

Chapter 21

Young Adult Literature as a Means for Developing and Supporting Socio- Emotional Learning

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ABSTRACT

Addressing the social and emotional needs of students is not only vital, but it should be a priority for all teachers. Teaching social and emotional skills directly influences students' academic ability. Yet, many schools and classrooms do not see the connection between their instruction and curriculum with SEL. Often, schools have set aside a portion of the school day, or a few minutes at the end of the class period, to check in with students or teach specific skills. One way that students can explore their own identities and build a sense of agency is through the use of young adult literature. There are many ways that teachers can incorporate YA in the classroom to build SEL. This chapter focuses on how three current in-service teachers use YAL to address SEL in their classrooms. They each provide a brief background of who they are, their beliefs about using YAL to address SEL in their classrooms, and authentic examples from their instruction. Using these descriptions, the authors hope this chapter will help promote using YAL to address SEL in classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

Addressing students' social and emotional needs is vital, and it should be a priority for all teachers (Frey et al., 2019). Teaching social and emotional skills directly influences students' academic ability (Durlak et al., 2011). The benefits of socio-emotional learning (SEL) are wide-ranging, but ultimately, promoting student empowerment and agency and pushing back against any inequities students may face, have faced, or are still facing (Frey et al., 2019). Yet, many schools and classrooms do not see the connection between instruction, curriculum, and SEL. Often, schools have set aside a portion of the school day, or a few minutes at the end of the class period, to check in with students or teach specific skills (Jones et al., 2018). While this is not necessarily a harmful practice, especially if these activities require students to learn and grow, they may not be authentic and related to what is happening during the school day. To have a profound and sustained impact on students, SEL must be integrated throughout the school day and all classrooms (Jones et al., 2017).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2017) identified five interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: a) self-awareness, b) social awareness, c) relationship skills, d) self-management, and e) responsible decision making. Upon further investigation of the various models and programs that identify SEL opportunities, five central tenets overlap that relate to students' needs, ranging from personal experiences to experiences encountered at school: a) identity and agency; b) emotional regulation; c) cognitive regulation; d) social skills; and e) public spirit (Fisher et al., 2020). Fisher and colleagues (2020) state how students need to recognize their strengths and believe in themselves, or a higher sense of self-efficacy, to continue through obstacles or learning challenges. They must have the resiliency to work through moments of failure. Also, students must understand their own emotions and reactions while also recognizing and understanding others'. Students need to think critically as they work and identify ways to solve problems - personal or academic. In addition, one aspect that requires more than a program or isolated skills is the development of peer relationships and effective communication.

Rather than SEL being viewed as an isolated task through a program or specific time of day, teachers need to understand the importance of addressing and incorporating SEL within their classrooms through their instruction and throughout the school day. Through professional learning, collaboration with their peers, personal self-directed learning, or other school- or district-based resources, teachers can learn how to design tasks and assignments and consider ways to address social relationships, emotions, and identity with their students. Most importantly, teachers and other school faculty need to understand that "social and emotional learning is not simply about helping students stay out of trouble," but rather "it's about developing life skills that can be applied to a wide range of situations" (Frey et al., 2019, p. 8).

Related to SEL, culturally sustaining pedagogy and practices are another equally critical pedagogy that supports the inclusion of SEL (Fisher et al., 2020) as this type of teaching emphasizes valuing students' cultures, backgrounds, and experiences matter and ensuring that instruction promotes students' identities within the lesson and throughout the curriculum (Paris, 2012; Alim & Paris, 2017). Instruction then becomes authentic, relevant, and related to students' interests, which align with the intent of SEL. This type of instruction also promotes students' ability to advocate for their own community's needs, which can be argued is the natural extension of empowering students (Gay, 2013).

Andolina and Conklin (2020) describe the connection between promoting democratic citizenship as the qualities and actions one takes to maintain and service a healthy, equitable democracy and foster SEL skills. The authors argue that educators, "should aim to increase interpersonal practices such as

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listening, particularly to those different from ourselves, in order to improve trust, develop community, build empathy, and foster equity” (p. 1207). This is further explored by Holmes and colleagues (2018) that posit how protective factors, variables that reduce adverse effects such as caring teachers; prosocial skills, such as cooperation with peers, showing empathy, and being assertive; feeling connected as a community, improve language and academic outcomes. Therefore, this development of student character and civic engagement is a core skill of SEL development. Community building and speaking out against injustices are necessary for successful post-school life (Jones et al., 2017). Educators know that student engagement improves when student and community assets are foregrounded within the curriculum, the community must see itself enacted in instruction, texts, and tasks (Gay, 2018; Nieto & Bode, 2018; Moll et al., 1992).

Students can explore their own identities and build a sense of agency through young adult literature (YAL). Although many topics tend to be considered “taboo,” and teachers may self-censor which books get used with students, YAL provides a great way to address controversial issues (Heron-Hruby et al., 2015; Ivey & Johnston, 2018) that students may be experiencing. By promoting space for students to question and discuss with the teacher and other students, students are able to voice their thoughts and concerns instead of remaining silent. Thereby not silencing students and letting them know that their personal experiences are not left at the door when they come to class. Instead, YAL becomes a way for students to become engaged with personally relevant storylines and characters who experience many of the same moral dilemmas they encounter in their everyday lives (Ivey & Johnston, 2018).

For example, Ivey and Johnston (2018) explored what happens when teachers provide room in their daily instruction to allow students to choose the books that they want to read based on their interests or other factors. These books often contained “taboo topics” such as racism, gang-related violence, drug addiction, and suicide. The students actively engaged with others as they attempted to understand decisions, negotiating and problem-solving characters’ situations and experiences. This type of learning promotes civically engaged (Lent & Voigt, 2019) students through hands-on learning opportunities (Lent, 2016; Spires et al., 2016), taking ownership and participating in relevant instruction with authentic, real-world relationships (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lent & Voight, 2019). Doing so promotes empathy development (Mirra, 2019) using arguments that are central within English language arts (ELA) classrooms (Mirra & Garcia, 2020).

