curriculum that valued the experiences of our most marginalized students. This paper will provide a brief overview of literature relating to our investment in YAL and detracking and then move into our project-related research question. This work is evidence of the need for inclusive and rigorous ELA experiences for all public school students, regardless of past test scores or course grades. It is also a story of how teacher inquiry had a transformative effect on school policy.

### **YAL in Our ELA Courses**

YAL plays a foundational role in our ELA curriculum for several reasons. YAL has long been seen as integral to a contemporary English Language Arts curriculum (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, Wilhelm, & Simon, 2011; Beach,

Johnston, & Thein, 2015; Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2012). Recent scholarship has expanded on the importance of YAL in secondary classrooms in response to evolving diversification of classroom environments. For instance, Miller and Slifkin (2010) called for pairing YAL with traditionally taught AP texts in order to achieve more diversity in AP Literature courses and argue that the literary canon should be seen as an evolving concept. Miller (2013) later argued that it is more important that students can “read widely, shift and apply literary lenses depending on context, unpack meaning, critique ideas, and make sense of literature in a way that is useful and applicable in their lives” (p. 83) than being able to read canonical text. Within our secondary ELA department, students are scheduled into homogeneous groups until they are, we believe, skilled enough and academically autonomous enough to choose the AP track. This occurs in their junior year and represents a departure from a YAL-focused curriculum. We believe that YAL texts, which are more familiar to our students’ lives and experiences, enable our diverse student body to make connections to the curriculum and, for those who choose the challenge, offer adequate analytical skill preparation for AP English.

Our curriculum includes several pairings of classic texts and YAL. YAL can be a gateway into learning literary theory (Latrobe & Drury, 2009), a tool for differentiating in the classroom (Groenke & Scherff, 2010), a way to develop perspective-taking (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007), a means to address the real problems teens face (Flores, Medina, Durand, & Blasingame, 2016), and a pathway into understanding cultural studies and developing critical literacy (Webb, 2012, 2015). All of these reasons align with the goals of our ELA courses, which aim to use texts to explore broader socio-cultural and political issues in students’ lives. Our ELA curriculum and instructional methods are designed to help students develop the ability to read the world and the word (Freire & Macedo, 1998). YAL is foundational to that goal.

YAL literature offers students opportunities to read about experiences and characters that are different from their own and see themselves in their ELA curriculum. In other words, YAL provides what Bishop (1990) calls “mirrors” and “windows,” literature that allows students to see themselves in what they read as well as gain perspective from people different from themselves. Bishop’s clarion call has been vital to our own ELA curriculum as have more recent calls to expand the definition of “multicultural literature” to include religious and sexual minorities as well as people with disabilities and people living outside of the United States (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2014). Our school has a diverse student population, a population that by state law must reflect the diversity of our state. However, as with any student body, our school’s diversity extends beyond

state indicators: we have students who identify as LGBTQ, students who are immigrants or whose parents are immigrants, students who practice a minority religion, and students who are adopted. We believe it would be unethical to create and implement curriculum that does not include the voices of people like our students. Therefore, we believe that curriculum should be treated as a living and evolving entity that should be nurtured and revised as student populations shift. Many “classic” texts are Eurocentric and reflect a limited worldview; fortunately, YAL provides an opportunity for our curriculum to be as diverse as our student body.

### **Detracking at Our School**

Tracking is the process of segregating students into distinct groups based on markers such as standardized test scores, past grades, IQ tests, or other measures; typically, these groups receive different curriculums with one implicitly superior to another in quality and rigor. Tracked courses perpetuate racial and economic inequities. Students of color and from low-income homes make up the majority of remedial classes while honors, gifted, and advanced courses are overwhelmingly composed of middle-to-upper class white students (Oakes, 2005; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Tyson, 2013). These remedial courses are frequently skill-driven and lack the intellectual and creative rigor of their advanced counterparts (Burris, 2008).

Anecdotally, these assertions ring true at other schools. When Kate worked in a neighboring rural county, her advanced courses contained higher numbers of middle class white students. In her AP Literature course, there were only two students of color in the entire class. Her “regular” courses were generally composed of working-class students, students living in poverty, and students of color. Like many teachers who work in such schools, Kate struggled to “do the right thing” and give her best instruction to every student, but the system seemed to work against her. We shared these anxieties at P.K. Yonge. While an advanced course sounded like a good option for students who excelled in ELA, the demographics of our AP courses did not correspond with our student body at large. We were perpetuating broad social inequities at our school. Thankfully, our school’s leadership was open to exploring alternative scheduling options and wanted to work with us to ensure students’ diverse needs were met.

