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# A Platform for Voice and Identity: School Library Standards in Support of YA Urban Literature's Transformative Impacts on Youth

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*In this qualitative study of collaboration between an eighth grade English teacher and school librarian, 14 urban youth from a suburban city in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States were interviewed on the impact they experienced from a yearlong study with young adult literature reflective of their lived experiences. Steeped in the language of social justice and inclusive of the American Association of School Librarians' Standards for the 21st Century Learner (2009) and International Federation of Library Associations' School Library Guidelines (2015), an analysis of findings bring attention to the impact highly effective partnerships have on implementing literature discussion circles and Socratic Seminars to provide a platform of expression for young adult voices seldom heard.*

## Introduction

Historically, school librarianship has always focused on effective collaboration with classroom teachers for instructional implementation (Berkowitz & Eisenberg, 1989). Each AASL *Standard for the 21st Century Learner* (2007) is achieved using this strategy to not only provide essential skills for today's world but are vital in providing resource equity and "a well-rounded education for every student" (AASL, 2016a, p.1). Literature for young adult urban youth of color fall into this category as a priority, as this demographic is the fastest growing population in American society (Braun et al., 2014), and with the least amount of literature published annually (Children's Center for the Book Cooperative, 2017). It takes a purposeful move of inclusivity to provide the "particular resource needs and interests" (IFLA, 2014, p.8) that fit underrepresented youth who need to see their life mirrored in the text, "for when they can't see themselves, or they see a distorted image, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in society" (Bishop, 1990, p.1).

## Urban Youths' Disconnect

A total of 4.9 million young adults are disconnected from school and not working; disconnection at this level ensures a future of low earnings, high unemployment, poor health, incarceration, and short lifespans (Fashola & Slavin, 1998; Jerald, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Statistics show that those most impacted are people of color and those from low economic urban areas (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012). These underrepresented youths show strong levels of pushback (Rauner, 2013; Todd & Edwards, 2004) due to poor support networks and unstable homes (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs reveals how basic psychological sustenance should be provided as a first priority for these youth, because they must feel as if they are safe, secure, and that they belong to someone or something. Educators can help by providing environments that are communities of learning to support this mindset and aid these students in seeing possibilities of success (Christensen, 2009; Perry, et al., 2003).

Identity begins to be "structured early in the lives" of youth (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002, p.189), and strong identities are needed in order to function competitively (Rauner, 2013). Books with diverse protagonists can facilitate positive identity development for underrepresented urban youth and those in the majority (Bishop, 1982, 1990), presenting a balanced world vision "instead of [nurturing] conflict" (Larrick, 1965, p.63). This balancing is required to understand what is needed to right systemic wrongs (Fricker, 2013) through a socially just lens (Froggatt, 2015; Rioux, 2010).

### ***The Right to See Themselves on the Shelf***

Rioux (2010) explains how, when viewing the world through a social justice lens, "each individual is important" and "deserves respect" (p.12). Providing youth with the opportunity to access literature reflective of their own identity should be a fundamental consideration school librarians use to frame their policy for collection development and effective library programming (AASL, 2008; IFLA, 2015). When youth from underrepresented groups have a strong presence in the collection, they feel that they are not being ignored and that their presence counts (Todd & Edwards, 2004; Van Orman & Lyiscott, 2013) due to the purposely made effort to supply literature about, for, and written by authors from their cultural groups. When underrepresented youth cannot find themselves in the collection, they may feel invisible and unimportant. Taylor (1992) refers to the misrecognition of identity as something that "can inflict harm, [and] be a form of oppression [which could] imprison someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (p. 25). From a social justice perspective, this can be viewed as a deliberate act of aggression (Birnbacher, 1984).

The social justice metatheory of Rioux (2010) is an emerging framework through which this study is viewed. Wallis (2010) described metatheory as "a combination of perspectives which the usefulness depends on how effectively [it is applied] in the field of study" (p.2). Rioux's (2010) *Five Assumptions of Social Justice for Library and Information Science* is such a theory. The list of assumptions includes:

All human beings have an inherent worth and deserve information services that help address their informational needs.

People perceive reality in different ways, often within cultural or life role contexts.

There are many different types of information and knowledge, and these are societal resources.

Theory and research are pursued with the ultimate goal of bringing positive change to service constituencies.

The provision of information services is an inherently powerful activity. Access, control, and mediation of information contain inherent power relationships. The act of distributing information is itself a political act (p.13).

Termed as "nascent" (Rioux, 2010, p.13), these assumptions make allowance for research in the field of underrepresentation and resource availability supplied by the school libraries that provide services to youths from this group. These assumptions easily align with Fricker's (2013) epistemic justices and social injustices, which advocates the need for underrepresented people to have a voice and be accepted as purveyors of their own truth and knowledge.