There are many benefits to using YAL in classrooms, such as improving motivation (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Schreuder & Savitz, 2019; Smith, 2019), cultivating a collaborative learning mindset (Bowers-Campbell, 2011), and promoting improved “social, emotional, and moral development” among students (see also Christenson et al., 2012; Ivey & Johnston, 2018, p. 148). An additional benefit is that students can read about characters that face similar experiences and learn potential solutions (Fisher et al., 2020). Students read to understand themselves and to understand others’ lives (Bishop, 1990; Bishop, 2014), witnessing how characters deal with hardships (Rodríguez, 2019) empowering student ability to peek into lives or situations that may not directly apply to them (Fisher et al., 2020).

Rosenblatt’s (1994) transactional theory shows teachers that as students read, they consider their backgrounds, making connections that others may not (Wilhelm, 2016). Also, by asking students to analyze texts through various lenses, such as using a Youth lens that requires the reader to interrogate the social construct adolescence (Petroni et al., 2014; Silva & Savitz, 2019) or using Critical Race Theory to disrupt stereotypes or understand counternarratives (Hughes-Hassell, 2013), educators are asking students to do more than just read. Educators ask students to build their critical literacy skills by having them explore “personal, sociopolitical, economic and intellectual border identities” as they read (Bishop,

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2014, p. 52), promoting a valid, thoughtful critique of the power structures they either are subjected to or are upheld in their classrooms. To extend even further, reading through a critical literacy lens encourages students to take their reading another step toward identifying potential solutions to current, real-world problems (Vasquez et al., 2019).

There are many ways that teachers can incorporate YAL in the classroom to build SEL. Some teachers may use a whole class novel and engage the entire class in discussions, while others may want to incorporate small book clubs or literature circles (Daniels, 2002). Regardless of how, classroom inclusion is strengthened with peer conversations about topics that students identify as students can better enhance their resiliency (Fisher et al., 2020).

This chapter focuses on how three current in-service teachers use YAL to address SEL in their classrooms. They each provide a brief background of who they are, their beliefs about using YAL to address SEL in their classrooms, and authentic examples from their instruction. Using these descriptions, this chapter will help promote using YAL to address SEL in classrooms.

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE RESONATES WITH ADOLESCENTS: RACHEL

As a high school ELA teacher for the past four years, Rachel felt compelled to utilize the most relatable and interesting YAL that she is aware of, has read, others have recommended, or students have requested, in her classroom. Although this does cause questions and concern from some parents and students, mainly depending on the topic and themes to be discussed, the importance of using this literature with teenagers is ever-present and crucial. Students' SEL has become increasingly important for students when depression, anxiety, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and other diagnoses are prevalent in high schools (Fisher et al., 2020). In just this past year alone, 2020-2021, students at Rachel's school dealt with a pandemic, loss of life for varying reasons along with associated grief, a neighborhood shooting, and the ups-and-downs of learning virtually. Structure and routine were not consistent and led to confusion, stress, and frustration.

Teachers can address students' SEL, regardless of the location of class or types of student configurations for discussion, through the use of young adult literature. Young adult literature allows students to see the world through other people's perspectives related to race and culture (Ginsberg & Glen, 2019; Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Rodríguez, 2019), gender and sexual identity (Batchelor, Ramos, & Neiswander, 2018), and social perceptions of (dis)abled populations (Curwood, 2013). This may occur through analysis based on social themes such as empathy (Mirra, 2018) or specific demographics of people found in the text with whom some students can identify, such as rape victims (Alsup, 2003). According to Rachel, her students need to have these experiences because they are exposed to new ideas, cultures, and practices that can give them a better understanding of themselves and others around them. Relatable literature is one of the many reasons to include YAL (Bishop, 1990; Fisher et al., 2020).

One aspect of SEL is self-awareness. According to CASEL (2017), self-awareness is the ability to understand one's own feelings and thoughts and evaluate how they impact behavior in various aspects of life. In other words, being able to recognize personal strengths and weaknesses and believing that areas of improvement does not mean that success cannot be achieved. Zlotnik and Togliola (2018) emphasize the importance of this when they explain that the metacognitive process is "required to achieve successful outcomes in daily life" (para. 5). Many adolescents struggle with self-awareness because it is not a skill that is developmentally inherent at this age (Zlotnik & Togliola, 2018). Self-awareness is

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learned with practice. Yeager (2017) claims, “adolescents are learning how to handle new demands in school and social life while learning to deal with new, intense emotions, and increasingly feeling like they should do so without adult guidance” (p. 74). Through young adult literature, teachers can promote the development of self-awareness through relatable content in the novels (Bishop, 2014).

Much like many high schools, Rachel’s high school has students from many different backgrounds and cultures. They hear about students getting shot, getting arrested, mourning their parents’ death, watching family members go to prison for life, and other traumatic experiences. These traumas have significantly impacted her students by the time they reach high school, such as limited ability to focus and listen to instructions, ability to regulate their emotions, identify proper ways of handling conflict, and other cognitive abilities related to learning (Fisher et al., 2020). Her students come in without understanding how to regulate their emotions and the influence of said events affecting their learning. Self-awareness and the ability for students to develop their identities is an important component of their development in high school (Holland et al., 2012; McCarthey & Moje, 2002). Teachers at her school have witnessed their students’ handling of these hardships and traumatic experiences in very different ways, such as becoming aggressive or displaying other unwanted behaviors, because they lack the skills necessary to address them and are often silenced in the classroom. Students need to better understand coping and problem-solving solutions and learn about building resilience (Fisher et al., 2020). For this reason, Rachel intentionally chose to use YAL to address and support students’ development of self-awareness.