In 2010-2011, our school’s ninth- and tenth-grade ELA courses were detracked in response to two major issues. First, our African American population, which was disproportionately overrepresented in “non-honors” courses, was also not making annual yearly progress (AYP) on the state’s

standardized reading and writing assessment (FCAT). We knew we needed to remove barriers to this cohort's access to our best curriculum. Second, our school adopted a Response to Intervention model, which promotes "Embedded Strategy Instruction" as supportive curriculum that builds content proficiency for all students. We designed a framework for ELA instruction to provide a rich, challenging, and rigorous experience to every student, regardless of past achievement data.

The inequities revealed by discrepancies in demographic enrollment of honors versus "regular" are compounded when teacher experience is considered. Rookie teachers are more likely to teach remedial courses while veteran teachers are "rewarded" with teaching advanced courses (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2013). Our goal for ELA curriculum has been to professionalize and honor the work of the core classroom teacher in developing highly individualized curricula for diverse groupings of students. Rather than dictate fixed content and skills, which our students might measure up against (or not), we strive to design instruction that is responsive to diverse academic identities and experiences.

Student support is often determined in collaboration with a team of other content area teachers and student support personnel. Support strategies include flexible grouping of students for tailored instruction in skill practice, individualized commentary on written work, in-the-moment individualized coaching, and individually tailored reading and writing assignments. In sum, our reasons for detracking our ELA courses align with Nurenberg's (2016) assessment that ELA is the "ideal discipline" (p. 63) to be detracked within high schools.

### **Creating a Rigorous Curriculum for All Students in Detracked Courses**

Providing quality instruction that expands the capacities of all students is an evolving challenge. As noted, many "regular" courses lack creativity and rigor for students. Instead, remedial students typically face skill-driven, recall-heavy assessments that are teacher-centered and provide limited room for critical thinking and intellectual growth. Ideally, assessments should allow room for student choice, interpretation, and diverse responses. We will provide an outline of the types of assessments we offer before sharing samples of student work from our research.

We have already described *why* we use YAL. Now we will focus on *how* we use it to provide a rigorous and meaningful curriculum for all students. In our

ELA courses, assessment is not always limited to essays; instead, students can use multiple assignment formats to demonstrate their understandings and mastery of concepts and ideas. We provide a variety of formative and summative assignment options in our courses so that students have multiple opportunities to “show what they know.” We believe coursework should be designed to encourage success in the present. Assessment should reflect progress.

Such assessments include a critical essay that is typically used at the end of the quarter or semester as an exam. Prompts for synthesis essay assignments come from former AP Literature exams on the College Board website or mimic the AP exam’s format. We also assign a literary analysis project, for which students are asked to examine theme, characterization, symbol, and plot in multiple literary works they read throughout the year, including YAL; as well as annotations and dialogic journals, which allow students to show their personal and nuanced meaning-making processes as they reflect while they are reading. The types of assessments provided for all students move beyond the simple recall of facts and the isolated reading skills many “regular” courses espouse. Instead, all students are provided with opportunities to engage in complex topics and ideas using a variety of texts. YAL plays an important role in these assessments because the books are accessible to students and address contemporary issues often absent from “classic” texts.

We have outlined why and how we incorporated YAL into our courses in order to meet the needs of all learners in our detracked ELA classes. Because we wanted to understand what impact the incorporation of YAL had on student experiences, our next step in this project was to look at how students responded to this curriculum. Although there are many ways to gauge students’ responses to curriculum that go beyond the limits of the traditional A-F grading scale, we ultimately decided to use rubrics as the measure of student performance. Our state-adopted teacher evaluation tool encourages rubrics for formative and summative assessment (Marzano, 2007), and rubrics allow us to design our courses with student success in mind (Sample rubric provided in Appendix A).

Our students found success with some of the assignments throughout the year as measured by grades, student reflection, and teacher observation. We did our best to incorporate a variety of assessments so students would engage in new forms of writing to demonstrate understanding. Providing students with multiple means of expression gives teachers insight into different areas of success and need for individual students (Tovani, 2011). The long-term goal of our literacy program is to help students develop unique, personalized styles of interacting with



literature. In each of the assignments discussed, students engaged in exploring their ideas about their YAL book choices.

