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# Embracing Young Adult Literature to Support Struggling and Reluctant Readers from Disadvantaged Backgrounds

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Embracing Young Adult Literature to Support Struggling and Reluctant Readers from  
Disadvantaged Backgrounds

by

Richard J. Taddonio III

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of  
The College at Brockport, State University of New York,  
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## **Abstract**

Despite the billions of dollars spent each year in attempts to close the achievement gap between high- and low-income students, many young people living in poverty continue to struggle to read due to structural barriers within society. These structural barriers cause many low-income students to develop low self-esteem and lose confidence in their abilities and therefore decrease their motivation to read complex texts. In order to reach these struggling or reluctant readers from low-income households, it is crucial to address the obstacles they face in the lessons we teach. The best way to do this while benefitting all students is to incorporate Young Adult Literature (YAL). These diverse texts often contain themes of social injustice and other issues directly related to the structural barriers low-income students face daily and allow these students to make meaningful connections to the text. This not only boosts their confidence in their own knowledge and motivation to read by validating their personal experiences but also helps all students involved develop empathy for marginalized and oppressed people. By using YAL in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, English teachers have a unique opportunity to put low-income struggling or reluctant readers on a path to success and empower them to fight injustice.

## Chapter One: Introduction

**Problem Statement: ELA teachers reluctant to utilize Young Adult Literature are missing an opportunity to address social justice issues and work toward closing the achievement gap between high and low-income students.**

Many students today are struggling in school because of outside factors that create barriers between students and academic success. These barriers are a result of poverty and the generational impact it can have on families from low-income households. Out-of-school structural barriers resulting from poverty have a direct impact on affected students in school. For example, many children in poverty enter school with a significant reading deficit, usually due to a lack of reading materials at home and in their communities (Krashen, 2016). Also, many parents struggle to find time to read to their children and model good reading practices because they must work two to three jobs just to survive. As students with reading deficits progress in school, it becomes increasingly unlikely that they will catch up to their peers. Because of their struggle with literacy, these students lose confidence and motivation to continue, and many end up dropping out of school. Underprivileged students also face barriers in school, like teachers who believe poverty is caused by inherent deficiencies in the people who live in poverty (Gorski, 2016). This belief is not only false, but also prevents students from low-income households from receiving appropriate instruction that allows them to identify and respond to the societal conditions that cause the wealth inequality, injustice, and oppression they must face every day.

Although billions of dollars are spent each year in attempts to close the achievement gap caused by the cycle of poverty and low literacy, success has been very limited (David & Marchant, 2015). In order to close the achievement gap between students in poverty and their wealthier peers, teachers need to develop ideologies and pedagogies that not only recognize the

structural barriers certain students face, but also address those barriers in ways that allow students to see the causes of these inequities, giving them the tools to rise up against their oppressors and enact positive, lasting change in society. ELA teachers, specifically, have a unique opportunity to change the lives of their students with the right strategies and a structural ideology.

### **Significance of the Problem**

It is common knowledge that children in U.S. schools typically learn to read through third grade. After that, they increasingly use their acquired reading skills to learn for the rest of their academic career. However, students in poverty who struggle with literacy will often need more time to learn to read since they get less literacy support in their home and in their communities. More often than not, they do not get this extra time, and instead are pushed into the next grade where they struggle to learn because they struggle to read. Literacy is necessary for all content areas, and without it, there is little chance of success in school.

Literacy is especially important in English Language Arts (ELA) courses. Much of the instruction that takes place in ELA revolves around reading, comprehending, and discussing a wide range of texts of different genres, styles, and levels of complexity. If students struggle to read, teaching ELA can be a significant challenge. In fact, one of the main challenges of teaching ELA at any level is engaging students labeled as struggling or reluctant readers. However, at the secondary level, ELA teachers may feel like they are running out of time to reach these students. Some may even believe that it is too late and shift their focus to the students who have less trouble with reading. These teachers believe that they simply cannot have an effect on the lives of students living in poverty because of out-of-school factors and what these students have been through before arriving at school (Lewis, 1996). The problem of low literacy and success among

students living in poverty is significant to ELA because teachers of ELA have a unique opportunity to act as gatekeepers at the secondary level, keeping underprivileged students from dropping out by lifting them from their spiral of doubt and discouragement, and putting them on a path for success.