Using *The Hate U Give*

Rachel believes that YAL is an essential part of teaching because these novels are engaging and relatable for 9th and 10th grade students. Many novels provide protagonists that are inspiring, and through their voice, promote empowerment for the reader (Fisher et al., 2020). *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas is a novel that tells the story of Starr who feels as if she lives in two worlds: her home and the school she attends. After witnessing the murder of her friend, and the subsequent trial and defense of the person that killed him, a police officer, Starr finds her voice to speak up about what she witnessed. This novel has been an integral part of instruction for her ninth-grade students. Rachel believes that this novel is not only relevant to her students’ lived experiences because many of the students are experiencing similar themes and issues, such as systemic racism, gang violence, and police brutality within their home lives. Rachel has chosen this novel because her students’ reactions have always been positive and they have expressed a strong desire to read and discuss this book. The unit shared here is one example of how a teacher could incorporate a similar novel to develop self-awareness and empowerment students exploring and experiencing tumultuous times in our country.

Before reading, Rachel used anticipatory activities to introduce major themes of the book. For instance, students participated in a Four Corners activity, where Rachel read various statements that required students to identify their position and beliefs. After reading each statement, students moved to a corner that was representative of their opinion or belief with the following options: agree, strongly agree, disagree, strongly disagree. She used the following statements:

1. Police officers uphold justice, so their motives should never be questioned.
2. If you break the law, any punishment you receive is deserved.
3. Racism doesn’t exist in our society anymore.
4. If you’re guilty, you should go to jail.

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After each statement and student movement, the class discussed their reasonings and thoughts behind choosing a particular corner. Many cited personal experiences as examples for their justification. For example, one student stood at the “Strongly Disagree” corner and said,

In my opinion I believe that racism still exists in our society today, especially with being a teenager in high school this is a problem everyday. It might of gotten better over time but I definitely think and know it still exists today because I see it almost every time I go to school.

In reference to this student’s statement, another student said, “I say disagree because not all punishments fit for the crime that has been done. Harsh punishments are for major things but sometimes they give it to minor situations which is wrong.” As students gave reasons for their choice, teachers asked follow-up questions to help guide their class discussion.

After a brief discussion of each statement, students were allowed to move around the room again if their mindset changed based on what they shared. This example shows how students were developing their self-awareness as they were able to express their thoughts and opinions to each other by choosing a corner and explaining their reasoning. Self-awareness “reflects this dynamic relationship between the person’s knowledge, his beliefs, the task demands, and the context of the situation” (Zlotnik & Tolgia, 2018, para. 7). Students had to understand the dynamics of the conversation during this activity and realize that these topics can be viewed as controversial. They were also required to think carefully about what they said and how they reacted to their classmates without offending anyone. Even though they were young adolescents, they were able to have critical conversations with their peers respectfully and authentically.

Although this was conducted at the beginning of the unit, other activities could be used to enhance self-awareness skills before reading *The Hate U Give*. For example, the teacher could have groups of students conduct research of their choosing related to the book, such as on police brutality or gang involvement in the community. Students could then create mini-presentations to show to the class or others, sharing their found knowledge. For instance, some students could create a video public service announcement that could be shared across the school, with parents, or even community members. Others may want to create a speech, PowerPoint or new song lyrics. Students would be working together in small groups and researching essential topics related to the novel.

During Reading Activities and Discussion

Based on classroom conversations and activities related to the various themes that will be presented throughout the book, Rachel and her students were ready to begin reading the novel aloud during class. Rachel read most often as she wanted to allow her students to sit back and enjoy listening and following the story. She used this time to model fluent reading which includes the following: accuracy, or the ability to correctly read and pronounce written words; rate, or the ability to automatically recognize and read a word based on age or grade level; prosody, or the ability to read with expression in a way that is similar to spoken language; and many add comprehension so that the focus is not only on reading “fast” but to read for understanding (Rasinski et al., 2012). However, around halfway through the novel, her students asked to begin taking turns to read aloud in class, not only providing opportunity for them to practice their fluent reading, but also to build their confidence to stop and discuss at pivotal points in the novel.

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While reading *The Hate U Give*, she and her students closely analyzed and examined the novel's various themes, such as justice vs. injustice, racism, community, belonging, in whole and small groups. One small group assignment was for students to select a theme and create a ten-song playlist that pairs with their theme. Groups worked together across several class periods to look through their music and research to find songs with similar themes to the novel. Some students included Tupac in their playlist because he is mentioned in the novel many times. At the end of class, groups presented their playlist and explained their reasoning.

Rachel decided to play the Line Game with her students as they neared the end of the novel, as her students had previously read and watched *The Freedom Writers*, the story of a how a teacher and her students disrupted intolerance and misunderstanding through an innovative curriculum of diverse perspectives and texts, and expressed interest in participating in this activity. This game's object is for students to become more familiar with each other, better understand one another, and continue to build socio-emotional skills. Rachel chose this activity for the end of the novel because it builds community within the classroom and helps students look at the bigger picture. Not only are they communicating with one another based on their answers, but they are gaining a better understanding of each other's struggles. Rachel placed tape down the middle of her classroom, and students lined up on both sides. It is important to note that the teacher or the students can create the questions, and they can relate to the book's themes to develop more in-depth connections or be more about connecting with life. Some of these questions came directly from the book and movie, but they can be modified based on the students in a particular class. It is also crucial to understand that students must have some discussion before this activity as the questions can retraumatize students or lead to complex and controversial conversations. For instance, without discussion, those with privilege can not stop and further question or access what this means which means that there is little chance of changed action and beliefs. On the other hand, students that have experienced racism could walk away with a negative feeling based on their experiences and lack of changed behavior. However, Rachel's class had already discussed this activity earlier in the year, and Rachel provided a disclaimer regarding what to do if students felt uncomfortable. Plus, her and her students had a discussion related to the norms and expectations for this activity. As she read each question, students would step to the line if the question applied to them. Below are some example questions:

1. Who feels safe in their neighborhood?
2. Who has ever been in a fight?
3. Who trusts the police?
4. Who has ever heard gunshots?
5. Who has ever lost a family member or someone close to senseless violence?