### Study Design

As we set out to inquire within our new ELA landscape, we were initially uncertain how best to examine the effects of detracking. Over a two-year period, we collected data on each student in each class period; however, our data did not necessarily tell a story of student success. We had, like the system, reduced our students to numbers: How many essays did students submit? How many revisions were submitted for a higher grade? How many grades improved as a result of that system? Asking these sorts of questions led us to understand that our students' literacy capacities were woefully underrepresented by the numbers, and we were reminded of Dana and Yendol-Hoppey's (2014) contention that teacher researchers need to draw on a variety of data sources that might include, but are not limited to, quantitative measures of student achievement. While completion of and grades received on various assessments indicated how our writing assessment and revision process were working programmatically, we wondered whether our system was working for the students themselves. *Where were their voices?*

As qualitative thinkers, for this study, we decided to track our students' stories. We began our search for which students to focus on by exploring the following criteria: (1) low-likely placement in honors class before detracking, (2) grade history, and (3) current and previous standing in ELA courses. It is important to note that prior to the detracking, only students who received the equivalent of "passing" on the mandated state assessment and had a history of high ELA grades were permitted to enroll in honors courses. Therefore, we define "students who would not have been in honors courses" as students who did not receive a passing score on their previous year's state assessment or who did not have a history of high grades in ELA.

We recruited one student from each grade level who would not have been in honors courses prior to detracking for participation in this study based on three additional criteria: (1) the student was identified as having difficulty in our discipline, (2) the student was willing to share their work with us for this project, and (3) the student was willing to answer questions we had about their work and their experiences engaging with YAL throughout our investigation. The three students we selected, "Danielle" (8<sup>th</sup> grade), "Michelle" (9<sup>th</sup> grade), and "Hawk" (10<sup>th</sup> grade), are emblematic of the capable students whose intellectual capacities might be neglected in a tracked model. We wanted to see whether our teaching methods were actually helping these teenagers in the ways we hoped they would.

Our primary source of data was student work. Specifically, we reviewed students' narrative writing, poetry, book club projects, and class surveys; however, as their teachers, we also drew on our own observations and curriculum writing. Using multiple sources enhanced our data analysis (Bazley, 2013; Creswell, 2012). As Merriam (1998) notes, it is important to manage data in a way that allows the researcher to organize a thorough study. We thus collected relevant student artifacts throughout the year and compiled them in a shared digital folder.

We analyzed the data by reviewing all items in our shared folder, looking for themes or "recurrent topics" (Agar, 1996, p. 153) based on our research question: *How can the incorporation of YAL in a detracked ELA honors course affect the experiences of students who would not have qualified for honors curriculum under a tracked model?* As we read through each student's work multiple times, three themes emerged: (1) assignments with which students were successful, (2) assignment types with which students seemed to struggle, and (3) assignments that students reported enjoying. We used these three recurrent topics to create a narrative portrait of our students' experience engaging with YAL in an ELA Honors classroom. Taken collectively, these portraits reveal that each student expressed intellectually complex ideas about assigned literature and vocalized them in class and to their teachers; however, they all also faced challenges when those ideas had to be harnessed and committed to the format of formal writing. In the following section, we share each student's portrait.

### **Portraits of Student Engagement with Young Adult Literature**

#### **Danielle**

Danielle identified as female and African American. She had attended P.K. Yonge since kindergarten and was very comfortable at the school. She was gregarious, boisterous, and a joy to teach. Danielle, while bright and capable, tended to receive Cs on her major assessments in the course. She reported that she liked to write; however, she was not an avid reader. The following section details Danielle's experiences in her eighth-grade ELA course.

During the 2015-2016 school year, students in Jen's course read a variety of texts. Some were whole-class novels, and others were choice texts from teacher-selected book club options. Two whole-class titles that stood out to Danielle were Sharon Draper's *Copper Sun* and *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. The former novel is set in the late 1700s and features rotating narrators: Amari, a young teenager stolen from her village in Africa and enslaved on a plantation in

America, and Polly, a white indentured servant whose racist ideas are transformed through the girls' friendship. It is an inspirational story of survival and perseverance. The latter novel engages students by critically examining social classes; however, its context and setting require scaffolding for use in contemporary classrooms. Because the novel began as one of Hinton's own high school short story assignments, it provides a powerful example of writing success for our student authors. For Danielle, these texts were the most salient of the semester.