### ***The School Library as a Site for Social Justice***

The mission put forth in the AASL (2009) national guidelines has been "to ensure that students are to be critical, effective, empowered, and ethical thinkers and users" (p.8). Through the lens of Rioux's (2010) fifth assumption, this mission can be interpreted as the school library's "provision of information is an inherently powerful act" (p.13), that not only supports classroom curriculum, but the "everyday" realities that are pertinent for the "teen-to-adult maturation" process (Agosto &

Hughes-Hassell, 2006, p.1394). Narrowing interpretations of this mission through Rioux's second assumption tells us that the lived experiences of youth from underrepresented groups should not be assumed to be the same as the lived experiences of youths in the majority, and underrepresented youths therefore require literature reflecting the issues specific to their reality. Tatum (1997) speaks on the importance of racial identity for youth of color in our society by explaining how race and identity are very much part of a youth of color's maturation:

For teens of color and for Indigenous teens, the coming of age is integrally tied to the process of racial and ethnic identity formation. Although identity formation is a critical task for all, adolescent researchers have found that adolescents of color and Indigenous teens are more likely to be actively engaged in exploring their racial and ethnic identity than are white adolescents (p.1).

Tatum's research goes beyond black, and Asian and Latin American youth to include how Indigenous and biracial youth view themselves as part of a race or ethnic group because of how society views them (Tatum, 1997; Moule, 2010).

### ***Problem Statement***

In looking at the rising demographics in diverse youth, many are urban and from metropolitan areas. Research exists on urban youth and young adult literature in metropolitan settings (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Hughes-Hassell & Agosto, 2010; Morris, Hughes-Hassell, & Cottman, 2006). Studies have been conducted on books that urban youth and young adults read with provided lists by age (Morris, 2012), and subject (Guerra, 2012). Very little work exists on urban youth or young adult urban literature in nonmetropolitan settings (Hinton & Carnesi, 2017). In this study, I focus on suburban youth who identify as urban, due to their "struggle to survive urban social issues and the polarizing pull of the street" (Hinton & Carnesi, 2017, p.80). I also considers these youth's opportunities to form identities as readers, and their lack of opportunity to be part of positive learning communities that allow for healthy youth development.

In this study, I share the interview results from 14 students in the eighth grade who took part in a yearlong literature project which included regularly scheduled literature discussion circles and Socratic Seminars, which are formal debates or cooperative dialogues based on questions that stimulate critical thought on a common text (Moeller & Moeller, 2015). Results for this study are framed through growing needs of school library programs repositioned within well-defined concepts of "social justice typology" (Rioux, 2010, p.12). The dialogue generated between the students and myself as school librarian and co-facilitator in the classroom brings to mind a need to incorporate more opportunities for topical discussions on literature with students in the library and in classroom learning communities.

### ***Purpose and Research Question***

Youth who are often silenced socially, misrepresented, and marginalized should be provided with platforms that lends voice to their silence. In this study, I purposefully shine a light on how young adult literature can affect the literacy experience of urban youth who need to see their own experiences and life issues reflected in the literature they read. The effects are qualified in a variety of areas, among which are the first-hand perspectives and emotional reactions generated by the youths involved with this study. I draw heavily on the data obtained from student interviews, enduring that "a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible, transformative, and representative" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.3). I have sought to explore the question: "How does

involvement in reading and discussing young adult (YA) literature about urban youth by urban youth shape the construction of their identity and epistemic outlooks?"

## **Method**

### ***Setting***

I am a doctoral candidate who also works as the school librarian providing services to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in this study; my school is comprised of 849 urban youth in a suburban area. Seventy percent of the school population is black American and 16% is Latin American. Ten percent of the population is white and the remaining 4% is from Asian and/or Indigenous cultural groups. One hundred percent of the school population receives free breakfast and lunch, a standard indicator of family poverty. In the past two years, the administration worked hard to improve the reading scores on the state mandated Standards of Learning (SOL) assessment test in English and mathematics. Despite efforts, the scores did not improve enough to remove them from state accreditation warning status. The school improvement plan for 2015 - 2016 included additional support for both math and English. Although an after-school program to assist with math skills and writing skills was in place, nothing was in place for reading.

### ***Participants***

Participants in this study came from one classroom teacher's third core period, comprised of 28 students ranging in ages between 13 and 15. Slightly less than half of the students were above the poverty line, while over half were at or below. Due to the school scheduling practice of prioritizing mathematics, this class contained students registered for either grade 10 geometry or grade level pre-Algebra. The class was also considered an inclusion class, and four of the students required additional staffing to assist them with learning needs. An additional eight students showed severe gaps in reading that held them back in advancements in other content. All 28 students volunteered to take part in the interview sessions at the end of the year and were given consent forms for permission, but only 14 students (three female and 11 male) qualified to participate: 11 students brought back signed consent forms; and three students turned in signed handwritten notes giving consent. These students were interviewed on the impact they felt from the yearlong study, within the last six days of school, before their 8th grade graduation exercises. Background information on each participant was collected, to develop fuller profiles gain deeper understandings of each student's literacy and classroom identities.

An overview of each individual participant is documented in Table 1, which includes basic demographics for age, gender, and household profiles. Participants also volunteered personal overviews of their learning behaviour when interacting with literacy activities and peers in the classroom. The information was collected at the beginning of the school term, with students showing little to no inhibition in sharing their self-assessments. Many were either grade level or higher. Only two participants were functioning below grade level. One student admitted to intentionally sabotage tests to produce failure, due to boredom and a lack of motivation. Several students shared their biases with students that were a different race or that did not share the same cultural background. All felt there was room for improvement, but most were not sure how the improvement could occur.

