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## The Impact of Analyzing Young Adult Literature for Racial Identity / Social Justice Orientation with Interdisciplinary Students

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### ABSTRACT

Research suggests that students need authenticity by welcoming their stories, even causing tension and discomfort with complex topics, encouraging discussion, and questioning. Our study explores undergraduates' open-ended reflections on using young adult literature to challenge dominant, deficit perspectives about themselves and others, which is not yet the norm but more common in high school settings. We explored how students questioned their implicit biases and assumptions toward a more critically aware identity through a holistic qualitative case study. Our analysis of students' open-ended reflections produced three major themes: (a) Importance of Diverse Books and Analysis; (b) Books as an Impetus for a Change in Thinking and Awareness of Self; and (c) Lingering Tensions and Ongoing Resistance. Although many students expressed a change in thinking, there were still instances that reflected resistance.

### KEYWORDS

Critical literacy; disrupting stereotypes; undergraduate english; young adult literature

A long-standing tradition across secondary English classrooms is a focus and desire to read texts from the canon. By doing so, teachers propagate dominant ideologies such as “Whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, Christianity, and physical and mental ability” (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 123), with most written by White authors (Borsheim-Black, 2015). Although these texts may provide value in classrooms, they may not offer means to understanding self or learning about others—culturally, politically, historically, or in any other way (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). These stories promote racism by incorporating harmful depictions and do not require students to investigate systemic inequities (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2018). They may not compel students to think in agentive ways to change their local community and global environment (Dyches et al., 2020; Mirra, 2018).

Therefore, only using these texts is problematic as school is not neutral (Freire, 1989) and there is a hidden curriculum—a set of unwritten, informal, and unofficial rules, expectations, and perspectives—that has exerted powerful

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negative pressures on students. In the United States, the hidden curriculum has been determined by the cultural values and expectations of the dominant White, middle and upper class, English-speaking, heterosexual majority (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Rahman, 2013). Anyone who falls outside of those groups has historically been defined as different and, therefore, deficient, needing to assimilate with the dominant perspective (Gutierrez et al., 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2018). White students, students of color, and other historically marginalized students need educational opportunities that will not simply support students' access to social, economic, and academic power structures, but also develop language and literacy practices capable of challenging the White-dominated status quo in the United States (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b; Kinloch et al., 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017). Otherwise, students' voices can be silenced, prompting a sense of powerlessness, which is often accompanied by feelings of shame, humiliation, and betrayal (Fisher et al., 2020).

The reason for not including these necessary texts is that it can be easy to turn away from specific topics that cause tension or discomfort in our classrooms (Tatum, 2005), especially when most of the nation's teachers and administrators are White, with most educators being White and female (Hussar et al., 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Yet, students need authenticity by welcoming their stories and encouraging discussion and questioning (Beckelheimer, 2017; Collins, 2017) with texts that provide ways to see themselves in their realities and lived experiences (Borsheim-Black & Sarigiandes, 2019). Students need authentic and relevant instruction that provides the opportunity to question texts and real-world situations (ILA, 2018; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Luckily, this trend of sticking to the classics is starting to change with more and more high school classrooms using diverse contemporary texts, including young adult literature (YAL) to center on students' lived experiences and perspectives through dialogic conversation (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b), although there is a need for this to become even more common (Dyches et al., 2020). Among the many benefits of YAL, one is that these texts provide ways for teachers to promote space for discussing sensitive topics, often termed "taboo," pushing educators to discontinue the trend of self-censorship and fear of bringing these conversations into the classroom (Ayers & Ayers, 2014; Collins, 2017; Fisher et al., 2020; Tatum, 2005). YAL enables us, students and teachers, to question preexisting beliefs and assumptions, leading to new understandings of relevant cultural and societal issues (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, 2018) and providing us with an opportunity for civic engagement (Mirra, 2018; Turner & Reed, 2018).

This type of engagement and critical discourse is vital throughout K-12 (ILA, 2018) as education is a sociopolitical context created by a "belief system that helps create and perpetuate structures that reproduce" assumptions (Nieto & Bode, 2018, p. 15). Research and experts in education emphasize

that teachers can do this work. Prominent experts and authors in children's and young adult literature, such as Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, Jason Reynolds, Dr. Kim Parker, and Drs. Sophia Sarigianides, and Carlin Borsheim-Black, have shared this message for the past few years, offering various free webinars and resources for teachers and parents. Literacy organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Literacy Association, have hosted many sessions free to the public, shared resources with members and nonmembers, and created various blogs such as Build Your Stacks. These initiatives help to support the curation and use of high-quality literature to disrupt dominant beliefs and narratives.

Yet, many educators are either not introducing these needed discussions into their classrooms, silencing many students' voices, or are just starting to help students begin the process of critically examine texts to question stereotypes and racism, challenge self, and garner a better understanding of various perspectives of what is currently happening in the world (ILA, 2018; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). This means that many students may be finishing high school and stepping into the world of post-secondary education without knowing how to question their own beliefs and assumptions. Further, they may not have a strong understanding of why this nation needs movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, let alone be prepared to get involved in making change.

Regardless of what our undergraduates go on to do, become doctors, scientists, or engineers, their awareness of themselves and potential biases is essential. Students must be able to understand others and learn to appreciate and desire to learn from multiple perspectives. Young adult literature in an undergraduate English course is an avenue to dive into self and myriad cultures and identities. Research within the past decade has emphasized the benefits of using YAL in high school classrooms, such as promoting intrinsic motivation and enjoyment of reading (Guthrie et al., 2007; Ivey & Johnston, 2013, 2018; Smith, 2019) and providing an opportunity to develop greater civic engagement (Turner & Reed, 2018) Additionally, research has provided an understanding of the impact of using multicultural YAL (see Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b) along with a subversive approach to including literature that requires disrupting the traditional ways of teaching literature (see Dyches et al., 2020). Problematically, there is limited research investigating the potential of using YAL read through a critical lens with undergraduates. However, all undergraduates, not just those studying to be teachers, deserve the opportunity to become more aware of their own biases and stereotypes and challenge these stereotypes and the world they were created in. This study addresses this gap in the literature.