As students get more comfortable, the questions get a little deeper. For Rachel, past students consistently discuss this as one of the favorite school activities. For instance, one of her former students reflected on this experience and said,

That game was fun. It's like you tryna find out what I did in the street without asking me or what happened to my family." Another former student said, "That was such a fun activity but then it was sad because you know like you don't really know that much about people until they step on the line and you really see how alike we all are.

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After Reading

One after reading activity that Rachel used is the Socratic seminar, a strategy that requires students to prepare thorough answers to a set of discussion questions based on a text. Students lead the formal discussion, using their ideas and perspectives and textual evidence to make their claims. There is an inner circle and an outer circle. Each circle has their chance to discuss the book, give feedback, and then students switch roles. Socratic seminars work well with any text because they require critical discussions and understanding of varying perspectives and textual evidence. Since self-awareness is a major component of SEL, Socratic seminars are an excellent way to teach students how to identify and express their emotions while also being able to use the text to support their claims and help students decide what needs to be said, how it needs to be executed, and how they must respond to their peers (Zlotnik & Tolia, 2018). This can also give students more confidence in their ability to have conversations with their classmates about essential topics. Socratic seminars were commonplace throughout the curriculum that year so that students understood expectations for each novel and unit. Before conducting a Socratic seminar, teachers should show examples and give ample support to students as the first attempt may be difficult for students based on the fact that it is student-led. However, Rachel let students use their written answers and textual evidence to help guide their conversations. Students also were required to use their books and refer to page numbers as students mentioned them during the discussion.

Rachel's discussion for this novel revolved around the themes in the book, but the students pushed back as they wanted to talk about their experiences and how they related to Starr Carter. This turned out to be better for students as their lived experiences prompted in-depth and open conversations with classmates regarding their situations, forming connections with each other and building a sense of community in the classroom. Therefore, examples of the discussion questions used include:

1. At the beginning of the novel, Starr and Khalil listen to Tupac, and Khalil explains that when Tupac said "Thug Life," what it meant. Discuss the meaning of the term as an acronym and why this was chosen to be a part of the book title. In what ways is this seen in today's society?
2. How do you think Starr would define family? What about Seven? How would you define family? Why?
3. At the end of the novel, Starr says she will never be quiet about injustice. After reading this book, how can you use your voice to promote social justice? Reflect on how you and your community discuss and address inequality. What are some things we can do in our school and community?

Number three was a challenging discussion for her students as they shared their vulnerability but also their concerns and questions for how to get more civically engaged and involved. They were unsure of how to promote social justice and if anyone would even care about their thoughts. One student noted that they wanted to stand up and fight for injustice, but they did not know how without getting themselves hurt or in trouble. This sparked a conversation about ways students can get involved, such as starting clubs to advocate for injustice without putting themselves in danger. While answering these questions, Rachel noticed that students had well-thought-out answers with textual evidence to support their claims.

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Implications

Self-awareness is a crucial skill that takes time to develop for adolescents (Zlotnik & Tolgia, 2018). Throughout this unit, students shared their appreciation for reading this novel and how their beliefs and tensions that arose regarding the topics and situations in the novel were included within classroom instruction. Because of the nature of the novel and society today, controversial topics may need to be addressed with parents and students before the unit. Rachel had several students who decided to read something different per parent request because of this novel's contents. However, this novel has proven to be influential for Rachel's students as they continue to discuss this unit years after they have left her classroom. Rachel asked a former student to reflect on that unit from Freshmen year.

The book/unit *The Hate U Give* gave me the mindset that there will always be someone there to have your back through anything. You're not in anything alone especially if there's something bad going on such as police brutality and you want your voice to be heard about trying to make a change in society. I think this book was great to read in English, it relates to the reality of what's going on in life.

READING FOR PLEASURE IS A MUST: KIM

Kim is in her 7th year teaching high school English at a rural high school in South Carolina. Her school serves approximately 830 students, of which 61% are Black, 29% are white, 5% are Hispanic/Latino, 1% are Asian, and 4% identify as two or more races. Over 80% of the students at her school live in poverty and qualify for free/reduced lunch. Her students come from various backgrounds, but one thing that many of them have in common by the time they get to her in 9th grade is that they have not read a novel independently in years, if at all, as they report to her each year. When she realized this, Kim began incorporating independent reading into her daily classroom practices, focusing on helping students find books of interest to them and helping students navigate the challenges of adolescence (Beers & Probst, 2017; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Miller 2009; 2014). Students select independent reading novels and spend the first 10-15 minutes of class reading, with an average of 60 minutes spent reading each week. Young adult novels, in particular, are popular among students and provide students with validation that their experiences are not unique and that they are usually surmountable (Fisher et al., 2020).

Meeting the Books

First, Kim introduced novels and independent reading to students using a book tasting or book pass (Beers, 2003; Miller 2009; 2014). Since many students have not read a book on their own in years, Kim felt helping students find books about topics they like was important (Beers, 2003; Miller 2009; 2014). This can be done through individual conferences, a reading interest survey, or a book tasting or talk. For a book tasting, which is when students are able to take a few minutes to peruse a variety of books, books of various genres, mostly YAL, were pulled from the library shelves and sorted by genre, topic, theme onto different tables.

Students rotated from table to table and sampled one book in each genre for three minutes. During each three-minute time frame, students looked at the front and back covers and began reading the first few pages. When the time was called, students decided if they were interested in the book using a scale

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of yes, no, and maybe. This process continued until students sampled books from each genre. At the end of the session, students were to select at least one book to check out, though many asked to check out two or three books. While students were sampling books, Kim circulated the room, looking at students' recording sheets to see if any students had marked at least one book as a yes. If students had blank pages then she would use her background knowledge of the student's interests to suggest other books that they might be interested in reading. This is important to her as she understands the importance of intrinsic motivation and engaged reading to read for certain reasons, to include pleasure (Deci & Ryan, 2010; Gambrell, 2011; Schwabe et al., 2015). Novels such as *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Odd One Out* by Nic Stone, *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander, *I'll Give You the Sun* by Jandy Nelson, *Gym Candy* by Carl Deuker, and *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds were some of the recent popular choices among students.