Reluctant and proficient readers alike can view reading as a chore. The main difference is that proficient readers can force themselves to do the chore, whereas struggling readers are met with a task that they do not want nor possess the ability to do. As a result, their confidence, and therefore their motivation to read, drops to zero. ELA teachers are in a position to reverse this trend and bolster the confidence and motivation of struggling and reluctant readers, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For this to work however, teachers need to have an understanding of the structural barriers and inequity that impeded these students' acquisition of literacy skills in the first place. They need to realize that they are not going to easily rectify the complex structural conditions that result from poverty and inequality, but they can give their students the knowledge and tools to do their part and join the fight against oppression and injustice. By addressing issues of injustice and inequity within society in their lessons, teachers of ELA can begin a discourse on the subject and reach reluctant readers by showing them that reading about important issues can allow them to form their own opinions and beliefs and take action against the very oppression they face. ELA teachers can use this instruction to help students tap into a love of reading and introduce a new incentive for literacy. Through reading about and discussing important issues in society that directly impact the lives of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, these students will see that the incentive for reading is not a pizza party at the end of the year or watching the film adaptation of a book when the unit is done. They

will see that the true incentive for reading is the power it gives us to confront deficit beliefs and social injustices and to create positive change throughout society.

## **Purpose**

One reason teachers struggle to find success in engaging struggling or reluctant readers is that they fail to impart on these students the importance of the texts they assign. Most students just see the reading as a chore they must complete to get a grade and pass the class. Also, students may struggle to see the relevance of these texts in their own lives, let alone in society. If reluctant readers do not see a meaningful connection to their lives and the world around them, why bother? Furthermore, research shows that many reluctant readers come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and due to a lack of reading resources at home and in their communities, they come to school with a significant reading deficit that makes them reluctant to read (Krashen, 2016). The key to reaching reluctant and struggling readers while also supplying appropriate instruction for all students is to incorporate Young Adult Literature (YAL) into the curriculum.

Reluctant and proficient readers alike can struggle to find meaning behind reading. The key difference is that proficient readers have the skills, confidence, and motivation to push through and read, while students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to lack these characteristics. To raise the confidence and motivation of reluctant and struggling readers, teachers must incorporate texts that students can relate to and actually enjoy (Ambe, 2007). Many YAL titles are full of topics and issues that directly relate to students today, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds. With the proper Young Adult (YA) text, reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds can make personal connections supplemented by prior knowledge and similar experiences, which increases confidence and motivation. Furthermore, YAL can help all students develop critical consciousness, allowing them to “awaken to the tools of oppression”

and act against oppressors (Aziz, Wilder, & Mora, 2019). By reading YA texts that reveal society's issues of injustice and inequality, students not only gain a better understanding of the world but also of themselves and the adversity they face.

Using YAL in the ELA classroom is not just beneficial for struggling and reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds. All students will benefit from exploring societal issues of injustice, inequality, and oppression through YA texts, and the best way to do this is through collaborative learning and discussion. A good way to start is to select a YA text that is accessible to all students, especially students who struggle to read. One concern that teachers may have is that such texts would not be advanced enough to engage proficient readers. For example, ELA teachers may be wary to assign a graphic novel like *I Am Alfonso Jones*, by Tony Medina (2017). However, assigning this kind of book in class would have a range of benefits for all students when paired with frequent discussion. Discussions on the social issues of racism, gun violence, police brutality, and other injustices that are explored in the text will develop and nurture empathy among students (Hays, 2018). The development of empathy is crucial to understanding the deficit ideologies and structural barriers that impact people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Also, discussing these topics through Medina's graphic novel will let reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds make meaningful connections from the text to their own lives, aiding in comprehension, boosting their confidence, and motivating them to read more complex texts down the road. They will see themselves in various places in the text, revealing to them the validity of their own life experiences and the struggles they face.