Therefore, our study's purpose was to explore non-education undergraduates' reflections on using YAL better to understand themselves and their peers and others. We wanted to see if students became more aware of their

preconceived biases and stereotypes by the end of the course and if their perspectives changed. We also wanted to understand their perceptions of diverse texts at the postsecondary level. The following research questions guided our study:

1. How does exposure to diverse young adult literature shape students' reflections on biases, stereotypes, privilege, and assumptions?
2. What do undergraduates think about diverse young adult literature?

### Conceptual Framework

More recently, secondary teachers have started to use YAL with their students to disrupt dominant narratives, stereotypes, and deficit perspectives (Dyches et al., 2020; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b; ILA, 2018). Diverse texts allow students to engage in critical discourse (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019), simultaneously seeing themselves (mirrors) and learning about others (windows; Borsheim-Black & Sarigiandes, 2019; R. S. Bishop, 1990). Research has shown that YAL can be used to disrupt gender stereotypes (Munson-Warnken, 2017; Rodríguez, 2019; Schey, 2019; Taber et al., 2012), detrimental perspectives of adolescents (Groenke et al., 2015; Petrone et al., 2014; Silva & Savitz, 2019), untrue stereotypes of adolescents on the autism spectrum or other identified disabilities (Black & Tsumoto, 2018; Curwood, 2013; Matsumoto & Black, 2019), stereotypes about youth who are members of LGBTQI+ communities (Dunkerly-Bean & Bean, 2015; Rodríguez, 2019), or other hardships students may experience, such as adoption (Parsons et al., 2017).

Secondary students can question their perceptions of those who have different identities from their own and can “challenge problematic norms with insight, care, passion, and empathy” (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019a, p. 618; see, also, Parsons et al., 2017). For instance, teachers can use YAL to challenge dominant perspectives related to undocumented immigrants (Cummins, 2013; Johnson & Gasiewicz, 2017). When students read a text about a character, similar in age to them, facing the daunting and terrifying task of leaving their home country because of unforeseen hardships and misery, students must question the dominant narrative posited by so many politicians that undocumented immigrants come to the United States to steal jobs or sell drugs (Fisher et al., 2020).

These YAL narratives can engender “sympathy for the struggle[s]” protagonists face (Cummins, 2013, p. 71). Students must examine what they have previously learned, including potential implicit bias and assumptions, and walk away after reading with a newly devised understanding of people they work with and are surrounded by in their communities (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Literacy scholar and researcher Ebony Thomas (2018) demonstrated that, unfortunately, too few young adult readers “are able to see their own experiences mirrored in the books that they read” (p. 14). As a result,

young adults all over the world have engaged in racebending (i.e., creating fan-made works that alter the race or ethnicity of characters traditionally portrayed as White) and other forms of reshaping narratives to write “diversity into existence” (E. E. Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 329). We should celebrate these young people’s creativity, but they should not have to rewrite the stories they read in school just to find mirrors of themselves. Thomas (2015) argued secondary English language arts classrooms “are promising sites to begin the hard work of racial reconciliation, social justice, and cultural change” (p. 173).

### ***What Does This Look like in High Schools?***

Literature circles (Daniels & Steineke, 2004) are often used with secondary students to validate their reading practices and challenge dominant, deficit perspectives about themselves and those who are racialized (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019; Gibson, 2016; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019a). For instance, Ginsberg and Glenn (2019a) studied secondary students in an English class as they engaged in literature circles centered on YAL involving Muslim cultures and Islam. Over time and through the study of YAL, the students, who initially othered Muslims and those who practice Islam, demonstrated a better understanding and appreciation of Muslim cultures.

Gibson (2016) studied six Black girls’ reading practices in grades 10 and 11 in weekly literature circle meetings as they read and discussed urban YA fiction. Gibson explained that urban YA fiction is traditionally viewed as “trash” or pulp fiction (p. 212). It usually is written for Black teenage girls, features Black female protagonists who must overcome hardships, and cautions the readers to learn from the protagonists’ mistakes. During the study, several of the participants did not view themselves as readers, “despite their voracious reading engagement with urban fiction” (p. 221), perhaps because some educators consider urban YAL as inferior to the texts in the traditional canon. (see Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020, for a study that challenged dominant perspectives of the canon.) These students, however, used the same skills valued in classrooms (e.g., comprehension and analysis) while also challenging dominant views of urban literature as “trash” and perspectives of Black girls as “non-readers.” YAL can be used to disrupt racism and build empathy for those who are racialized (Borsheim-Black & Sarigiandes, 2019; Matteson & Boyd, 2017; Sherr & Beise, 2015).

### ***What Does This Look like in Post-secondary Settings?***

Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013) argued that teacher education programs should emphasize a commitment to “working against oppressive structures that impede the academic success of students from diverse backgrounds” (p. 248). They advocated for using YAL to be studied through

a critical lens to equip students “with tools to critique and question the world around them as they make sense of texts” (p. 254). To promote critical literacies with preservice teachers (PST), Matteson and Boyd (2017) created a framework with eight components: positionality, race, orientation, gender, relationships, environment, social class, and stereotypes (PROGRESS; p. 28). Matteson and Boyd urged those who work with PSTs to implement this framework when examining YA fiction PSTs plan to use in their future teaching. This framework encourages PSTs to consider how “a text might, for instance, work to defy racism but simultaneously uphold the gender binary” (p. 38). Such instances would need to be addressed critically by teachers. If teachers do not skillfully and intentionally employ critical literacy skills, they might reinforce harmful dominant discourses of oppression (Schieble, 2012).