Like the other participants, Danielle struggled with writing; however, she also experienced many victories when it came to her writing, especially when the writing was guided by YAL titles. Her growth and understanding of complicated concepts, like how authors employ literary devices, was evidenced in multiple written interpretation tasks throughout the year. Students were asked to identify and implement intentional choices in writing. In her first critical essay, Danielle expressed a nascent understanding of the difference between literal and figurative language, supporting her definition by quoting *Copper Sun*:

She felt herself fading into faith' is what Sharon used in the book and this is figurative language. This is figurative language because she is explaining how someone feels by using another meaning.

Danielle perceived non-literal language yet did not adequately examine its figurative meaning. Later, Danielle communicated a personalized understanding of how literary devices work by incorporating symbolism in a poem about her social identity. She wrote, "My life is like a lightbulb, on & off moments." In reflection, Danielle wrote she chose this symbol because "the friends that i have are like a light bulb. They are off and on. For example one day they my friend and the next day they hate me." It became clear that Danielle's understanding of literary devices grew in depth as the school year progressed.

Toward the end of the school year, Danielle was identifying patterns in author's choices across texts and explaining their effect on characterization. Her growth in her understandings was marked by her enjoyment of certain texts as well as her overall success with developing nuanced understandings of character development and synthesizing these understandings across texts. In her annotations about *The Outsiders*, she wrote:

The author says all this bad things about Dally and Johnny...and I want to know is this really [their] character?...Dally and Johnny remind me of Jim Scout's brother because he was so rude to Scout by saying why can't she

act like a girl or when she would act like a girl he would call her a sissy. And I felt like that wasn't his real character...because at the end of the book he fought for her which showed that he had heart. And I feel like Dally and Johnny was only doing that to fit in and that's [not] their true self.

What is so impressive about this remark is Danielle's analysis of *both* works. Danielle's engagement with literary criticism and YAL bolsters her ability to critique more complex texts.

In Jen's eighth-grade class, students were asked to write original essays that could be supported with the literature they read together. While Danielle showed growth in her ability to identify key concepts from the readings and articulate their figurative meaning, she did struggle with conveying these understandings through writing. Danielle was a confident, vocal, and outspoken student, but being unused to critical examination of text, she did not consistently substantiate her observations with evidence. She could carefully copy text to support her insightful thinking; however, she struggled to explain *how* the text excerpts were logically supportive, especially in non-YAL texts. For example, about the canonical *Things Fall Apart*, she wrote,

Okonkwo thought that a man should not be lazy and should work for the right to eat. Like when he said 'A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm.'

Danielle was correct in her identification of this character's beliefs about manhood—a complex interpretation—and she attempted to prove her thinking with text evidence. However, the quote she chose does not reveal the trait she identified. Even with writing feedback intended to help her with this issue, Danielle struggled to explain connections between events in text and the conclusions she drew about characters.

However, this was not the case with Danielle's experience with her favorite text, *The Outsiders*. She was able to correct prior thinking and refer to various specific pieces of the narrative—*without being directly coached or prompted to do so*—to analyze characters. In her annotations, she wrote:

I thought Cherry was a bad person because she was throwing paper balls with Jonny and got kicked out. But now that the author says that they (ponyboy and Johnny) think that she is scary, her and Marcia is hard to

believe only because the beginning of the story Cherry was more out of the shell than she was riding back home with them.

In analyzing Johnny and Dally, she chose a quote when the boys broke the rules and said,

I never thought they would have the courage to do what they did. For example by goofing around at the drugstore. And blowing straws at the waitress which is very childish of them for their age.

Danielle successfully tied her insightful ideas to text evidence using this YAL text. A goal for Danielle's future work in ELA is to bring this richness of insight and logical analysis to her critical essay assignments.

Danielle was inspired by *The Outsiders* and composed her own creative response to the book. In class conversations, she expressed frustration that this novel was written by a woman while the main characters were all boys, so she rewrote parts of the story from a "greaser girl's" perspective named Emma, an original character Danielle created. Named after Danielle's grandmother, the character Emma exemplifies the same familial values that Hinton's fictional gang possessed, and presumably, familial values espoused by Danielle's own grandmother. After a fire at Dally and Johnny's hideout (originally Hinton's plot event), Danielle narrates Emma's inner thinking:

I don't care to talk unless I have to and for this situation I am not talking for nobody. But don't get me wrong I AM NOT that type of person that don't stick to my people. And the greasers are like my family too so I am gonna be there for them.