**Table 1. Demographics of Sample Group Provided by Each Participant at Start of the Year**

Name	Race	Age	M/F	Household	Reading Level	Self-Described Disposition at Start of Study
Aeris	B	14	F	Single MC Father	Above level	Says she has a tendency to cringe when in the presence of some of her classmates, thinking they possess little in terms of intellect
Alex	W	15	M	Single WC grandmother	Grade level	An introvert who doesn't participate in class and rarely speaks in front of the class
Amani	B	14	F	Single WC Father	Grade level	She knows that she knows the skills being taught and feels it's not important to pass a test to show the teacher that she has command of these skills.
Ayanna	B	14	F	Single WC Mother	Above level	Is always satisfied with producing minimal results, as long as it is a B or C.
Charles	W	15	M	Both parents MC	Above level	Carries a negative view of blacks in the school
Chris	W	15	M	Single UMC mother	Grade level	Self-identifies as a reluctant reader who is bored with books in the library and classroom
DeeJay	B	15	M	Single LI mother	Below level	Is very aware of his low reading and writing skills. Has little patience and low anger management.
DeVonte	B	14	M	Single WC mother	Grade level	Prefers to read only books in graphic format
Elijah	W	14	M	Both parents WC	Grade level	Pre-judges and stereotypes others based on their behaviour
Kadin	B	15	M	Blended family MC	Above level	Bored and sometimes chooses to fail a test on purpose
Leon	B	14	M	Fostered to relatives LI	Below level	Doesn't participate in class because of low literacy skills
Mike	W	15	M	Single parent LI	Grade level	Not motivated. Accepts below average grades
Malik	B	15	M	Single Parent LI	Above level	Is trying to read 40 books but never gets to talk about what he's reading
Patrick	B	13	M	Both parents UMC	Grade level	Stutters bad when he's nervous and speaking in class makes him really nervous

Abbreviations: B=Black American, W=White American, M=Male, F=Female, UMC=Upper Middle Class, MC=Middle Class, WC=Working Class, LI=Low Income.

### **Study Context**

The students were not strangers to my presence; they had experienced library collaborations with staff and faculty in their English, science, social studies, and mathematics classrooms, during sixth and seventh grades. This year was a continuation of the relationship, building on an existing foundation of trust with the school librarian in the role of investigator and interviewer for this research study. The study took place between October 2015 and May 2016 with co-facilitation in the class occurring two to three times a week.

From the beginning of the academic year, I met with the classroom teacher, in the role of school librarian, to plan and schedule new adjustments with literature choices in the 8th grade English curriculum. With the objective of identity development (Bishop, 1982) embedded in this

effort, I wanted to form a “true partnership [with the students], in order to bring about a positive change and empowerment” (Rioux, 2010, p. 14).

To meet these students’ independent reading needs, as the school librarian, I began the year by collecting feedback on the most preferred genres through an informal classroom discussion. This initial list of reading needs was followed up with an informal interest reading inventory for additional information on reading needs, and an overview of the students’ favorite titles, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Results of Informal Student Reading Interests Inventory and Class Chat in Prep for Study**

Reading Interests Wants	Classroom Chats on Genre	Titles and Series Mentioned Five or More Times
Protagonists of color	Realistic Fiction is not real or valid for students	<i>Divergent</i> series (HarperCollins, 2011-2016) by Veronica Roth
Books should reflect the similar Socioeconomic settings as students	Students love horror and fantasy because it provides escapism from their realities but there’s very little to no black people in the future	<i>The Percy Jackson and the Olympians series</i> (Disney-Hyperion, 2005-2009) by Rick Riordan.
Book protagonist should navigate through the same kind of daily urban social and urban street issues as students	Black writers don’t write fantasy	<i>Cirque du Freak series</i> (Little Brown, 2002 - 2007) by Darren Shan.
Protagonists should use similar diction or vocabulary as the students	Fantasy writers that include people of color, such as Marissa Meyer and Suzanne Collins, are read over and over.	<i>Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark series</i> (Lippincott / Norton & Company / Harper, 1981-1991) by Alvin Schwartz w/Stephen Gammell or Brett Helquist (illustrators).
Protagonists should act like students	Authors do not like to identify the black characters, which makes it difficult to find books with people of color in many fantasy titles.	<i>First Part Last</i> (Simon & Schuster, 2003) by Angela Johnson.

Students expressed displeasure with the lack of diversity in young adult realistic fiction, which is why many chose to read fantasy and horror. Building on this knowledge I filled rolling carts with their interest preferences and reserved the titles just for their independent needs. I generated a list of the available multiple titles to be used for curriculum implementation, and all copies of the titles, in sets of three or more, were reserved for approval by the classroom teacher. Books were either biographical or realistic fiction which addressed the daily issues of youth living in worlds of poverty, gangs, homelessness, poor parenting and/or teen parenting, police confrontation, immigration challenges, and foster care, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Book Titles in Their Final Student-Generated Categories**