Because of the potential of YAL to disrupt harmful stereotypes and forms of oppression, some preservice teachers prepare to teach secondary students to study YAL in their undergraduate coursework. Beck et al. (2018) argued that because YAL books are “authentic, accurate, approachable, and emotionally engaging” (p. 19), they can be used in undergraduate courses to address complex topics and challenge oppressive systems. Batchelor (2018) had her PSTs select topics that could be considered taboo and required them to create text sets (collections of related texts) to use with their future students. The PSTs created text sets related to the Black Lives Matter movements, rape culture, and stigmas about mental health. Then, Batchelor required her students to examine the text sets they created through a critical lens. They asked themselves questions like “What’s missing? Whose voices are not heard? Whose view is privileged?” (p. 381). Through questioning and reflection, the PSTs recognized that although their text sets were meant to encourage equity and justice, they silenced some and privileged others. These realizations helped them understand their implicit biases more profoundly and the potential impact of those biases on their future teaching decisions.

Most of the literature on the critical study of YAL with undergraduates focuses on preservice teachers, but there are some notable exceptions. Misemer (2015) used graphic novels in an elective course for English majors to encourage them to “make compelling arguments about and in various media” (p. 131). Krusemark (2016) used a comic book to guide undergraduates in leadership and reflect on their leadership knowledge and skills. D. M. Thomas and Kim (2019) implemented literature circles studying YAL with undergraduates enrolled in developmental reading courses; they concluded that “literature circles improve reading comprehension, facilitate deep, and meaningful textual engagement, [and] motivate students to read” (p. 109).

Grue (2020) discussed the potential of using texts from the Afrofuturism genre in undergraduate courses. Grue explained that the Afrofuturism genre challenges race and gender perceptions and contains many texts in various



media (e.g., music, visual art, comics, movies, novels). Afrofuturism draws from the science-fiction genre and “re-envision[s] the past, present, and future to show what the Black community does and can look like in imaginative and yet intensely real ways” (p. 33). While Grue did not specifically mention YA fiction, comic books are often considered YAL. The Afrofuturism genre includes comics, and Grue argued this genre “provides a rich resource for college literacy instruction, especially the teaching of composition and rhetoric” (p. 33).

### **Critical Literacy**

As has been mentioned by scholars, there is a need for the use of a critical literacy lens, as students examine, analyze, and critique texts; evaluate author intent, embedded messages, and missing perspectives; and assess trustworthiness (Applebee & Langer, 2013; Vasquez et al., 2019). E. Bishop (2014) defined critical literacy as:

(a) mobilizing learners as social actors with knowledge and skills to disrupt the commonplace; (b) conducting research, analysis, and interrogation of multiple viewpoints on an issue; (c) identifying issues focused on socio-political realities in the context of the lives of the learners; (d) designing and undertaking actions focused on social justice outside of the classroom; and (e) reflecting upon actions taken and creating vision(s) for future project(s). (p. 55)

Through this type of critical analysis, students learn that constructs such as race are socially constructed, meaning that the concept is a “product of social thought and relations” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 9), with the hope of their investigation leading to social action (Dozier et al., 2006). Students develop and strengthen their critical consciousness, the ability to “recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). Students gain an awareness and understanding of power dynamics within the dominant culture and mainstream society and begin shifting to a shared power dynamic in classrooms by being critical of the social, political, and technological processes that “produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162).

Learning together through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), students can discuss personal connections or ask questions to dissect real-life events (Buehler, 2016; Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019; Fisher et al., 2020) by first reflecting on character actions and situations, as well as critiquing their values and assumptions and those of others. Students can use texts to gain insight and see themselves and learn about others (R. S. Bishop, 1990; Tschida et al., 2014), as students’ interpretation is based on personal experiences and backgrounds (Rosenblatt, 1994). Students from dominant groups (White, wealthy, etc.) learn to recognize how their perspectives and responses to a text are constructed from their dominant experiences (Borsheim-Black & Sarigiandes, 2019), and in turn, view cultural differences as assets (Gay, 2018; Johnston



et al., 2017; Zacarian & Soto, 2020). With critical literacy, students can evaluate and change their perception of how they initially drew conclusions and viewed “others” based on what society says and start questioning the “status quo” (Graff, 2010), becoming more aware of the inequities in the world around them (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Unfortunately, it appears that if students are not extensively and frequently engaged in the critical study of YAL in secondary schools, they might never get to do this crucial work in their schooling. Education majors preparing to teach secondary students might be involved in the critical study of YAL. It seems, however, that undergraduates in other majors are likely to graduate from their college or university without ever studying YAL in their coursework. The potential benefits of the critical study of YAL are too great to relegate to secondary classrooms or reserve only for education majors.

## Methods

We chose a holistic qualitative case study (Yin, 2018) to understand if and how students questioned their implicit biases and assumptions toward a more critically aware identity through reading and discussing racial issues presented in young adult literature. Yin (2018) recommends multiple sources used to support data triangulation. Our primary data sources were the student open-ended midway and final reflections. We triangulated and checked our interpretations with secondary data of novel analyses and field notes from the instructor to include notes taken during classroom discussions (Hatch, 2002). It is important to note that while interviews would add a more profound description and provide for elaboration or additional context to students’ reflections and class discussions, we felt it vital to include all students of the course in analysis. Therefore, we chose not to require interviews to participate in this study.

