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Young Adult Literature Research in the 21st Century

The study of young adult literature (YAL) as both an art form and teaching tool is in its infancy. Barely 50 years old, this emerging genre began to establish a presence in the canon of both classical and popular literature. As a developing field of inquiry, however, YAL struggles for legitimacy and prestige. The purpose of this article is to issue a call to educational researchers to shift the focus of current YAL research from teaching the content (text analysis research) to that of student learning in the classroom (empirical research). Doing so would increase the legitimacy and influence of the genre and establish its jurisdiction within the educational research arena as a valuable and viable subject worthy of investigation.

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CAPTURING THE IMAGINATION of adolescents is no easy task. Young people—especially those more eager to watch than to read—are always transfixed by the here and now. Hence, the job of a teacher becomes doubly hard when they confront adolescents with something as passive as a book (Alvermann & McClean, 2007; Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007).

Adolescents, though, do enjoy reading. As the American Library Association has reported, a majority of their patrons are under the age of 18 (Goodnow, 2007; Kennedy, 2009). Indeed, the success of Stephanie Meyer's (2005) *Twilight*, J. K. Rowling's (1998) *Harry Potter* series, and von Ziegesar's (2002) *Gossip Girl* series reflects an engagement with adolescent readers that is quite profitable. Who knew teens read in such abundance outside the classroom?

The arrival of J. D. Salinger's (1951) *Catcher in the Rye* nearly 50 years ago introduced adults and adolescents to a character that had not made much of an appearance in American letters—the teenage voice. Gone was the desire for sweet and innocent fantasy (first dates, learning to drive, fun at the prom), and in came the often harsh and unforgiving reality of adolescent lives (neglectful parents, wayward youth, and abusive relationships). Happy reads—or at least relatively pleasant ones—were replaced with more volatile and angry voices that spoke to young people in a style that had much market and artistic viability.

Thus began the spate of educational materials that addressed the use of YAL in the classroom (Hooper, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Articles, monographs, and books about adolescent literature soon filled the library and classroom shelves of teachers and bibliophiles alike (Irvin, Buehl, & Klemp, 2007; Salvner, 2001). Little, though, exists about the transaction that occurs when YAL is taught in a classroom setting (Christenbury, 2007; Wilhelm, 2008; Zirinsky & Rau, 2001). We know much about what good books are available, but we know little about what actually happens when teens read young adult novels.

The reason for this void in research is that the study of YAL is fairly new, and researchers are just getting to know this emerging body of literature (Kaplan, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010). Thus, there is a need in the study of YAL for academic research that asks these and similar questions:

- What transactional occurrences happen between teachers and students?
- What transactional occurrences happen between students and students?
- What transactional occurrences happen between readers and texts?

The intent of this article is to serve as a call to arms, for researchers and teachers alike, to begin the next phase in the study of literature for teens. Teachers, academics, and researchers need to know what happens in a classroom setting when young people read adolescent novels (Moje

& Hinchman, 2004; Probst, 2004; Rugieri, 2007). Much can be learned by simply asking teachers and students alike to record their impressions about their reading experiences. After all, is anything more important?

Educators who believe in the use of YAL, and seek to implement its inclusion in school curriculum, need validation for their stance in a solid body of research drawn from the field. The Commission on the Study and Teaching of Adolescent Literature, under the auspices of the National Council of the Teachers of English, was established in the 1990s for just this purpose: How can proponents of adolescent literature engage in scholarly study of the field as one way to enhance acceptance of the genre?

In the following section, we will assert that although there is little empirical research, what is there, based on our article analysis of the first decade of the 21st century, is diverse in method, topic, and population. We offer support that this is a rich field, worthy of investigation and study that is being largely ignored.

Examining the Status of the Research

Using the mission of the Commission on the Study and Teaching of Adolescent Literature as a guide, 4 years ago we began an annual article analysis updating the peer-reviewed research that focused on adolescent literature. We used databases that included ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), MLA (Modern Language Association), and the multidisciplinary Academic Search Complete. We limited our study to the subject terms *adolescent literature* and *young adult literature* in various combinations with the term *research*. The use of both terms reflects the dichotomy in the field over appellations.

Overview of Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

The examination of adolescent literature and/or YAL research in academic journals reveals

that most articles come primarily from textual analysis; our intent was to investigate the field beyond text and related areas by looking at other kinds of empirical research. This section examines the status of research in YAL beyond textual analysis, author interviews, bibliographies, and book reviews.

An investigation of the number of empirical studies in the past 10 years (2000–2010) reveals that only 27 articles that could be labeled scholarly research have been published. This is a small number when compared with the rest of what is published about YAL. For instance, in 2008–2009, out of 30 articles printed in the major peer-reviewed journal for adolescent literature, *The ALAN Review*, only one article could be labeled empirical research, other than textual analysis; the three issues then included teaching vignettes, teaching strategies, text analyses, bibliographies, genre studies, memoirs, and author interviews. In 2009–2010, two research articles, plus one research bibliography, were published out of 30 articles under new editors. The rest included author studies, vignettes, teaching strategies, text analyses, genre studies, interviews, columns, and one bibliography. However, as this new editorship continues, this journal has in the last two issues carried at least one article based on empirical study.

Those scholars who examined the effects of adolescent literature utilized two journals that routinely consider studies of the impact of the genre, *The ALAN Review* (the journal of the Assembly on Adolescent Literature affiliated with the National Council of Teachers of English), mentioned previously, and *The Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy* (affiliated with the International Reading Association). In addition, a single research article was published in other journals including *English Education*, the major publication for the Commission on English Education, and *English Journal*, the preeminent journal for English teachers. Other journals including only one article during this 10-year period are *Journal of Childhood Education*, *Journal of Literary Research*, *Multicultural Review*, *Qualitative Studies in Education*, and others that deal generally with education or literature.