Curriculum Categories	Student Categories
<p><b>Our History Ourselves</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Mexican Whiteboy</i> by M. de la Pena</li> <li>● <i>The Boy Who Carried Bricks</i> by A. Carter</li> <li>● <i>So B It</i> by S. Weeks</li> <li>● <i>Orbiting Jupiter</i> by G. D. Schmidt</li> <li>● <i>Locomotion</i> by J. Woodson</li> </ul> <p><b>Historical Moments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Rock and the River</i></li> <li>● by K. Magoon (references: Civil Rights, Black Panther movement)</li> <li>● <i>A Fighting Chance</i></li> <li>● by C. M. Salinas (References: Migrant Farm Movement, Immigration, and Alamo / Mexican Fight for Independence)</li> </ul> <p><b>Accepting Consequences for Civil Liberties &amp; Disobedience</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>All American Boys</i> by J. Reynolds &amp; B. Kiely</li> <li>● <i>Conviction</i> by K. L. Gilbert</li> <li>● <i>Exposed</i> J. Graves</li> <li>● <i>The Outsiders</i> S. E. Hinton</li> </ul> <p><b>Survival</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Diego's Crossing</i> by R. Hough</li> <li>● <i>Make Lemonade</i> by V. E. Wolf</li> <li>● <i>Forged by Fire</i> by S. M. Draper</li> </ul>	<p><b>The Mexican Presence in this Country Should Not Have to be Tested</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Diego's Crossing</i> by R. Hough</li> <li>● <i>Mexican Whiteboy</i> by M. de la Pena</li> <li>● <i>A Fighting Chance</i> by C. M. Salinas</li> </ul> <p><b>Do Black Lives Really Matter? To Who?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>How it Went Down</i> by K. Magoon</li> <li>● <i>Conviction</i> K. L. Gilbert</li> <li>● <i>All American Boys</i> by J. Reynolds &amp; B. Kiely</li> </ul> <p><b>Family Comes in Many Forms: So When You Find It Just Don't Let Go</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Orbiting Jupiter</i> by G. D. Schmidt</li> <li>● <i>So B. It</i> by S. Weeks</li> <li>● <i>Locomotion</i> by J. Woodson</li> <li>● <i>The Boy Who Carried Bricks</i> by A. Carter</li> <li>● <i>Make Lemonade</i> by V. E. Wolf</li> </ul> <p><b>U Gotta Jus Meet the Challenge</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Rock and the River</i> by K. Magoon</li> <li>● <i>Exposed: Retribution</i> by J. Graves</li> <li>● <i>The Outsiders</i> S. E. Hinton</li> <li>● <i>Forged by Fire</i> S. M. Draper</li> </ul>

I provided multiple titles to the students in a variety of formats, including audio, digital download, and print, which helped to address the various skills development levels present in the population (AASL, 2010).

When students were first introduced to the topics for each set of literature curriculum units, many were displeased with the outdated labels and wanted to create new ones. To avoid taking up additional class time, the school librarian and teacher facilitated after school library sessions. Dividing books into groups by title and making use of the links on the school library website's wiki, students consulted book blogs, book reviews, and news articles on the topics addressed in each of the books. Students reached consensus on the topics through two days of asynchronous online discussions, and generated a new set of unit headings based on current social issues and values that directly correlated with their adolescent world experiences, as shown in Table 3. This activity of expressing disagreement with the injustice on how school curriculums are unaligned with one's real world experience was one of the earliest moments observed by me and the classroom teacher which showed the students finding voice and expression through self-directed collaborative efforts. The students' actions proved transformative, as they found themselves returning to the resources they stored online and in their e-folders repeatedly, throughout the school year, for additional informational needs in other contents.

From October through May, students met in literature discussion circles and Socratic Seminars. The literature discussion circle was the method applied during reading and the Socratic questioning method was applied at post-reading. Each book was set in a diverse community, allowing the students to have exposure to working class whites, blacks, and Latina/Latina (i.e., Latinx) storylines.

### **Data Collection**



Near the end of the school year, I interviewed the students to determine what effects they experienced from this year-long reading and critical discussion analysis of young adult literature written by authors of color and authors who write for youth who are marginalized and/or from underrepresented populations. A list of the individual titles and series the students read is featured in the Appendix. I scheduled the 14 qualifying students for individual interview sessions arranged within a 40-minute block of time during 8th grade physical education (PE) and related arts across five school days. School administrators granted permission and made arrangements with PE and related arts teachers to admit each participant to their classes late with my time stamped signature. I interviewed two to three students each day.

I conducted semi-structured interviews guided by five open-ended questions to elicit each student's perspective on their experiences with text engagement. Because my subjects were youth and I was an adult, I took certain factors into consideration as I planned and then implemented the interviews. My conversation was adapted to the cognitive and linguistic levels of my participants (Hill, Laybourn, & Borland, 1996), and I made sure that students understood the questions. I also attempted to ensure each student interviewee was motivated to talk with me during the interviews. Kortessluoma, Hentinen, and Nikkonen (2003) advised researchers that it was their responsibility to let the youth they interview know that they can choose to stop participating in the interview at any point and time, without any animosity.

### **Data Analysis**

I digitally recorded interviews and uploaded them to NVivo 10. I transcribed the interviews within the NVivo program, as it provided a more advanced means to classify, sort, and arrange the transcribed text. I coded the digital transcriptions and categorized the data within the software program to find underlying themes and ideas related to identity theory and the social justice assumptions for library and information science (Rioux, 2010). I compared the themes and codes emerging from the analysis to the themes presented in the literature. I grouped themes by the overarching perceptions by how their year-long experience with literature had impacted each of them personally. Themes that were ambiguous or lacking in content were eliminated or integrated into related themes. I organized the final themes into four relevant groups that encompassed all of the students' responses. Although the software allowed for an easier means to select a word or phrase from the data, in addition to coding with NVivo 10, I also assigned codes by hand as necessary (Creswell, 2013).