Importance of Diverse Texts

Providing students with choice in novels is a critical component of getting students to read independently (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Ivey & Broadus, 2001), but it also provides students with the opportunity to find books with characters facing similar situations that they are currently facing. When students can read about the main character who is also struggling with coming out to her parents, the student who is feeling fear and facing possible rejection from her parents does not feel alone (Bishop, 1990; Fisher et al., 2020). Teenagers want to read about characters who look like them, who talk like them, and who act like them, as well as learning about others (Bishop, 1990; Bishop, 2014).

Living in a rural community, many of Kim's students had limited experiences, and few have traveled outside the state. YAL novels provided students with experiences that they would not otherwise have (Bishop, 1990; Bishop, 2014). Comparing their own experiences with those of the characters in the books they were reading helped build their self-awareness and develop their identities (Zlotnik & Tolgia, 2018).

To better help students connect with their books and to be able to recommend books that students would enjoy, Kim began each semester focusing on building relationships with students. She asked each student to write her a letter introducing themselves and sharing some of their favorite things. Through these letters, Kim can better understand who her students are, and she uses this knowledge to help her recommend books to students.

Students' Connections to YAL

One of Kim's students, a ninth-grader, introduced herself in her letter as "gay and black." Knowing this and the student's interest in sports and music, Kim recommended *Odd One Out* by Nic Stone. Kim wanted to provide the student with a potential "mirror" text (Bishop, 1990) and a way for the student to process some of her feelings. This student, who hated reading before, was hooked and connected with one of the main characters, Jupiter, who was also gay. For instance, although the time for independent reading ended, this student would continue reading until Kim required everyone's attention to move on with their lesson.

Another student struggled to find a book but he knew that he wanted to read about basketball. So Kim, being familiar with various options, suggested he read *Rebound* by Kwame Alexander. The novel in verse format made the text more accessible for the student, and he identified with the main character, Chuck, the son of a single mother. While reading, Chuck made connections with the main character

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and the plot of the novel, seeing how his interactions with his mother may be complex but gaining new understanding and realization that she was doing the best she can.

Another student, who preferred playing baseball over reading and frequently expressed his opinions about reading, chose *High Heat* by Carl Deuker, a book about a high school baseball player named Shane who experiences family turmoil. While the student was not experiencing the same types of family problems that the main character was, he could relate to Shane's difficulty controlling his emotions and making the right decisions. The book engaged him because it had characters he could relate to and was about his favorite sport, baseball. Each day, he would come to class excited to share that he read the book on the way to and from his travel baseball games, which was previously unheard of for him. Another student, a female, disclosed to Kim that she had recently left an abusive relationship and was struggling with the decision of what book to read. Kim used her book knowledge to recommend that she read *Dreamland* by Sarah Dessen, as the narrative provides examples of an abusive relationship, what it means to the character, and potential ways to get out of this situation. Throughout reading, and upon finishing the novel, this student shared how the book helped her process what she was going through and made her feel less alone.

How Students Interact with the Books

Students were given time in class each day to read their novels independently. In the first few days of independent reading, students only read for five or six minutes, with the amount of time gradually increasing each day as they build their reading stamina. In a 90-minute class period, students will read for 10-15 minutes and then fill out a modified form of a reading log. Students write a brief summary of what they read, and then they are asked to make connections between the novel they are reading and their personal lives (see Table 1). These connections can include anything from playing football like the main character to going through a difficult breakup. The entries in their reading log serve as a starting conversation point during reading conferences, which could occur with the teacher or with each other.

Reading conferences took place each day during independent reading. While students were reading, Kim met with two or three students each day to discuss their book. Reading conferences were student-led, so when they met, the student discussed what they wanted to discuss. This may relate to a previously student-created goal for using certain strategies or skills while they independently read or it could relate to retelling elements of the story (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Serravallo, 2019). Another option could be for the student to connect with something they were reading or ask questions about an issue presented in the novel. Kim used guiding questions to help direct the student as needed. A reading conference early in the semester might have more guiding questions but the student can take the lead as the semester progresses. A conference at the beginning of the semester might look something like the following:

Young Adult Literature as a Means for Developing and Supporting Socio-Emotional Learning*Table 1. Core Class Novels*

Title and Author	Student Summary	Personal Connection
<i>An Abundance of Katherines</i> by John Green	Colin and his best friend decide to go on a road trip. Hassan, his friend tells his parents and they are on their way! Colin drives all the way to Kentucky. He still thinks about her constantly.	Simple little things remind him of her which I can relate to, when I've been in a break-up.
<i>Legend</i> by Marie Lu	June is set up to meet the mysterious "Day" in exchange for some notes "money" for some of the new plague medicine. Day doesn't take the offer and doesn't even show himself for his safety. Then Day and Tess are sitting back in the Zein sector just relaxing after day returns from the "meet up" with June. Day gives a brief 2 page description of how he meet Tess. Then he realizes 2 soldiers talking about a new type of plague spreading around the Zein sector, he thinks that this is the play that Ethan has.	This reminds me of the first day that I met most of my friends. I was very hyper in going to whatever grade I was going into at the time. Then here we are now in the 9th grade as freshmen.
<i>Shattered Star</i> by Charnan Simon	This book is about a girl named Cassie who wants to be a singer. Cassie is already part of the glee club and one of the strongest singers. After one of her glee competitions her best friend gave her a flyer about a Talent search competition and she's unsure if she gets what it takes.	I enjoy this book because it's something I can relate to because I like to sing.
<i>Every Day</i> by David Levithan	A is now in the body of a girl named Kelsea Cook. She suffers from depression. Her room describes her personality, it is a mess, ink on the walls, and clothes everywhere.	Kelsea makes me second guess how being mean to people is not good because you never know if they are suffering with depression which is very serious.

Teacher: Tell me about the book you're reading.

Student: I'm reading a book called Slam Dunk, and there are some players on a team named Barry, Gary, and Julian. Those are the three main players in the book.