Studies Focused on Student Engagement

In examining the subject matter of the articles, one-third of the articles looked at the attitudes of high school students when engaging with adolescent literature. The areas of study range from book-specific study to literacy to multicultural education. Using one novel per class, Hill (2009) compiled the results of a pre- and postsurvey with students who read a young adult book about teen pregnancy in a health class; he and the content teacher concluded that cross-disciplinary study like this encouraged teens to explore similar situations and their own reactions. A more ambitious study by Houge and Geier (2009) looked at the use of videoconferencing in one-on-one literacy tutoring where young adult novels were used by teacher education candidates working with adolescents in ten states. The researchers plan to continue expanding the use of videoconferencing based on the results.

In addition, George (2008) examined the data collected over 4 years of field notes and transcript discussions from faculty-student book clubs in two New York City middle schools. Not surprisingly, teachers often began by studying stylistic elements of the seven Newbery prize winners, but students responded to characters in terms of believability. However, by far, the most original format for research presentation with students was found in Kottke's (2010) article concerning the comparison of gendered choices for academic and extracurricular self-selected reading choices among sixth graders during one school year. His results are presented in graphic novel format.

Groenke and Paulus (2007) paired university preservice teachers with middle school students to discuss YAL in online chat rooms, and discovered that teaching strategies with responding were necessary. Glazier and Seo (2005) used ethnographic and sociolinguistic methods to analyze data obtained when observing discussions prompted by multicultural young adult texts in a suburban high school. They found that the use of multiple texts might help create a global perspective, along with improving intercultural and intracultural understanding. Vyas (2004) explored bicultural identities of seven Asian high

school students in a literature club that focused on the importance of students making personal connections to the literature they read. In that same vein, Johnson (2000) discussed the phenomenon of girls falling silent in the classroom and the detrimental effect on their learning; 11 middle school girls in reading classes and girls-only literature circles provided the data.

Studies Focused on Teachers and Teacher Candidates

Researchers also looked at teacher attitudes, primarily using surveys. Hazlett, Johnson, and Hayn (2009) investigated use and attitudes of English language arts teachers concerning YAL on a national scale. Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber (2008) used quasi-quantitative and quantitative methodologies to study English language arts teachers in one southern state to determine multicultural texts taught and their attitudes towards including them in the curriculum. Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth (2006) surveyed the same state's English teachers who regularly use YAL to discover their conclusions about literary merit, issues of time and crowded curriculum, and potential with struggling and reluctant readers. Lewis, Ketter, and Fabos (2001) included themselves in an ethnographic study that examined how discussions of multicultural YAL among White, rural teachers were shaped by constructs of racial identity. Gill (2000) surveyed college teachers regarding their attitudes about the use of multicultural texts in their adolescent literature classes; he examined syllabi to determine which adolescent literature authors are taught, including the absence of non-American authors.

Others looked at attitudes of college students in teacher preparation. For example, Singer and Smith (2003) examined two different university teacher education groups involved in discussion of the same young adult text; one group consisted of undergraduate private university teacher education students, and the other consisted of students in a children's literature class at a large urban public university. The authors found that what readers bring to a text is of major im-

portance in determining how they will respond; the implications are profound for teachers at all levels.

Finally, one article transitioned from text analysis to research by codifying texts. Rothbauer and McKechnie (2000) considered how 32 novels for young adults that feature gay and lesbian characters were treated in 158 reviews in five prominent journals used by librarians when selecting books. They concluded that gay/lesbian literature stands separate from YAL as a category.

By looking at what has been studied and the results, advocates of YAL can find support for the continued use of the genre in curriculum design. In addition, evidence exists that could convince those who doubt the efficacy of adolescent literature in English language arts education. The number of research studies may not be immense, but the diversification of methodologies and subjects implies that opportunities exist for those who want to participate in the validation of YAL as a field worthy of study, one that contributes to the body of knowledge about secondary and middle level education.

A Call to the Field

Fallon (2006) took educational researchers to task for not empirically investigating and producing persuasive, trustworthy evidence around how to best prepare teachers. He concluded his article:

> Advocates of teacher education programs within institutions of higher education cannot promote them effectively with a predominance of logical propositions and moral argument. In the end, dependable relationships between the interventions of teacher education programs and the learning of pupils taught by teachers who have been subject to those interventions must be reliably demonstrated with convincing evidence. (p. 152)

Just as he lamented the quality of the research being produced by those in the field, the findings of this study reflect the same paucity of persuasive empirical evidence around adolescent literature as curriculum.

It is important to note that none of the empirical articles we found that examine adolescent literature used sophisticated statistical analysis. All remained at the descriptive level, rather than an inferential level for the quantitative studies, or a conceptual level for the qualitative studies. For example, educational researchers who use hierarchical modeling procedures communicate that they understand the nested structure of educational data. One cannot simply examine educational outcomes without contextualizing students' performance and behavior in situ of the classroom (teacher effects), within a school, within a community, and so on. In the same vein, educational researchers who employ qualitative case study design could rely on embedding phenomenon within the case and compare across cases (Yin, 2009). Complex time-series designs allow for the rich explanation of the multifaceted patterns across multiple sets of variables over time. How teachers and students engage over adolescent literature and how that genre can be used not only in instruction but in assessment practices creates a rich research agenda that requires equally complex strategies and designs.

We echo Fallon's call to educational researchers to use the might of our situated expertise to produce persuasive and trustworthy empirical evidence leading to increased understanding of the complex nature of the teaching and learning around adolescent literature.

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