**Limitations.** Although researchers have suggested that studying what students themselves say about reading literature in the classroom provides opportunity to better assess the need to teach use it (Enriquez, 2006; Guerra, 2012; Ivey, 2014; Ivey & Johnston, 2013), limitations to this study relate to the fact that only members of one class session taught by one teacher were interviewed for the study. The results of this study, therefore, will not be generalizable to the larger education population because of the small sample that has been used in this study.

The following section describes how the themes emerged from the interviews and how these themes are an expression that gave way to eliminating many of the systemic injustices acknowledged by the participants which made for a more leveled ground of learning and peer group understanding.

### **Findings**

Responses from the 14 in-depth interviews resulted in four themes that addressed the research question's concern with how YA literature impacted the literacy experience of urban youth who need to see their own experiences and life issues reflected in the literature they read. Here, I present results using multiple participants' own words. The emergent themes were: (1) Finding Voice and

Being Heard; (2) Welcome to My World: The High Preference for Fantasy is Finally Revealed; (3) An Identity Within: "That Ain't the Way It Used to be!"; and (4) The Dissipation of Longstanding Misunderstood Images.

### (1) *Finding Voice and Being Heard.*

For many of the participants, the study interview was the first time they were ever given a chance to express themselves and have those expressions be accepted as a truth. The opportunity to be heard and the empowerment of helping each other provided a platform that aided many participants in building the efficacy needed to help participants gain control of their own learning and improve in the skills needed to move forward academically. Evidence for how students were able to find their own voice and be heard is illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4. Reports of Text Engagement's Direct Impact**

Student	Quote	Activated Voice	Gain Ownership of Learning	Improved Reading Skills	Increased Self-Efficacy
Kadin	"I normally didn't get the opportunity to actively take part in talking with my classmates. [This year] we collaborated together...with the people who are also reading [the same book] and talked about where they are at...and if they didn't understand something, you explained it to them and they listened."	✓	✓		✓
Elijah	"Everyone could relate to Ponyboy [protagonist in <i>The Outsiders</i> (Hinton, 1967)], because ...he was more like the outsider. He inspired me to do better in school, to try my very best ...if I get something wrong."		✓		✓
Leon	"Like some students caught his mother's name in <i>The Boy Who Carried Bricks</i> . I didn't pay attention to the names of the characters. I didn't even know the main character's name. Everyone helped me in group...the whole year...nobody laughed at me...I...they made it safe...I feel like I'm a better reader."		✓	✓	✓
Patrick	"This year...helped me with like public speaking, cuz I don't really like that. Socratic Seminars...helped a lot...and now...and now...I speak in public now." [Patrick overcame stuttering]	✓	✓		✓
Amani	"This year started off with others helping me through the readings, because I wasn't doing them, but then I saw others who couldn't do the reading cuz they didn't really know how...and I began to help them and then I began to help me...and I worked so hard this year, harder than before and I passed my standard tests. I passed ALL of them."		✓	✓	✓

Students shared responses on how the new classroom dynamics helped with processing, which aided in the building and strengthening of reading comprehension strategies and life lessons, due to their ability to gain ownership of their own learning.

These students’ comments illustrate how the failure to use one’s voice can lead students into the habit of a being passive bystander, experiencing little to no progress due to their lack of interaction. For youth in particular this restraint causes a harness to form on their human spirit that keeps them from rising up and declaring they have something to contribute, or something to say.

**(2) Welcome to Our World: The High Preference for Fantasy is Finally Revealed.**

Results from participants in this study allowed for a closer examination of their genre preferences. Findings revealed a heavy interest in fantasy genre by every participant. The numbers causing fantasy books to dominate circulation seemed due to students’ preference to check out entire fantasy series as opposed to the stand alone single titled realistic fiction and biographies. “I reread the entire Percy Jackson series (Riordan, 2005-2009) for the third time this year,” Ayanna shares, while Aeris admitted to checking out all the ghost titles by Mary Downing Hahn; and Malik, who reads anything interesting, checked out all the titles in the *Divergent* series (Roth, 2011-2016) and *The Mortality Doctrine* series (Dashner, 2013-2016) when they were available.

Amani liked books about romance and speaks about the lack of available titles that interest her, “I want to read a book where the black girl is loved and she’s not in the ghetto,” responds Amani, “but there’s not enough being written, so I find a good superhero title or fairies’ series.”

When Leon was queried about this phenomenon, his response was more matter of fact, explaining that the reading preference types are due to real life experiences and the need to escape their day-to-day realities: “Our world is too intense. I prefer to read about something out of this world so I don’t have to think. Most kids don’t have the stamina to...read something...if they are dealing with it [themselves].”