Teacher: And what is the book about?

Student: It's about a basketball team. Like one year they were champions, but the next year they got a new team, so everybody's new. Then the second game Barry got hurt, so they're in the hospital right now asking if Barry can play basketball again.

Teacher: Which character do you like the best?

Student: Julian.

Teacher: Why do you like Julian the best?

Student: Because he's the main character in the book and he's the player that's doing all the work on the team trying to make sure they win.

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Teacher: Do you think you relate to Julian?

Student: Kinda sorta

Teacher: How are you similar to Julian?

Student: Because when it's time for basketball I keep my head in the game. I love playing sports.

Addressing SEL components during reading conferences allows the teacher to differentiate the needs of each student (Fisher et al., 2020). For example, one student might be reading John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* and connecting with the main character, Aza, and her struggles with anxiety. Through conferences with the student, the teacher can discuss how Aza copes with her anxiety, how her anxiety is part of her identity and not something to hide, and how it is essential to be aware of our mental health. The teacher might even suggest that the student read another novel like *Turtles All the Way Down* if she thinks the student may need additional exposure to similar topics. With each student reading a different novel, many other conversations can encompass SEL during reading conferences. Additionally, the teacher can assess student understanding and mastery of required standards and skills, such as identifying a theme, analyzing its development, and exploring the author's choice in text structure, character development, and how setting affects the characters (Kittle, 2013; Miller, 2014).

Benefits for Students

Using YAL for independent reading is a powerful way to incorporate SEL in the classroom while also providing individualized instruction. YAL can be used to help students build their own identity, increase their self-awareness, develop their relationship and social skills, and improve their decision-making (CASEL, 2017). Reading about characters who are like them and who face similar situations will help students grow and develop into young adults with strong identities (Bishop, 1990; Bishop, 2014). Many students enter the class at the beginning of the semester with little experience reading independently and hating reading. After building their reading stamina and developing a habit of reading, students often find that they enjoy reading. Students were able to provide comments about this unit during their end of semester reflections:

- I loved SSR... I liked getting to calm down and just read. I am not much of a reader, but if I have a good book I enjoy it. I enjoyed all of the books I read. I learned new vocabulary. One of the books I read taught me about how to have a different perspective on life. [EB]
- It was my favorite part of the day because I enjoy reading. It allows me to escape into another world where I can be another part of a story of someone else's life. I strive to become an author. [ZBL]
- This class has made me a better reader day by day. [TS]
- I learned that it's actually fun to read when you take your time and choose a book. [CC]
- After I finished [my book] I was kinda mad. I couldn't find another book that was as interesting like the first one [CN]

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Kim's students found pleasure in reading while also connecting with the texts, their peers, their teacher, and their personal lives. These books provided a means to investigate their experiences and real-world issues, providing a way to question and learn from the characters and problem-solve solutions for their own lives.

CONNECTING NOVELS WITH WHOLE-CLASS READS AND BOOK CLUBS: STEVEN

Steven is a high school English teacher and has been for the past 3 years. His school, located in the suburbs of South Carolina, serves 2,360 students. Out of this group, 62% are White, 21% are Black, 10% are Hispanic, 3% are Asian, with the remaining 5% identifying as other. As of 2019, the student's free and reduced lunch population has grown to about 24%. The exact numbers of this specific population for the 2020-2021 school year dropped, however the students were not required to fill out the forms for free and reduced lunch in order to receive free meals. In addition, the school also has an emergent bilingual population of 237. These students come from a variety of linguistic environments. Steven's specific classrooms have an average of 24 students in each. The two classes from which the following examples come from have 25 students and 26 students respectively. Out of those classes - totalling 51 students - 7% identify as Black, 7% identify as Hispanic, 83% identify as White, and the remaining 3% identify as Asian or other. None of his students in these two classes are categorized as emergent bilinguals, while 2 of his students have some form of academic accommodations - 504 plan or an IEP. Steven understands the criticality of teaching a novel in lessons. During those three years of teaching, there is a focus on world literature and U.S. literature. Although the district mainly designs the curriculum, individual schools have flexibility with how strictly they would like to adhere to these guides provided by the district.

That flexibility has translated into his classroom through the critical examination of setting and the ramifications of societal influences on the characters mentioned in the literature as a critical and necessary foundation for instruction. Students bring into their readings their lives, backgrounds, and experiences and use them when creating meaning with and from their texts (Wilhelm, 2016). Students' comprehension is influenced by their ability to "make sense of their own and others' lives through the storylines that tell them what to expect in social situations" (Buehler, 2016, p. 12). These texts often further a students' understanding of historical and political impacts (Vasquez et al., 2019). There is a distinct connection between the inherent power of language and narrative as it relates to students identifying and examining their place within the classroom and the broader society (Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

Explanation of Unit

Steven decided to use a book club reading unit for students to conduct a critical examination of society, which self-aligns with the central tenets of SEL because of the task and dialogue required. The book club unit asked students to identify how the texts they engage in address societal issues. This unit required students to do this examination in groups, promoting peer collaboration. This peer collaboration allows students to build their critical reading skills, their social awareness, and their self-awareness - not just as individuals but as a collective whole. Through reading and examination, students see themselves, their peers, and members of their communities in the context of these social structures (Holland et al.,

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2012; McCarthey & Moje, 2002). Through this collaborative examination, the students are building their relationship skills and their sense of responsibility in shaping their communities.

In an attempt to bring YAL into the classroom discussions and connect it specifically with the curriculum as opposed to relegating YAL solely to independent reading times, the English 2 ELA team chose to use book clubs, or literature circles, in classroom instruction. The class's literature circles (Daniels, 2002) were set up in two parts: literature circle conversations and a final group project. Students picked a particular role and then reported on and discussed their findings to their groups during the allotted class time. These conversations would then be used to help students complete their final group project, which in this particular case was a text set that established a connection between themes present in the whole class novel and their choice novel.