Jen was impressed with Danielle's ability to co-opt another author's narrative using her own voice. Her perspective is bolstered with metaphors ("...in the inside I felt like my heart was being frozen"), intentional syntax ("Even though we were poor, we still survived"), and hyperbole ("[Socs] were just cool to the point they don't feel any emotions") to communicate a clear theme she shared with the original author: "But to me it never makes a person better than someone cause they have money."

Danielle's opinion about the importance of this YAL text was revealed in a reflection she wrote at the end of the year:

My end of the year Narrative was the BEST one I had yet. This book did not just help me with this assignment it helped me with any other that i may have or even when i can be writing on my own free time.

This YAL novel was transformative for Danielle’s engagement with narrative, and the related assignments helped her express a personal connection to its theme.

### **Michelle**

Michelle, an African American female, was a new student during her freshman year. The move to P.K. Yonge marked a “fresh start” for Michelle, whose previous school experiences left her feeling that she was not a “strong student,” especially in middle school. Although she frequently received Cs on major assessments, Michelle noted an enjoyment and penchant for reading texts that “are about real life.”

As in Jen’s eighth-grade class, Cody offered students a balance of whole-class readings and student choice novels. It was through the YAL novels by Sara Farizan—*Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* and *If You Could Be Mine*—that Michelle really flourished as a critical reader. *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* focuses on an Iranian-American student who faces discrimination at her school for her race and religion. Additionally, the character works to come to terms with her sexuality. The characters in the text explore issues around school culture, religion, sexuality, and friendship. *If You Could Be Mine* follows a young Iranian girl who is in love with her best friend, who is also female. The protagonist must navigate the country’s oppressive legal system and her family’s expectations while trying to follow her heart.

In Cody’s ninth-grade class, Michelle noted that annotations and dialogic journals “help us understand what we just read better and remembering what we just read.” Michelle also connected what she wrote in her annotations and dialogic journal to how she discussed texts in class. She noted that she benefited from having class discussions about texts because discussions gave her “a chance to talk about what you read and what you got from it.” As noted in class observations, Michelle excelled at discussions within her small groups, especially when discussing YAL. She also noted an enjoyment of discussions because of the opportunity to connect ideas in the texts to her lived experiences.

Throughout her annotations for *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel*, Michelle analyzed subtle social cues the protagonist drops to reveal her sexuality. For instance, Michelle annotated several exchanges between the main character of

the novel and another character as “flirty” based off of the quotes and the broader context of the novel. These observations required Michelle to look beyond the surface meaning of the text, make connections between multiple chapters in the text, and synthesize the plot. Michelle’s annotations also echo her home dialect. For instance, Michelle notes the main character’s desire to keep her sexuality a secret as wanting to “keep it on the downlow.” She also refers to the progression from initial attraction to courtship as “catching feelings.” These reactions show real depth of understanding. Michelle is not forced to adopt a whitewashed “standard” form of English to excel. Rather, she uses her own linguistic acumen to make meaning of the complex issues within YAL texts.

In Cody’s ninth-grade class, students were required to write a critical essay for their final exam. Students had a week to select a prompt from a list Cody created or create their own prompt, write their first draft, and receive feedback from Cody before submitting the critical essay. Students could use any text from throughout the year to answer the prompt, and it was unsurprising that Michelle opted for *If You Could Be Mine*, her favorite throughout the year. The prompt she selected “spoke most” to her and the text, asking students to “Analyze how characters in a novel struggle to free themselves from the power of others or seek to gain power over others.” Michelle’s critical essay examined the struggles of being a lesbian in Iran.

Michelle incorporated imagery within her critical essay that was worthy of the highest value of the “word choice” portion of the rubric, scattering phrases like “she fell for lust,” and “let her emotions show on her face” throughout. Even more impressive, Michelle used these phrases to provide insight into characters’ actions in response to the prompt. However, Michelle had difficulty completing the assignment and meeting the word requirement. Additionally, Michelle’s essay read as one long paragraph despite having multiple ideas that deserved their own paragraphs and development. Michelle informed Cody that she just “wanted to be done” with the essay when they met to discuss revisions. She was proud of her key idea and word choice, but expressed she had “said what” she “needed to say” in her final and was ready to move on. Michelle used the content of the essay to express her meaning-making process but saw the form of the assignment as something that just “needed to be done,” rather than a chance to reevaluate her ideas.