There are many ways to pair YAL with discussion in the ELA classroom. Teachers can utilize various strategies like Socratic seminar, snowball discussion, gallery walk, and many more. One effective strategy would be to have students discuss in small groups rather than

having whole-class discussions right away. This way, all students will have a chance to discuss and voice their ideas, including those who do not normally raise their hand during whole-class discussions (Wolsey & Lapp, 2016). The most important thing is to ensure that whatever discussion strategy is being used, it allows all students to engage in meaningful analysis and discussion of not just the YA text, but also the themes and issues from the text as they relate to society and the students themselves. By having students read about and discuss social issues of injustice and inequality in YAL, teachers can empower all their students to recognize and fight against oppression and create positive change, without leaving reluctant and struggling readers behind.

### **Rationale**

Literacy in the U.S. is in decline, creating obstacles for educators as they try to reach struggling and reluctant readers with limited reading proficiencies. This problem not only impacts schools but also society as a whole. As the achievement gap in schools widens, so does the wealth gap in the U.S., which recently reached its highest point in 50 years (Schneider, 2019). This is directly linked to literacy, since research shows that low levels of literacy lead to low employment rates and lower wages, making it nearly impossible for those impacted to break out of the cycle of poverty (Lewis, 1996). Something is not working, and there needs to be a significant change in the way we address literacy in students living in poverty in order to reverse this trend. The ELA classroom is where this change can occur. By using strategies with YAL that bolster confidence and motivation in students who have struggled their entire academic career, ELA teachers can keep students from dropping out by opening their students' eyes to the power of literacy and encouraging them to finish strong and apply what they learn in the real world.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Cycle of Poverty:* The cycle of poverty refers to the set of factors or events by which poverty continues from generation to generation unless there is outside intervention.

*Wealth Gap (wealth inequality):* The wealth gap refers to the unequal distribution of assets—the values of homes, automobiles, personal valuables, businesses, savings, and investments— among residents of a particular country or region.

*Achievement Gap:* Refers to the significant and persistent disparity in academic success and educational attainment between different groups of students. In the case of this project, achievement gap refers to the disparities in academic achievement between students from lower-income and higher-income households.

*Literacy:* The ability to read and write.

*Pedagogy:* The method and practice of teaching as an academic subject or theoretical concept.

*Reluctant Reader:* Any student who does not show an interest in reading.

*Struggling Reader:* Any student who is usually reluctant to read because of low literacy skills.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

Literacy in the U.S. is in decline, making it more difficult for teachers of the English language arts to reach students through complex literature. With this literacy decline comes a widening achievement gap in schools between students from low-income families and their wealthy peers. As a result, billions of dollars are spent each year in attempts to close the gap caused by the cycle of poverty and a lack of early literacy interventions for struggling readers. While the attempts to close the poverty achievement gap are well-intentioned, many strategies are missing the mark. Furthermore, the ideologies of some teachers on the issue are detrimental

to efforts to close the gap. One belief that truly undermines the success of many students is that it is too late for high school students to get into reading, and that there is nothing for teachers to do as students from disadvantaged backgrounds get closer to dropping out. Another is that a lack of success in school is a result of laziness or apathy toward education. The fact is, there are many outside factors that make school unfathomably difficult for many underprivileged students. There are barriers to education that are invisible to many educators, barriers that students find impenetrable without the help of their teachers. These barriers are caused by social structure and cannot be ignored. Instead, teachers must find ways to address structural barriers through their lessons that will reach struggling and reluctant readers from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and show them the power reading and literacy has to enact social change. Despite changes in the learning standards aimed at increasing literacy and comprehension, the attitudes and environments of many schools around the country do little to accommodate students living in poverty. Even teachers with the right ideologies and motivation to reach underprivileged students may be held back by internal factors like the attitudes of peers and administrators, or rigid curriculum that meets the standards but does not address the struggles certain groups of students face.