The first step to establishing these literature circles was identifying an overarching theme or connection between the text students are reading as a whole group and relatable options for them to read independently. For this unit, the connection was the literature of Africa. This was done by having the whole-class novel be *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. The additional choice books were then all either set in Africa or written by African authors. In addition to this geographic connection, four themes were discussed and analyzed throughout the reading of Achebe's novel: a) the expectations and values of masculinity; b) the importance and role of language in a culture; c) tradition versus adaptation; and d) the inherent value of individual cultures. It was imperative that the identified books that students could choose from fit the region's criteria and dealt with one or more of those themes present in *Things Fall Apart*.

The books chosen were: *Born A Crime* by Trevor Noah, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Good Braider* by Terry Farish, *Soldier Boy* by Keely Hutton, and *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah. It is important to note that students only came into the classroom two days a week because of the pandemic, meaning just half of the students were in the classroom at a time. However, students were still able to form literature circle groups. Novels were voted on and chosen by class periods instead of groups formed by student choice. For the examples that follow, one class chose *Soldier Boy* by Keely Hutton, and the other class chose Trevor Noah's *Born A Crime*. Both of these works, as explained later, were compared with the whole class novel, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Steven formed literature circle groups once the books were chosen.

Whole Class Read

Students would read sections from *Things Fall Apart* during whole class novel days and primarily focus on the literary elements of characterization and theme. Students were given a graphic organizer to support their analysis. As students analyzed Chinua Achebe's message about these themes, they were also told that it is not enough to know the theme exists within the story - critical readers work to understand why the theme exists and what the overall message of the theme is. Students were to track evidence to answer each thematic question with the understanding that towards the end of the novel, the class would determine what the message is within that big idea by writing the theme statement. Students also had to include two sentences of commentary for each quote, which was to explain how the detail answers the question.

In positioning this unit as a critical examination of the society they live in, students examine both how characters and their actions relate to the creation of a social belief as well as looking at these beliefs being represented, upheld, or critiqued in the texts they choose to engage. Furthermore, this unit and critical examination promote SEL by having the students see their specific role in creating the societ-

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ies that they wish to live in and the relationship skills needed to operate within and collaborate with members of their book clubs.

Choice Text

Students read at home for 10-15 minutes per day for their literature circle novels and discussed with their groups on Fridays where they divided up roles and tasks. Krashen (2005) states that it is more effective to provide small increments of time per day for students to read rather than devoting large amounts of time once or twice per week. Students completed tasks in class, ending with groups discussing their findings with their group and the whole class. Although not every student presented, groups were encouraged to highlight any particular question, connection, or topic of interest that their group made or discussed during their allotted discussion time. During some of these whole class discussions, some groups would highlight one of their chosen roles by answering the questions: “What was the connection that your group came up with today? How does that relate to our novels thus far?” or groups would share interesting ideas they discussed. Positioning this work as critical examination and promotion of SEL, the literature circle conversations allowed students to see how the texts they read connected to their own lives and affected their peers. Students were able to see the importance of their actions by completing their assigned role within the literature circle and in the broader conversations about the texts and how this impacted others and their surroundings.

Final Outcome

As a final outcome, groups completed a project that explored the connections between the readings, the whole class novel and their choice novel, and other texts that students have read, seen, and engaged in their own lives. This project was to create an extension of the students’ conversations in their literature circle groups. First, the student groups were to choose one question from a list of inquiry questions that they felt could be answered by both novels. These questions were the same as the thematic topics the class had explored during their reading of *Things Fall Apart*. Choosing the question aimed to highlight both what topic or theme they felt was most prevalent in *Things Fall Apart* and the connection theme or topic they noticed between *Things Fall Apart* and their choice novel. The question options were:

1. What are the expectations of and value of Masculinity in modern-day society, and how have they potentially changed?
2. What is the importance of Language or Communication in a culture, and how does it operate in creating said culture?
3. How have cultures or people groups dealt with the importance of maintaining tradition versus the importance of adaptability?
4. How has the inherent value of individual cultures and people groups been challenged, and what were the consequences?

Then, the groups presented a document where they detailed why their group chose the thematic question they did, specifically looking at how it was answered by *Things Fall Apart* and their choice novel. Next, they were to create a text set that included at least six additional texts related to the thematic question they chose to explore. It is important to note here that in Steven’s class, students consider videos,

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art, and nonfiction work with the same analytical and critical examination at written text. Therefore, the student-created text sets, or groups of similar, multimodal texts, included visual texts such as videos, movies, television shows; non-fiction written works such as newspaper or magazine articles; and fiction written works such as short stories, other books, children's books, etc.

The purpose of these specific questions was to critically examine how literature resists or upholds certain societal standards. Furthermore, students learn to look critically at what societal standards are being pushed or countered within the media. It gives students insight into how they potentially play a part in this resistance or upholding by specifically naming how their identified texts, their chosen novel, and the in-class novel relate to issues they experience or see others experience.

Exploration of Final Outcomes

In examining the final text sets, the primary thing that stood out was that students were predominantly focused on text-to-text analysis, comparing the texts they read to other texts they are already familiar with. This does not mean that students did not make text-to-world or text-to-self connections and analysis, but rather the lens where those connections were made was through text-to-text connection. Most of this was due to the assignment's nature, which was to identify connecting themes, topics, and/or answers to social questions in the texts.

The following examples highlight these connections and examinations. In the first group with Trevor Noah's *Born A Crime*, the students focused heavily on how other non-fiction texts question and critique traditional notions of masculinity in western society. This group, via a discussion with the teacher, also briefly contended with the pushback that these questions and critiques could raise. In the second group with Keely Hutton's *Soldier Boy*, the students focused on how the texts they engaged with throughout this unit highlight the consequences and effects of challenging individual cultures.

One Group's Example - Born A Crime

This group chose to reframe the masculinity question to serve their purpose and interpretation. In their introductory paragraph for the text set they created, they focused on men's actions and some of the damaging effects from the concepts that accompany masculinity instead of focusing on how the actions and work of men are valued and changed over time, as noted in the original question. This decision was based on the theme in both books and the relevance of the topic. Students wanted to highlight how much of the world's literature also revolves around the expectations of masculinity and how these expectations are changing. These students are explaining how they see the changing of society and the role literature is playing in that change.