In a survey at the end of the school year, Michelle noted that the book that “mattered to her most” was *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel*. She noted that she could relate to the protagonist,

Just a little bit on how she feel, when she was scared to come out to her parents and friends, because she didn't want to let her parents down and she didn't want nobody to judge her or treat her different.

Despite the cultural differences between Michelle, an African American female, and the fictional character Leila, an Iranian American female who identifies as lesbian, Michelle drew meaningful similarities between herself and the character. She then went on to abstract the lessons learned from the text to her broader social circle, writing, “But Teenages go thru what she was going thru all the time maybe not that deep but teenages have crushes on there friend all the time sometime it get serious sometime it doesn't.” She furthered her praise of *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel*, writing the text was relevant because it was “your average teenage love story where one is falling but the other already has someone this can go for girl or boy weather there straight, gay, bi or, lesbian anyone can catch feeling and get hurt.”

Michelle also wrote extensively about how she learned from and enjoyed *If You Could Be Mine* in a final project for the text. In an annotation, Michelle pointed out how she saw herself in the characters, writing, “When i'm going through something i do something else to keep my mind off what i'm going through at the time or something i really don't want to deal with, just like Ali made Sharia come to the party just to get her mind off what happen between her Nasrin.” She also addressed how she believes the Iranian people in the text are not dissimilar from many Americans Michelle knows, as both groups tend to be “judgemental” to the LGBTQ community. Michelle also noted that she enjoyed *If You Could Be Mine* because it taught her an important life lesson: “Don't sacrifice anything or yourself to please somebody.”

Michelle's responses to both *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* and *If You Could Be Mine* show the importance of students' being able to find themselves in ELA curriculum. Too often, a heavy focus on traditional literature (a staple of honors courses) can leave minority students feeling alienated from the course content. Instead, Michelle was able to make cross-cultural connections, identify cross-textual examples, and draw out life lessons when she enjoyed a text and an assignment. As evidenced by the examples provided, Michelle met the rigorous standards embedded within an honors course and still noted enjoyment of the curriculum. In short, Michelle did not have to relinquish her identity and unique life experiences in order to achieve within an honors course.

## **Hawk**



Hawk was a first generation African American male. His early schooling experiences were transient; however, he found a “home” at P.K. Yonge. A quiet student, he was nonetheless enthusiastic about learning. Hawk was notably passionate about reading and prided himself on his desire to do well in school and seek post-secondary success. Despite his desire to be successful, his grades often cycled through Cs and Bs, with the occasional A.

For Hawk, *In Darkness* was an important novel. The young adult title by Nick Lake follows the memories and experiences of a boy named Shorty who is attempting to survive the Haitian earthquake while trapped under a building. He develops a connection with Toussaint L’Ouverture who was a slave hundreds of years ago. The novel addresses key themes of survival, “doing the right thing,” and family tensions. However, it also confronts racial and socioeconomic injustices, both interests of Hawk.

In Kate’s tenth-grade class, students were asked to complete annotations and journals throughout their assigned readings to track their understanding. For Hawk, this was a struggle. However, in his *In Darkness* essay, he demonstrated his analytical capability. For example, he stated, “In books with male lead characters, you will usually see that they commonly have a lot of action and violence.” To support these notions, he went on to focus his essay outline on Shorty’s (the protagonist’s) connections to gang violence. In his essay plan, Hawk wrote, “The gang decided to kill him and Shorty’s sister. Shortly later ends up in the same gang, and unknowingly, befriends the man that killed his father.”

Hawk often focused on familial relationships and was outraged by the fact that Shorty inadvertently consorted with the people who killed his father. This outrage was present in his verbal sharing, which demonstrated his deeper understanding of the complex plot. As the son of immigrants, Hawk valued his own tight-knit family. In the novels *In Darkness* and *The Kite Runner*, Hawk’s personal interest in these connections also showed through. When Kate sat next to him during independent work time, Hawk would quietly whisper his thoughts about the painful and terrible realization that in the novel, *In Darkness*, Shorty was connected to his father’s death in an accidental way. This was a profound insight that showed Hawk’s deeper understandings of theme, plot, and irony.