## Student and Study Context

Fifteen non-education undergraduate students (all names are pseudonyms) from a predominantly White institution elected to take an honors seminar in the Fall of 2018 with the first author (see Table 1). This course was open to any student in the Honors College, and it replaced their General Education Arts and Humanities Literature requirement. All Honors students received a list of potential seminars and course descriptions offered each semester with the requirement of choosing one course. For this course, the description provided was as follows:

This Honors College Seminar will focus on reading, discussing, and analyzing social constructs presented within young adult literature (i.e., youth, identity, race) using various lenses. Students will be required to read four books (e.g., *The Hate You Give*)

and choose an additional five books from instructor-provided lists. Students will develop an understanding of the complexities of YA literature and understand the need and purpose for reading YA to learn about life, racism, and ways to make positive changes in your communities. In addition, students will collaborate with high school students to engage in discussions around each novel.

When asked at the start of the semester, one student identified regularly reading YA, predominantly realistic fiction, and zero students read YA throughout their high school ELA classes. Also asked was why they chose to take this course, with most students saying that they were interested in better understanding social constructs through literature and that their other English and literature courses focused on novels already read in high school, having limited opportunity to read YAL.

The course was taught in three sections, with each section focusing on a different social construct: adolescence; race and ethnicity; and sexual orientation and gender identity. Students learned about each lens through (a) a class discussion on their assumptions about the social construct, (b) reading articles related to the construct and lens, and (c) class discussion related to the lens's background, theory, and precepts. Students were given recommended analysis questions for each lens (e.g., What does the text do to promote or challenge stereotypes and generalization) but were also allowed to modify based on knowledge or interest. To ensure understanding of each potential analysis question, students and the instructor read a short story and responded as a group to the questions. This practice was a vital step to ensure students' understanding of each question.

This class met once a week for a total of three hours per session. Therefore, the overall structure of each class session consisted of students reading assigned lens-related and social construct articles before class, allowing for whole group discussion to clear up misconceptions, discuss questions about either, learn the background and precepts of each lens, and ask remaining

**Table 1.** Student participants.

Student name	Gender	Class	Race	Degree
Nora Abrams	Female	Junior	White	Language and international health
Kevin Ahn	Male	Junior	White	Industrial engineering
Brittney Carson	Female	Sophomore	White	Nursing
Victoria Church	Female	Sophomore	White	General engineering
Fred Daniels	Male	Senior	White	Biochemistry
Patrick Davenport	Male	Sophomore	Biracial	Industrial engineering
Lexie Edwards	Female	Sophomore	Biracial	General engineering
Stephanie Franklin	Female	Sophomore	White	Food science and human nutrition
Danielle Jacobs	Female	Sophomore	White	Nursing
Molly Kimbell	Female	Senior	White	English
Robert Madison	Male	Sophomore	White	Civil engineering
Sarah Marts	Female	Sophomore	White	Management
Megan Matthews	Female	Junior	Black	Health science
Ricky Pilkey	Male	Junior	White	Financial management
Preston Thomas	Male	Sophomore	White	General engineering

questions to the entire group. This flipped environment allowed for class time to share a brief lecture but most of the time was used within small groups for guided practice and support.

Students read one novel per week, typically with at least one other student. They were required to read four whole-class novels (see [Table 2](#)) with five additional choice partner novels chosen from predetermined options created from award lists (e.g., Coretta Scott King Award and Pura Belpre Award) or known important texts (i.e., identified in scholarly research). Choice was provided as research has shown that choice positively impacts reading motivation (Smith, 2019) and student agency (Ivey & Johnston, 2013), and to encourage students to learn about others' lived experiences (Guthrie et al., 2012). Options also provided students the ability to read and connect with local high school students, a requirement of the Honors seminar (see Schreuder & Savitz, 2020 for more on this portion of the course.) As a class, they critically analyzed the novel, recording connections and additional questions related to personal lives or current events to discuss with others at our next class session. The overarching objective was for students to create and engage in literacy practices that develop awareness, understanding, respect, and valuing differences in our society.

### **Data Collection**

Novel analysis assignments and field notes from the instructor, including notes taken during classroom discussions, were collected by the first author throughout the semester. Midway through the course, students were provided the following prompt to respond to:

At this point in the semester, you have read four novels and learned about social constructs and events related to race, ethnicity, and adolescence. Please write a minimum of two pages to describe your current thoughts related to our discussions and texts and learning thus far, your mindset about using diverse YAL within curricula (high school and university), any specific takeaways or experiences you have had related to personal biases or beliefs, and input regarding any needed changes for the remainder of our course.

Similarly, at the end of the course, students were asked to respond to three open-ended questions. The first two questions were:

- (a) Why is young adult literature needed in high school and university classrooms?
- (b) What were your original assumptions about the books and social constructs, and did your perception change or get disrupted?

The third question was related to the university-high school partnership and is unrelated to this study, therefore, not included in this article. (see Schreuder & Savitz, 2020 for more information.)