When looking at the compiled text set of this group, students focused heavily on non-fiction articles and artifacts such as magazine covers of Kurt Cobain (1993) and Harry Styles (2020) wearing a dress on the cover of Vogue magazine, Nora Caplan-Bricker's (2019) GQ article titled "How Masculinity is Changing," and Justin Boldoni's (2017) TED Talk titled "What It Means to be 'Man Enough.'" The students' primary takeaway on most of these texts was the mere fact that ideas of masculinity are changing, promoting the questioning of and expression of gender - specifically, femininity amongst cis-gendered men.

While this group was working on creating their text set based on the theme of the effects of masculinity, the teacher asked how they would contend with Harry Styles facing extensive backlash for wearing a dress on that Vogue cover. This conversation can be challenging and complex. Specifically, the

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student who brought up the Harry Styles photoshoot seemed a little unaware or caught off guard by the questioning here. At the end of this brief conversation, the student said that she recognized how some people were not a fan of Harry's style choices. It also seemed she understood how texts were challenging preconceived ideas and notions about gender and gender expression. Regardless, the excerpt shows how these conversations can arise given the subject material.

Another Group's Example - Soldier Boy

The other group chose to address how individual cultures are challenged and the apparent consequences that stem from these challenges. They rephrased the question in their own words, by writing "This is asking about how a group's culture and values have been challenged or changed during the story, and what the consequences of the story's outcome were." The group identified how their two texts, *Things Fall Apart* and *Soldier Boy* addressed this question. They mostly found connections between the texts they chose over overtly exploring how the texts addressed the world's issues through analysis. However, this does not mean students did not make connections to the real world. One example that highlights this distancing is in the group's prompts about a testimony of a man from Mozambique who converted from Christianity to Islam and then converted most of his family (Rempel, 2018). In connecting this text to the themes and other texts, the group writes the following:

This was the start of a change for James' community. They slowly started to get rid of their traditions and values. This shows the value of individual cultures and how people groups have been challenged. The consequences being the loss culture and tradition.

The origin of the testimony, which came from an American Missionary group called Operation Mobilization, is not touched upon despite the students recognizing how interactions of this nature can have great impact on a people group and their culture.

In one particularly poignant example of connecting to real-world issues, the group wrote about the poems "We Should Make A Documentary About Spades" and "What I am" by author Tarrence Hayes (1999; 2015). The group reports the following:

The poems show how African American culture has been challenged by that of the white man and how the struggling people had risen above it in their own communities and through their own strategies, all while remaining a sense of their own identity. This is similar to Okonkwo's struggles against the white religion and culture in Mbanta and Umuofia. His religion and culture is challenged and it creates animosity and violence as a consequence, just as Hayes talks about how people must protest as a consequence, and how people must endure the animosity and sideways glances as consequences.

Here, the students can see how the literature connects and comments on the world in which they live and occupy, explicitly addressing their country. This detailed analysis highlights the possibility for real-world research that directly relates to the experiences they are personally witnessing. While there were no direct conversations between the group and teacher about their work, the students did ask questions about the prompt itself and what exactly they needed to investigate.

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Implications and Take-Aways for the Reader

One consideration when introducing this unit is the role of whole class and group conversations. Specifically, these conversations demonstrated critique and awareness of connections between the texts and the outside world, while much of their writing centered on connections between the texts. This conversation and dialogue, and the act of contributing to creating a shared space, aid in the formation and promotion of social relationship skills. It is from those conversations that readers should be able to see evidence of students engaging in critical thinking of how the texts that they consume not only relate to one another, but also relate to more prominent themes and structures that govern their lives.

Another key takeaway from this unit should be the role that collaboration plays in students making sense of the world around them. This was done by having students engage in this critical analysis of text and society in groups. These groups allowed students to engage with one another, question the communities they all occupy, and collaborate to create their text set. By having students work, learn, and discuss together, they gain multiple perspectives and practice the SEL notion of democratic citizenship and, hopefully, empathy.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

As SEL becomes a crucial part of student learning during the 21st century, there is a need to understand how educators can incorporate SEL in daily instruction, by using YAL to strengthen students' strategies and skills while encountering socio-emotional challenges in their everyday lives. As adolescents begin developing their identities, having characters in their books to whom they connect is essential. Students' feelings of loneliness and isolation are minimized when they see a character going through similar experiences. Students learn additional ways to cope with stress, heartbreak, loneliness, and the myriad other emotions they experience from day-to-day. Identifying characters from the same culture empowers students to accept their own culture, while reading about different cultures teaches them to embrace and celebrate diversity.

The three teacher vignettes presented in this chapter promote SEL with YAL in a multitude of ways. As previously mentioned, there are five CASEL competencies: a) self-awareness, b) social awareness, c) relationship skills, d) self-management, and e) responsible decision making. Additionally, Fisher and colleagues (2020) identify five social and emotional learning opportunities that relate to students' needs and SEL: a) identity and agency; b) emotional regulation; c) cognitive regulation; d) social skills; and e) public spirit.

Each teacher mentioned in this chapter focused on a different competency of CASEL (2017) and the tenets outlined by Fisher and colleagues (2020). The first vignette discussed the intersection between YAL and the ability for students to increase their self-awareness through encountering texts and characters that provide both windows and mirrors for students (Bishop, 1990). Students use these texts as gateways to learn more about themselves through others. The second vignette used YAL as a connection for students to learn more about themselves. Students can connect with texts and characters to help them overcome their own personal challenges. The third vignette used YAL as a way for students to build relationships to other texts and to students' own lives. Students used texts in a variety of manners to better know themselves and others. Ultimately, all three teachers were putting their students' lived

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experiences and needs into their curriculum, attempting to be culturally responsive by requiring students to investigate their sociopolitical realities and issues (Simmons, 2021).

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