DeVonte is an exception to the popular fantasy fandom, and normally prefers realistic fiction. This year, however, he was introduced to young adult biographies through the memoir of Alton Carter, which brought to life conversations on how systemic the misunderstandings were between students that live in the more affluent and less affluent areas. Expressing how relieved he is that someone has finally written about what his reality is like and how hard it is to navigate through his world. He welcomed the conversations in the discussion circles, “This is what it’s like in our world. Kids down here don’t have money, [but] we all ain’t thieves. You got one parent, one paycheck, and all these bills, and the lights ain’t got first [choice], man.

Due to the participants’ continued expressions on how the yearlong literary encounter caused their reading preferences to either change or remain the same, it was important to include this as a theme. Results from each participant’s response revealed an even amount of interest in both fiction genres and nonfiction. Only titles mentioned by three or more interviewees are included in Table 5.

**Table 5. Most Popularly Expressed Independent Reads by Interviewees**

Fantasy Choices	Realistic, Informational, or Biographical Choices
1. <i>Percy Jackson and the Olympians</i> series by Rick Riordan*	9. <i>Middle School</i> series by James Patterson
2. <i>Daniel X</i> series by James Patterson	10. Contemporary young adult biographies such as <i>The Boy Who Carried Bricks</i> by Alton Carter
3. <i>Divergent</i> series by Veronica Roth	11. <i>Schitzo: a novel</i> by Nic Sheff
4. Anime and Manga series and single titles	12. <i>The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth</i> by Alexandria Robbins
5. Ghost stories by Mary Downing Hahn	13. <i>All the Bright Places</i> by Jenifer Niven
6. <i>The Shadowshaper</i> by Daniel Jose Older	14. Anime and Manga series and single titles
7. <i>The Mortality Doctrine</i> series by James Dashner	15. <i>Augie &amp; Me</i> by R. J. Palacio
8. <i>Naughts &amp; Crosses</i> by Malonie Blackman	

As Table 5 shows, the most popular fiction series were Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series (2005-2009), Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series (2011-2016), and James Patterson's *Middle School series* (2012-2016). The most popular nonfiction informative title was *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth* (Robbins, 2011) and for biographies, it was *The Boy Who Carried Bricks* (Carter, 2015).

### **(3) An Identity Within: "That Ain't the Way It Used to Be!"**

A typical characteristic of classes that display high needs is the presence of the reluctant reader. Librarians and classroom teachers would identify reluctant readers as students that are not necessarily missing skills that hold them back but lacking in motivation to read due to a disengagement that is not allowing them to connect with the textual content. The data in this case showed how participants made these connections.

When looking back on past experiences, Malik, an honor roll student and avid reader, recalls the absence of literature in his early years, low to fairly average grades in school, and a kind of dullness to his learning experience, until he found the book that he made a connection with, "I won't never forget it because it had black children on the cover playing baseball and I liked to play baseball. I just started to read from there and my grades started getting better." The book that Malik is referring to was Walter Dean Myers's (1988) *Me, Mop, and the Moondance Kid*. Malik's comments on his success are significant to the research that says youth should be able to select their own literature, which are books they see themselves in and which allows them to build on their efficacy to succeed both in and out of school (Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2009).

Where Malik's identity was based on his personal choice and reading curiosity, DeeJay is the opposite. He aligns his identity with the quality of education he has been exposed to saying, "*In my past, it was all about the teachers. They didn't really help you. At this school, they care about you, like you they son. Like coming [to this interview] was something different.*"

Alex looked at an identity where he "*didn't get to share*" an "*opinion.*" He remembers classes of students that "*just answered questions.*" This was similar to Malik's experience. After overcoming his reluctance to read, he then needed as chance "*to talk to other people about the books*" he read. Such an opportunity was not possible, for he shared a similar experience in classes where seldom chances were provided for dialogue. The discussion circles in this study, provided such an opportunity for him. An even more severe systemic issue existed with Aeris, the daughter of a city police officer. Up until this year Aeris self-identified as one who did not accept the accounts of racial bias her classmates spoke of. The books she read changed her perspective, giving her the opportunity to view the world through a social justice lens, from their perspective. "*They made me aware of how important racism and inequality was to everyone,*" she reflected, "*We were talking about important topics like equality. You don't usually get to see intelligence like this in my class conversation, but we did it.*"

DeeJay also admitted that he was one of the classmates that didn't like Aeris because her father was a police officer and actually apologized to her. He talked of his anger management issues and how he used to get into constant arguments. DeeJay described how his encounter with Alton Carter's (2015) autobiographical memoir was a change factor, "*I used to catch a temp on everything. The author went through so much of the same as a child and he still succeeded.*" DeeJay continued, "*That taught me to work harder. We have too much to do [and] this year showed me that I can do better.*"

Finally, there was Chris, your typical reluctant reader who identified himself by saying, "*I don't read not really.*" This year Chris experienced a shift from reluctance to eagerness. His metamorphosis was supported by the safety net of daily dialogue with a peer group which allowed his vulnerabilities to be exposed for dissection without the loss of self-esteem. Describing the spark that ignited his desire to read, he says, "*Reynolds's book hooked me in the first couple of chapters! I said wow that really happens!*" Looking back on his year of growth, he reflectively admonishes, "*That ain't the way it used to be for me!*"

Many participants expressed hesitance to enter into the dialogue, due to the vulnerabilities they felt from marginalized issues at school and home, such as economic conditions and learning development problems, that made them feel different from their peers. Students made vulnerable due to issues such as these expected negative responses from others in the class. No one was prepared for the acceptance, the change, and the empowerment brought on by reading novels and participating in the weekly scheduled dialogues.