**Table 2.** Core class novels.

Title of novel	Author	Author Information	Book Synopsis
House on Mango Street	Sandra Cisneros	Sandra Cisneros is a Mexican American writer whose work explores the lives of the working-class Hispanic families.	This New York Times Best Seller and American Book Award novella explores the life of Esperanza Cordero, a young girl living in the Hispanic district of Chicago. Using free-verse poetry, Esperanza describes her day-to-day life.
The Hate U Give	Angie Thomas	Angie Thomas, a novelist whose award-winning debut novel, <i>The Hate U Give</i> , was a #1 New York Times bestseller. Her work primarily focuses on the lives of black adolescents.	This Coretta Scott King Book Award novel follows 16-year-old Starr Carter, a young girl who, while grappling to balance her differing lives in school and home, witnesses her childhood friend shot to death at the hands of a police officer.
The Good Braider	Terry Farish	Terry Farish prefers writing about cultures and races that are different from her own. "Writing for me is also deep immersion into what I don't know . . . I write to understand us in our small world." She emerges herself in the communities and builds relationships to support her writing.	This ALA Best Book for Young Adults is written in free verse, telling the story of Viola, a young Sudanese refugee who escapes with her family to America. Although she is immersed in the American culture, she learns to merge her Sudanese culture with her new life.
If You Could Be Mine	Sara Farizan	Sara Farizan is an Iranian American writer and the award-winning author of <i>If You Could Be Mine</i> . She has an MFA from Lesley University and a BA in film and media studies from American University.	This Rainbow Project Book List Winner shares about Sahar and Nasrin, Iranian teenage girls who have loved each other since they were young. However, homosexuality is a crime in Iran, and they could be punished. When Nasrin's parents decide to arrange her marriage, this threatens the girls' relationship.

## **Data Analysis**

Using constant comparative analysis (Miles et al., 2014), we coded for patterns within each student's midway reflection and final reflection pieces, coding each student's midway and final reflections at the same time. Initially, three coders developed an iterative process that applied labels with co-constructed properties for each code to allow for consistency across coders. Individually, we analyzed the same three de-identified student responses, meeting after to discuss established codes, adjusting for clarification and consistency. Once we reached 85% consistency among all three coders, two team members finished coding the rest of the responses, still meeting regularly to ensure at least 90% inter-rater reliability. We also wrote detailed analytic memos about information provided, the need for clarification, and questions related to properties.

We started with open coding, analyzing data by idea unit (Saldaña, 2016), such as “diverse texts” or “stereotypes.” We sought to understand the participants' use of diverse YAL and students' reflections using a critical literacy lens. The second coding round consisted of focused coding to group data into conceptual categories (Saldaña, 2016) while looking at relationships and patterns between initial codes, such as “dominant culture perspective” and “centering Whiteness.” Our final round of coding consisted of collapsing the focused codes by themes (see Table 3).

## **Findings**

Our analysis of students' reflections on reading and analyzing diverse YAL produced three significant themes.

### ***Importance of Diverse Books and Analysis***

The first theme explores students' emphasis on incorporating diverse texts within the classroom, especially considering the current, divided climate and the propensity for misunderstandings. All 15 students in the study expressed the need for and importance of diverse books in the classroom. Students provided many reasons why this is essential and why diverse YA texts should hold an important place in the classroom space.

The White curriculum critique looks at the differences between the traditional literary canon that students were exposed to during high school or prior reading courses compared to the diverse literature they encountered in this course. Reflection on the classic literature enabled the students to consider the importance of diverse YA texts used in the curriculum to promote change. “Coming into this class, I had experienced wonderful English teachers, but we only read classic books, such as books

**Table 3.** Representative example of coding parameters.

Theme	Code	Parameters (explanation/example)
Importance of diverse books	CWC = Critique of white curriculum	Materials provided in school that reinforced/perpetuated/never discussed bias; Importance of diversity; missed connections with students.
	NDB = Need for diverse books	Due to the fact that society now is divided, and misunderstanding exists everywhere, reading from a different perspective is important to act as a bridge.
Books as an impetus for a change in thinking (Readers growth + action)	DCP =Dominant culture perspective	Need to fit into the dominant culture; individual perspective.
	CQ A = Critical questioning of the author	When students question the author's use of stereotypes or generalizations.
	CS = Challenge stereotypes (books)	Challenging stereotypes through YA and the protagonist; disrupting assumptions
	RL = Role of lenses	Through analysis of young adult literature through specific lenses, I have begun to further understand the biases that I see prevalent in every-day life.
Lingering tensions and ongoing resistance	YA RWC = YA as a real world connection	Hard topics, Difficulties of teens, Reasons for making bad decisions in real life; personal experience based on what was read in text.
	SA = Stereotypes of adolescence as defined by reader	Youth lens: (a) adolescence is a construct (b) adolescence is not a universal experience (c) adolescence has consequences (d) adolescence discourse is a symbolic placeholder (Petrone et al., 2014) Stereotypes; youth are driven by hormones, need their parents/adults, irresponsible and impulsive, etc. Gateway to challenging texts; Deficit mind-set in YA. Reader's personal assumptions.
Lingering tensions and ongoing resistance	YA SB = YA as a springboard	Mirrors and windows limitations, cannot fully relate.
	A = Assumptions	Preconceived notions and ideas about someone can influence the way you interpret events when in reality what you thought was far from the truth.
Lingering tensions and ongoing resistance	MWL = Mirrors and windows limitations	Critical Consciousness leads to Action.
	CC = Critical Consciousness	Student experience of being white in personal experience; Fear of discussion about race. Need to fit in with dominant culture, all people of one race are the same, all are gang members, all want to harm others and are criminals to get away with things, etc. LGBTQ analysis; binary only, choose sexual identity.
Lingering tensions and ongoing resistance	CC-A	The stereotypes that authors write against; Connections between assumptions made by readers and by characters. Reinforces why we need diverse books.
	CW = Centering whiteness as defined by reader	
Lingering tensions and ongoing resistance	SR = stereotypes of race/ethnicity as defined by reader	
	SSI- Stereotypes of sexual identity as defined by the reader	
Lingering tensions and ongoing resistance	RS = Reinforcing stereotypes in YA	

by *Shakespeare*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We had lively Socratic seminars, but they lacked diversity and perspective” [Nora, Midway Reflection].