Hawk also wrote about Shorty’s attempt to survive the earthquake in Haiti. He noted the profound impact Shorty’s struggle to live had on the character’s emotional state by using descriptive language to capture his impressions of the character’s experience. In class, Hawk shared with Kate that he was distressed by what happened to Shorty. He was struggling to make sense of his personal turmoil

when he read about Shorty's extreme measures to survive (the character is trapped beneath a collapsed building and drinks his own blood and urine to live). The novel prompted Hawk to learn more about Haiti, and his work highlighted his ability to see intricate layers of character development. Hawk deconstructed the narrative by contrasting Shorty's extreme measures to live with his earlier, more lighthearted experiences with the gang. Such insight demonstrated his ability to see deeper shades of meaning within the text.

In Kate's tenth-grade class, students could "order off the menu" (choose from a list of essay topics collaboratively built as a class) or be challenged to "make up their own dish" (develop an original essay topic). Hawk usually sat off to the side of the front table, and on decision day, Kate could see him from the lecture podium where she rested her computer. The faint blue light of the screen reflected on the whiteboard, illuminating possible essay topics written in pink and orange marker. In the darkened classroom, Hawk looked down at his desk and fiddled with his hands. As Kate moved around the classroom asking for more suggestions of topics, Hawk would not make eye contact with her. He did not suggest a topic for the class "menu" and ultimately chose a pre-written AP option. He missed an opportunity to take more ownership of his assignment.

He made similar choices when it came to his *The Kite Runner* project. In his essay reflection about his grade and work, Hawk made little attempt to defend his grade or argue for an increased score: "I think that my project should get a grade of a C or higher, for I have completed the assignment that was asked." His response shows his hesitancy to take ownership of his work and highlights his struggle to define and explain his writing. He also wrote, "I learned how to represent my thoughts about this novel and understanding the different events and mishaps that occur in the story between the characters through the works that I have been tasked to complete." The use of the words "tasked to complete" shows that Hawk's emphasis for this assignment was more about completion than meaning-making.

One of Hawk's favorite activities during the year was choosing his book club book. A small group of students would rearrange the books in a "pretty" display at the front of the class. When they had finished, Hawk would creep to the front of the room and collect a few of the books and then go tuck himself beneath a desk or find a space on the floor. Hawk enjoyed the act of choosing and mulled over which books he felt would render a more "intellectual" experience.

However, despite his efforts to select the "best book," Hawk still struggled to submit assignments, particularly those involving writing. While Hawk was

capable, he preferred to demonstrate his understanding orally. He was more active in small group discussion and often guided students to discuss politics or the human condition. His skill in this area enhanced mini literature circles during discussions of *In Darkness*. Hawk passionately ensured his classmates were aware of the injustices that the 2010 earthquake brought to the world's attention.

In a questionnaire, Hawk wrote that he preferred “meaningful” and “educational” assignments. He also shared that he selected *In Darkness* because it was “recommended by a friend” and the book was “interesting” because he did not have “any personal experiences that relate to events in the story.” Stories like this expanded Hawk’s understanding of concepts he was interested in but knew little about. The YAL format made these topics more compelling and relatable because they were aimed at his age group. When asked whether the novel should be taught in school, he wrote, “Yes, because of the topic,” and went on to explain it was important to learn about events like the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010 and the humanitarian crisis that ensued.

### **Looking Across The Portraits**

Our text selections and assignments provided multiple opportunities throughout the year for students to connect with characters and plots salient to their interests. While every ELA teacher dreams that each whole class novel will have a profound impact on each student, this cannot consistently be the case. In an effort to increase the likelihood of each student’s encountering a transformative text, we integrate whole-class novels and individual YAL choice novels. This pedagogical choice permits our students’ literacy development to shine through, as was the case with Danielle, Michelle, and Hawk. We believe courses should be designed for success, and we saw our students succeed in their literary interpretations and understandings.