#### **(4) *The Dissipation of Longstanding Misunderstood Images***

In the fall of 2015, the school year opened with student participants having been bombarded by social media and news reports concerning fatal encounters of police with black male youth, social media outcries for the validity of black lives, social media outcries for the validity of police and/or all lives, indigenous nations' protests concerning land infringement at Standing Rock Reservation, and divisive political rumblings due to the approaching presidential campaign. With such current issues serving as backdrop, participants often tackled longstanding epistemic images of social injustices that could have turned into explosive confrontations outside the classroom setting, thus making the literature discussion groups the perfect conditions in which to explore answers and work through misunderstandings of longstanding misrepresentations. Deeply embedded images of the Black Panther Party and the Civil Rights Movement were tackled during and after reading Kekla Magoon's *The Rock and the River* (2009). Misunderstandings of authoritative aggression and what underrepresentation and privilege looks and feels like were examined from Claudia Meléndez Salinas's *A Fighting Chance* (2015), S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) and Jason Reynolds's *All American Boys* (2015). Historical and contemporary news clippings that documented the subject were often used for additional support to the daily literature conversations. Results from the unpacking of these issues and more is summarized in Table 6.

**Table 6. Misunderstandings Held and Changed Due to Dialogue with Peers and Novels that Served as a Catalyst for the Change**

Student	Race/Gender	Old Understanding	New Understanding	Change Catalyst
Charles	White/Male	Black Panthers as “radical”	Started out registering people to vote in Mississippi	<i>The Rock and the River</i> by K. Magoon
		Negative views of People of Color in school and community	Carried guns with no bullets to ward off attackers at Chicago programs	
			Broadening our reading selections helps us to understand things that are not in our textbooks	
Mike	White/Male	Racism doesn’t still exist	Racism is still here but exists in a different form in today’s world	<i>All American Boys</i> by J. Reynolds and B. Kiely  <i>A Fighting Chance</i> by C. M. Salinas
Aeris	White/Female	Felt there was no hope for the future	Has restored “hope for humanity”	<i>The Outsiders</i> by S.E. Hinton  <i>All American Boys</i> by J. Reynolds and B. Kiely
		Thought black youth were not intelligent	Realizes black students are intelligent and have the same desires for success and hope for peace.	
		Physically cringed around other classmates of color	No longer cringes	
Leone	Black/Male	All middle-income families have 2 parents and live uptown	There are single parent households in middle income neighborhoods	<i>The Outsiders</i> by S.E. Hinton
		All lower income families have one parent and live downtown	There are 2-parent families in lower income neighborhoods	
DeVonte	Black/Male	Kids try to dress like the entertainers in the videos downtown	Uptown kids think the same way	<i>All American Boys</i> by J. Reynolds and B. Kiely  <i>How it Went Down</i> by K. Magoon
		Only downtown kids steal clothes	Kids who steal are not limited to socioeconomic levels	

Table 6 depicts specific misunderstood concerns based on social and historical misrepresentations. Each misunderstanding was corrected due to dialogue that was generated from the assigned literature, that acted as a change catalyst in the process.

## Discussion

Findings in the study support much of the literature regarding underrepresented youth of color’s need for identity in literature (Bishop, 1990, 2012; Christensen, 2009; Van Orman & Lyiscott, 2013), curriculum implementation (Camangian, 2015; Tatum, 1997; Moule, 2010), library collection development and programming (Hughes-Hassell & Bracey, 2017), and interpersonal development from social damage (Fricker, 2012, 2013; Froggatt, 2015; Larrick, 1965) .

This study's findings illustrate how urban youth participants were able to reshape identities of themselves and others and form positive epistemic outlooks for their future when young adult urban literature is implemented in the curriculum. Including contemporary young adult urban literature in the curriculum provides vital opportunities for youth to discuss and work through their reactions to text in peer-generated dialogue, while encouraging a conscious and purposeful move to include a broader range of readers' advisory dialogue in conversations.

This study's findings reify readers' needs for representation in the books they choose. The findings also provide evidence of how youth from underrepresented minority groups are often misunderstood by their peers who are part of the majority or socioeconomic elite. The youth who are members of these underrepresented groups may have little opportunity to share perspectives in verbal exchanges with others outside their social groups. More literature should be made available that allows youth from all socioeconomic levels the opportunity to see their contemporary world in the stories they read. More opportunities are needed in academic settings for student voices to be heard on the impact these stories have or have not made.

When classroom teachers do not use literature that includes diverse characters in a variety of settings, they are denying their students opportunities to experience active engagement with literacy and limiting their student's chances to develop the efficacy needed for self-esteem. Effective school librarians can foster more inclusive environments by ensuring underrepresented youths can find themselves in the library collection. Effective school librarians also collaborate with classroom teachers, recommending diverse titles, and working as co-teachers on the reading skills lessons needed to better navigate and interpret the text. Having a "lower teacher-to-student ratios at point of instruction" (Moreillon, 2009, p. 28) is an additional benefit that produces two experts to support and facilitate learning in the classroom. A core value that forms the basis for librarianship is to provide resources reflective of the informational needs and wants of their patrons (ALA, 2004). Hicks (1997) argued that marginalized youth need access to distinctive types of discourse and genres which serve as socially empowering tools of identities. This aspect of literary inclusion heightens student impact on reading proficiencies when they are engaged with literature and allows for real-world alignment (Moreillon, 2009).