Megan stated in her final reflection that “Not every student will be able to relate to every young adult literature book, but I believe there are a variety of topics covered so that students will be able to find a book with characters that serve as mirrors to their lives.” Students also stressed how they could connect with the characters and situations in the YA novels. Nora shared the difficulty for a “sixteen-year-old to relate to a middle-aged man in the 1920s who throws extravagant parties [but] young adult literature provides teenagers with characters who are going through similar things as they are.” She continued by stating how these canonical books do not necessarily address “hard topics, such as racism and abuse, and beg the reader to see themselves in the characters” [Final Reflection].

Students identified how the dominant perspective of society permeates the perspective of books. When students read diverse literature, they disrupt the dominant culture, promoting additional connections to the text’s culture. For instance, Stephanie shared in her final reflection that “Although I read a lot growing up, and I still try to read when I can, I’ve never spent much time with books about people who are of a different race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation than myself” until this class.

Critical questioning of the author proved to be influential for the students as this related to their examination of the author and how the author’s decisions influenced text readability. For instance, students grappled with stereotypes in novels during the discussion, questioning why stereotypes were included and potential reasons or justification. Robert addressed his conflict with the author’s decision during his midway reflection when he asked, “Why do authors continue to use the same generalizations in an ever-changing climate? And, how have biases we read about as kids affect our opinions as we age?” Through classroom discussion, these students learned that there is a need to consider and question the author’s tone in texts and explore potential hidden meanings behind the author’s purpose for writing.

These conversations prompted students to challenge the stereotypes presented in the books and begin to vocalize how important it is to examine these stereotypes in many ways. Megan commented on her final reflection that “Once someone feels less invisible in literature, they can read books that serve as windows, engage with the text, and begin to understand the struggles and perspectives of people in society who aren’t like them.” This type of mindset was also noted in class discussions.

For instance, although we were not analyzing through a gender lens, students like Lexie addressed the intersectionality of social constructs and how many experienced real-world hardships. When discussing *The Good Braider*, she pushed past discussion on adolescents’ expectations and realities



of immigration and required her classmates to consider gender inequities. She connected the experience of the female protagonist, Viola, with real-world inequality faced by women worldwide, sharing details and information about how the tampon tax is unjust. For Lexie, gender inequality needed to be addressed. Lexie shared her voice not only in class, but also on her midway reflection when she stated that “Even though our nation has made many steps to progress towards equality between men and women, there still exists some disparity between the two.”

These real-world connections were made with the texts and discussion of complex topics, teens’ difficulties, and other personal experiences readers encounter in real life. In her final reflection, Stephanie shared how she thought “that the importance of young adult literature in politics and current events is incredibly understated.” She contended that “it’s easy to read news articles and watch videos on Facebook of conflicts, but nothing puts you in the mindset of someone in a situation quite like reading a book does.” In her final reflection, Victoria explained how young adult literature helped her deal with problems she faced as a teenager: “To deal with the issues of not fitting in, I read about characters in books which were similar to me. These characters helped me to accept myself and to believe that I could find other people who would accept me.”

Overwhelmingly, all students agreed that learning various lenses unfamiliar to them before the course was needed and supportive for analyzing YAL and becoming more aware of issues they had not considered or questioned. On the midway reflection, most students reflected on the importance of the race/ethnicity lens. They shared that the questions provided and discussion that occurred required students to read the novel and intentionally find the counter-narrative and the point when the protagonist found and shared their voice. In class and on the midway reflection, students reflected how this lens impacted their text interpretations. They were prompted to question their own biases encountered every day in life.

This was also noted when the class read *If You Could Be Mine*. In class, the students shared feeling appalled that the main character, Sahar, was legally able to get a sex reassignment surgery but that it was illegal to love another woman. Discussions within and outside of classrooms related to sexual orientation were rare, according to the students. In fact, when the instructor mentioned how certain states within the United States had laws that did not protect anyone that identified as LGBTQI+ under harassment laws, students were shocked and upset. Through these conversations, connecting characters’ lives with their own, students continuously reiterated the need to question texts with specific questions and lenses to activate critical awareness. These types of conversations and developing understanding are what led Brittney to state in her final reflection that she believed “that if everyone learns to read Young Adult Literature books through different lenses, the lives of many people can be changed.”

Students also noted that analyzing YAL with the youth lens required them to consider how others view them. They left the course realizing that they could better connect with characters like them and that the stereotypes of adolescents are profound in our society, even if they are not valid for all. Danielle shared how “it is critical that young adult novels be used to emphasize to the readers the consequences of their actions,” in the hope that adolescents can reflect on their own choices and potential impact to self, peers, and society [Final Reflection].

In the final reflection, students shared how YAL could serve as a springboard to support student understanding of more challenging ideas within the text. At the beginning of the course, the class brainstormed ways to incorporate YAL in classrooms. Based on their interest, the class read articles that shared how there were YAL alternatives to similar canonical text (e.g., *Romiette and Julio* by Sharon Draper for *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare), how some teachers used YAL to bridge to more complex texts, and how YAL promoted more pleasure reading. At the end of the semester, Nora remembered and identified with the use of YAL to scaffold student stamina for reading a more complex text, stating that “Once students develop a desire to read and the ability to analyze, they can move on to more challenging works” [Final Reflection].

### ***Books as an Impetus for a Change in Thinking and Awareness of Self***

The second theme describes the growth students experienced as demonstrated through how they read the texts and how they perceive themselves through the readings. This considers the reader’s assumptions about the text and how they influence their perception of the characters and their plots. Again, all 15 students expressed how their participation in this study helped to change their thinking and their awareness of themselves in the world.