One skill that Danielle, Michelle, and Hawk each struggled with was writing. Writing instruction is indeed complex and cumbersome work. Writing in Honors ELA is profoundly difficult because students are not merely asked to summarize information and report facts. Students must defend ideas, conduct complex analyses, and engage in synthesis. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that academically rigorous writing tasks will pose a notable challenge for students without backgrounds in quality literacy instruction. We felt this with our own students in this study. Their struggle to consume and write about complex text was compounded by our state’s proliferation of initiatives that did not encourage research-backed “best practices” for writing instruction. We continue to struggle to create an academic culture that is open and accessible for every student. Writing

instruction is something we must continue to work on and study. Danielle, Michelle, and Hawk were not bad writers. Their cited work in this article demonstrates insightfulness and thoughtfulness when engaging with YAL. However, given their personal histories with ELA and standardized reading and writing assessments, they had yet to develop enough confidence to view themselves as competent “writers.”

In order to flourish, Danielle, Michelle, and Hawk required meaningful activities and texts. That is not to say our students were uncomfortable reading texts that they would not select themselves; on the contrary, it is to suggest that students needed to see personal value in another author’s work. We need to think about the questions that they ask themselves: Does this book teach me a life lesson? Does it relate to an issue I value? Did it make me feel something new? Did it change my mind about something? If it did, then the meaning-making tasks associated with it also mattered. Our “regular” students were not “regular.” They were gifted and worthy of honors when the tasks and readings allowed them to shine and think critically as YAL did.

Danielle, Michelle, and Hawk all benefited from having assessments that incorporated YAL in the curriculum. The students selected to read and analyze YAL nearly every time a choice in text was offered, using YAL to guide their more “traditional” assessments (essays) and more “creative” assessments (poetry). Each student noted that the YAL texts were personally engaging due to the topics presented in the text. Additionally, the students shared how they could personally relate to the narratives. These students would not have found the same kind of engagement in a traditional Honors ELA course that focused solely on the “classic” texts.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The purpose of this practitioner research study is to explore how three English Language Arts (ELA) teachers used young adult literature (YAL) in their detracked courses to provide rigorous curriculum and instruction while meeting the diverse literacy needs of their student body. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) note that implications for teacher research should require teacher researchers to “interpret what they have learned, to take action for change based on their study, and to generate new questions” (p. 172). Our collaborative, school-based inquiry focused on policy issues with impact beyond the walls of our classrooms.

This study has implications for broader conversations relating to detracking policies and initiatives. Several scholars concerned with the

inequitable practices of school structures have noted the process of tracking as a key issue to address (Burris, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Oakes, 2005; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). We unequivocally agree that tracking in our nation's schools must end if our education system is ever to live up to its democratic potential. We also recognize that the process of detracking is not simple. Teachers need space and time to engage in systematic inquiry to further their pedagogical practice in detracked classrooms after the administrative decision to detrack. While detracking should be embraced as a broad policy goal, *how* teachers meet the needs of their students is best left to the expertise of the teachers. Our study spurred us to plan and implement action steps to support students like Danielle, Michelle, and Hawk in their academic writing, which was identified as an area for growth. In short, the role of teacher research in the process of detracking cannot be overstated.

Providing rigor and relevance for all students in a detracked course is an important step in ensuring success for diverse student populations. This teacher research project is a step toward understanding the impact YAL has on ELA curriculum, specifically honors and AP-level curriculum, but teacher research should generate more questions for further studies. We also want to see if the incorporation of YAL in Honors ELA courses leads to more students, or perhaps better-skilled students, eventually enrolling in AP courses their junior and senior years. Greater diversity in our 11th and 12th grade AP courses in the future could be considered a successful outcome of this work. Additionally, we intend to explore how reading and writing about YAL can enhance students' academic writing about canonical texts. Understanding what can be done to provide more equitable and rigorous instruction for all students remains the goal of this inquiry and of our teaching in general.

## Appendix A

### Writing Rubric

Name: _____				Comments:			
Trait	Weight	Score (5 – 2)	Points				
Ideas & Support	3 x		= / 15				
Organization	3 x		= / 15				
Sentence Flow & Variety	2 x		= / 10				
Voice & Word Choice	2 x		= / 10				
Conventions	2 x		= / 10				
Presentation	2 x		= / 5				
<b>Total Points / 65</b>				Percent	Second Draft		

This rubric is intended to assess writing between drafts. Its weights can be manipulated and tailored to unit focus and/or individual student goals or needs. It promotes growth through revision and is accompanied by teacher commentary and conferencing. It was developed departmentally and is adapted by each teacher.

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