One of the most compelling results from this study's findings reveals the new sense of empowerment gained by students who rarely took responsibility for their own learning. How does one look inwardly at personal flaws with open honesty, and learn from what they find? To look at what is needed to better yourself as a person is the first step towards change. However, to apply the effort it takes to change the paradigm you exist in so that you can succeed, is empowerment. The 5 Social Justice Assumptions for School Library Information Programs play a crucial role in helping to understand feedback from youth who are searching to express not only their joys, but their pains, and puzzlements by: allowing youth from a cross section of backgrounds to bond in dialogue for better understandings (Assumption 1 and 2); supporting findings that show a strong need for school library collections to include contemporary titles not only aligned with curriculum, but reflective of the life of the population the library serves (Assumption 3 and 5); and showing how important it is to carry out scholarly studies such as this to document the impact it has on student learning (Assumption 4 and 5).

If we remove the labels of race and class in our analysis of young adults, take into consideration how young adults describe themselves within the scenario they are existing, and allow today's them to explain the dilemmas based on their knowledge factors, this helps to eliminate the problems of misunderstanding from the lack of empowerment. Almost all of this study's participants at one time or another, addressed a misunderstanding they observed of their peers, basing previous perspectives on something either said to them by others or decided from a generalization of longstanding systemic misconceptions, as we saw in Table 6.

Expressing surprise at the biases they held, many participants commented on how the opportunity to read and discuss the controversies in the young adult literature titles led to better clarity and improved interactions among the students (Moule, 2009). This is a benefit of social justice in librarianship where the library program is purposely embedded into all aspects of their school's community in such a manner that allows for selection efforts to reflect the community's wants and needs (Mehra & Singh, 2016). Rioux (2010) referred to Jackson (2005) on the incorporation of social justice concepts in the 20th and 21st which have been "incorporated into discourses on human rights, government policy, public moral philosophy, and individuals' needs" (p.11). On a smaller scale, the opportunity to read, discuss, and learn from young adult titles allowed the titles to be used by the participants as guides and "enabling texts" (Tatum, 1997). To ignore the importance of implementing enabling texts in the classroom is equivalent to ignoring controversial texts in classroom curriculums; preemptive censorship practices exclude controversial texts in literature for classroom and school libraries.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

In this study, the implementation of the young adult titles with the weekly structured discussion sessions changed the dynamics between the students. Research indicates that classroom culture relates to classroom dimensions, such as mutual respect, instruction as dialogue, behavior self-control, connectedness, and involvement in learning; these components are some of the critical change factors when to establish a community where learning takes place ((Finnan, Schnepel, & Anderson, 2003; Intrator 2003). The responses from the participants in this study correlate with the literature in relation to how voices of the underrepresented are "silenced and seldom heard" (Fricker, 2012, p.287). Students were taught life lessons from their exposure to the controversies covered and learned to be less judgmental of other groups' truths (Fricker, 2013). By putting students in the lives of others, they began to develop understandings about people in history, in literature, in media, whose culture, race, or gender identity is different from their own (Christensen, 2000).

Several overarching implications are interwoven throughout this investigation. School librarians and educators should consider adopting fresh perspectives about which factors which determine the quality of good book, judging not necessarily by how well it is written, but by how it affects the reader, illustrating the life lessons and warning of the consequences of choices (Hill, Perez, & Irby, 2008). School librarians who provide services to underrepresented groups should honor the cultural capital these diverse groups bring. Purposeful action towards inclusion and representation on the part of school librarians will encourage the presence of these underrepresented groups to positively effect collection and curriculum development decisions and provide opportunities for identity building (Bishop, 1990, 2012). Selection development policies with an emphasis on inclusion and representation can foster the type of learning environments that help students to "love themselves, love people" (Camangian, 2015, p.448), and gain a better "sense of control over their collective lives" (Camangian, 2015, pp.246-247).

From a social justice stance, school libraries can act as sites of learning where both literacy skills and student voices are "cultivated" (Hughes-Hassell, Bracy, & Rawson, 2017, p.75). This type of efficacy-building is reflected in the American Association of School Librarians' national commitment to provide equitable opportunities to "every child, regardless of race, income, or [culture]" (Resolution on Equity for School Libraries for the DOE Making Rules for ESSA, 2016).

There is a need for school librarians and classroom teachers to learn more about how to use young adult fiction for middle school urban youth. By taking a social justice perspective and providing and using materials that represent the lived experiences of underrepresented youths in an instructional context, school librarians and teachers can foster an educational environment that can begin to address the educational issues facing underrepresented youths and empower them to engage in their own education. More research is needed on school libraries and social justice, to



provide school librarians with the language they will need to effectively advocate. Rioux's (2010) social justice assumptions are grounded in the centrality of reading and information and are deserving of consideration to frame future studies.

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## Appendix. Young Adult Titles Referenced in Study

### **Individual Titles**

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