For instance, in her final reflection, Danielle shared how she initially “assumed that many young adults were misbehaved” because of her own experiences attending a high school outside of Philadelphia. Due to her background and personal experiences, she believed that this type of inappropriate behavior was “the norm.” Sarah also felt these novels changed her perceptions of the world around her by “think[ing] about the different perspectives and cultures that are present in the novel[s].”

Another assumption disrupted was the “pick yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality. Preston shared in his final reflection how he initially believed that “if someone is in a bad situation or in a bad neighborhood, they could just leave the location to get out of the situation.” He shared how this was not the case for Starr in *The Hate U Give*, as she first struggled with identity depending on who she was around—her neighborhood of Garden Heights or her school, Williamson Prep. Preston shared how there isn’t a “simple” solution. Similarly, Ricky shared how “Reading the book made me realize that I had a lot of preconceived notions about low-income areas such as where Starr lived”

[Midway Reflection]. These are instances in which students identified race/ethnicity stereotypes in the YAL novels and affirmed that there are biases they have about the character's needs to fit in with their dominant culture.

As was previously mentioned, diverse books can provide both windows and mirrors (R. S. Bishop, 1990) for readers. Students can gain empathy for characters and an awareness of themselves as individuals. Many students shared this belief throughout this semester, expressing how their thinking changed based on discussions and reading the various novels. Kevin mentioned how his "eyes were opened" and that "any White person" could read through *The Hate U Give* to better understand others' situations, but guidance and discussion are needed to gain diverse perspectives and a richer understanding. Interestingly, he initially had a sense of reluctance, as he felt that reading various texts would not change his thinking, but he did address how novels like this are complex and needed. Throughout the semester, he shared how this novel, in particular, helped him "understand just how complex these [police brutality], still, for lack of a better word, situations, are." Patrick reiterated this sentiment in his final reflection, stating, "Young adult books could allow for students to read about a character in a similar situation as them, making them feel more comfortable about how to deal with it." He continued, "Reading young adult literature gives students the ability to not feel as marginalized from society by coming to the realization that they are not the only ones going through what they are."

The development of personal awareness led many students to develop critical consciousness, with some students' mind-sets changed. Student responses reflected their critical consciousness and how their thinking patterns were altered after interacting with the diverse literature. Victoria shared in her final reflection how "Young adult literature is an important way to help youth think about problems in our society and instill the desire in them to want to change the way things are to make the world a better place." Similarly, and earlier in the course, Preston shared on his midway reflection how he "previously understood that racism was a problem in society, but [he] never realized the effect it had on the daily lives of African Americans, and how even subconscious racism from society can manipulate lives in extreme manners."

Unanimously, all students shared their belief in the importance of incorporating YAL in all classrooms. Stephanie stated that "If the education system is serious about engaging more students, they need to look no further than young adult literature" and that "after taking this class, I think it is undeniable that young adult literature is a huge and vastly underused tool in teaching both college and high school students" [Final Reflection]. Robert echoed this sentiment during his final reflection by sharing that "Young adult literature should have a designated spot in the curriculum of every English classroom from kindergarten through twelfth grade because it helps students visualize other cultures, become more interested in reading, and discover characters; similar to themselves."

Further, after students realized this switch in their mind-sets, they began to think about the action steps required to enact real change. For instance, while Molly started our course as an English major, she set up a time to meet with Dr. Savitz to discuss options to seek alternative teacher certification after she graduates because she really wants to change the way texts are chosen and taught in classrooms. This sentiment is also noted on her midway reflection:

It was so important for me to read those ideas and studies because sometimes I find it hard to justify relating to a character of another ethnicity that watched her friend get shot in front of her; however, that doesn't mean I can't feel empathy for her and relate to her on other levels (like having a crush on a boy or hiding parts of myself depending on who I am with). That is something I will carry with me into my own teaching when I graduate so my students can learn to connect with people that aren't like themselves and see the common humanity in others.

Eventually, students started to think about the actions they would enact because of this change in thinking. As Patrick mentioned in his final reflection, “young adult novels allow for these situations to be talked about while making them more relatable to students.” He continued, “Instead of turning our backs to reality, we can face it head-on and put it in a way so as to make the students more interested in learning about it.” Students demonstrated multiple times throughout this course that the impact of diverse YAL helped to push them beyond their comfort zones to start thinking and talking about diverse topics. Ricky shared this sentiment when he stated on his midway reflection that “It makes me question how insensitive I've been in the past towards victims of police violence. Moving forward, I am going to use what I have learned to better judge a situation.” Several students expressed that they started to experience this change of thinking when they were enrolled in this class where they were exposed to diverse YAL. Victoria shared,

I assumed I would become aware to social issues but I did not expect the level of passion for social change and justice that I now have after this course . . . I have become more equipped with knowledge to help me understand different groups of people and to help me promote equality in my sphere of influence [Final Reflection].

### ***Lingering Tensions and Ongoing Resistance***

The third reflection theme describes how some students had lingering tensions or critiques that demonstrate ongoing resistance. Although many of the midway reflection and final reflections expressed a change in students' thinking, there were still instances that reflected a resistance to change. Five students, or 33% of the participants, expressed lingering tensions.

Students recognized that their personal life experiences might alter how they viewed and reacted to specific topics throughout this course. Students shared difficulty and fear while being White and discussing sensitive issues centered around race. Molly stated, “As a fairly privileged [W]hite woman, I don’t have to deal with many of the issues that members of minority groups face” [Midway Reflection]. And although students acknowledged their Whiteness while reading about the diverse characters in the YAL novels, this impeded their understanding. Sarah expressed this challenge when she stated, “Since I am not [B]lack, knowing the stereotypes and being honest about it was very hard for me. The society that we live in today is very sensitive, especially when dealing with topics such as race and ethnicity” [Midway Reflection].

Like the stereotypes of race and ethnicity, some of the readers in this study identified and reacted to the stereotypes portrayed by characters that identify as non-heteronormative. Their resistance is based on the inclusion of negative stereotypes. For instance, Fred mentioned in his final reflection that

It’s great that the author decided to include a complex gay character, but she also colors him with a lot of common gay stereotypes. Joe’s character perpetuates the heteronormative belief that all gay men are feminine. Gay men are attracted to other men, so they must act like straight girls that like them too.

Kevin furthered this thought when he stated how he “firmly believes that supporting stereotypes in literature is just as powerful and important as challenging stereotypes. Whether we like it or not, stereotypes exist, and they exist for reason [*sic*]” [Final Reflection]. Upon discussion, Kevin shared that this issue was a challenge for him, wondering if authors include stereotypes to also provide counter narratives or if stereotypes are presented to align with society. Through the analysis of YAL, students learned more about the stereotypes in their lives and how stereotypes may ultimately affect their ways of thinking or the choices they make. As Ricky mentions in his final reflection,

It wasn’t until I looked back on young adult literature this semester that I realized how adolescent characters were portrayed compared to their adult counterparts. We found that each book had its own stereotypes. In doing so, we discovered our own stereotypes that we found in our subconscious.

The goal for teachers is to help students identify the stereotypes that exist within their subconscious and how to move past these stereotypes and biases to recognize and appreciate the cultures and diversity they encounter in their everyday lives.

## Discussion/Conclusion

As we know, the traditional canon can be limiting in the type of critical analysis needed to disrupt personal assumptions and to prevent a race-evasive mentality. Instead, instruction using YAL can require students to

evaluate how the dominant culture oppresses in the hopes of students considering solutions and steps toward a more equitable local and global community (Borsheim-Black & Sarigiandes, 2019; Phillips et al., 2019). Our honors undergraduate students made it clear that although they did not realize this at the start of the course, their high school curriculum did not provide many representations of current real-world experiences they could relate to, even though most of them identified as White.

None of them were previously asked to learn about other people, cultures, societies, or biases as their high school texts predominantly focused on classics written decades ago. This shows that although more high school classrooms may be using more diverse texts, it is not yet common enough to support the critical analysis and reflection that is needed for students to become more aware of what is occurring in today's time (Coleman-King & Groenke, 2019; Dyches et al., 2020; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b; Mirra, 2018). As a united group, they all shared the necessity to read texts similar to those in this course, along with analysis and discussion that requires students to step out of their dominant narrative and comfort zone. While they did not realize that this was missing in their lives and education, these students shared how it was critical to reflect on their growth and understanding of the impacts of races and cultures related to society and oppression. As in other researchers' findings with high school students (e.g., Ivey & Johnston, 2013, 2018), they thrived in a situation where they had to discuss challenging topics. Ivey and Johnston (2018) argued adolescents would read when the barriers to reading engagement were removed and they could read books they found personally relevant. This is important as teachers can encourage students to read YAL featuring characters who are different from them, using diverse texts to encourage students to disrupt discrimination against social constructs and to challenge various privileges in the United States and other countries (Dunkerly-Bean & Bean, 2015).

Although conversations were not always easy or comfortable, these students found great value in reading about others and learning how to disrupt their assumptions and better understand the real-world realities of many around them. Cummins (2013) stated that though there is risk involved in teaching politically charged topics like immigration, teachers have a responsibility to do so because "reading realistic YA literature about undocumented migration builds understanding because the books individuate undocumented migrants and use their perspectives to humanize a political issue" (p. 58). Our students shared through their reflections and throughout that the course changed their mind-set in how literature can be used to analyze social constructs (Borsheim-Black & Sarigiandes, 2019) and the need for this type of work. They each embarked on their journey toward better awareness of themselves, developing a stronger critical consciousness while also bridging gaps in their knowledge of others and society. When they read books that required them to reflect on what they already "knew" or were told, such as through social media posts, they were

forced to reflect on their own potential implicit biases and assumptions. Students demonstrated the development of empathy for the characters and real people experiencing similar hardships. These students began the complicated process of questioning themselves to understand their own biases better and learn about others, echoing the research conducted by Sherr and Beise (2015), who found that using YAL enhanced the empathy skills of the undergraduates.

While one goal was for our students to not only understand self and others within political, societal, and historical contexts as members of “socially constructed groups with different levels of power and privilege . . . [leading to] a mutually humanizing experience that can spur social action” (Mirra, 2018, p. 20), we realize the constraints of our participants having only one course that required this type of ongoing personal investigation. It is evident the students experienced a change of thinking during their time, but some of the students did not fully “get there.” This perhaps demonstrates an additional value of studying YAL through a critical lens in undergraduate courses: Some people may need more time, more exposure to, and more discussions about topics and issues related to equity and justice to “get there.” If they study YAL in secondary school and college, perhaps they will. The crucial point is that students have the opportunity in their English and literature courses to engage in this type of critical investigation and thinking with texts that are appropriately curated to provide diverse perspectives and experiences.

That some students did not “get there” is also noted with the amount of resistance and pushback that students shared throughout the course. We feel that further exploration into this resistance is crucial if we want all citizens to shift their perspective and mind-set and continue to challenge their beliefs and assumptions and better understand their role in oppression and create a solid commitment to action. Similarly, while diverse texts can operate as a type of stand-in for conversations with people different from themselves, we believe that there is also a need for continuous discussion to garner more diverse perspectives. Furthermore, we believe these perspectives operate as external barometers of our biases and opinions, and a guided analysis is needed to learn from the questions posed. Therefore, there is a need for additional research of this type at the university level.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

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