To truly even the playing field and give every student the chance to succeed, regardless of background, there needs to be a significant ideological change in how educators see struggling students living in poverty. Teachers of ELA can play a leading role in changing the views of others in the profession. Because of their roles in teaching about identity, society, and how the world works through literature, ELA teachers are positioned to impart a new ideology on their students, showing them the value of their own experiences and how they can change the world themselves. While this might not immediately change the mindset of every teacher, it will at the

very least help underprivileged students find a joy and incentive for reading and plant the seeds for a better ideology of teaching students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the future. The key to this preferable ideology is to understand the cycle of poverty and its impact on students and literacy.

### **The Cycle of Poverty**

Kids struggle in school, they drop out, grow up, have kids of their own and struggle to sustain their family. Then their kids drop out of school because of their parent's struggle and repeat the process all over again. This is the cycle of poverty. According to Berliner (2009), home life has a significant impact on youth and education. Out-of-school factors like family, community, society, and all of life's problems exert a powerful influence on student behavior and learning. This influence is especially apparent in students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many believe that the cycle begins with the lack of early literacy interventions. Nonprofits all over the U.S. focus many of their efforts on education and early literacy to increase economic stability of low-income areas (Education, n.d.). While it is true that a lack of literacy skills makes it nearly impossible for people to break out of generational poverty (Lewis, 1996), and while this is a reasonable approach to breaking the cycle of poverty at one of its root causes, it neglects to address various other structural barriers that prevent underprivileged students and families from getting the resources they need to succeed. For example, according to Gorski (2016), unstable, housing, food insecurity, time poverty, and inconsistent or inadequate healthcare are out-of-school factors that create structural barriers for students from underprivileged backgrounds that prevent them from achieving success. Furthermore, students living in poverty from minority subgroups face additional barriers to success because, according to Thompson (2010), institutional racism permeates educational structures, creating obstacles for students of color like

deficit ideologies (Gorski, 2016) based on prejudices within schools. The idea that a lack of early literacy skills is the only barrier for underprivileged students to overcome inadvertently propagates the belief that by the time students arrive at high school, it is already too late to impart a love for reading and learning. The issue of poverty and its impact on education is more important now than ever, as studies show that the wealth gap in the U.S. has reached its highest point in 50 years (Schneider, 2019).

### **Literacy and achievement gaps: How poverty affects kids in school**

Research shows that literacy impacts academic success regardless of a family's socio-economic status (Krashen, 2016). This is common sense. If you cannot learn to read by third grade, you cannot read to learn in the grades to come unless someone intervenes and provides the correct supports. However, more students living in poverty tend to lack basic literacy skills because they have less access to books, which is why according to Krashen (2016), the strongest predictor of reading struggles is poverty. Studies show that economically disadvantaged students in the U.S. “have far fewer books at home, in their school libraries, and their classroom libraries. They live in neighborhoods with fewer bookstores and with public libraries that are open for far fewer hours and contain far fewer books” (Krashen, 2016, p. 4). The lack of exposure to and modeling of reading in the home is detrimental to the academic success of students, and this is seen in high levels within low-income areas.

Early childhood maltreatment is also directly linked to the poverty achievement gap. Research shows that the highest number of investigations for maltreatment occurred within disadvantaged subgroups, specifically students participating in free or reduced lunch programs and students from low-income households (Jacob & Ryan, 2018). Since children in poverty are

more likely to be mistreated or abused, it is imperative for teachers to use strategies that help students overcome their traumas and to keep themselves from falling into the cycle of poverty.

Unfortunately, efforts to close the poverty achievement gap have had limited success at best. According to David and Marchant, “there were no significant changes in achievement gaps between 2011 and 2013” (2015). So, the cycle of poverty continues, supplemented by the thousands of students who drop out of high school each year (Education, n.d.). The solutions are out there, and some schools and educators are taking the steps necessary to lead underprivileged students to academic success. For example, according to Parrett and Budge (2012), some high-performing, high-poverty schools have been studied to determine what makes them successful. The key is distributive and collaborative leadership, including the critical role the principal and other teacher-leaders play in creating a systemic, shared leadership capacity in schools that fosters a safe and supportive learning environment, as well as a focus on improving learning and changing the culture of the school in a positive way (Parrett & Budge, 2012). In order to have a lasting impact on students and effectively close the poverty achievement gap, teachers and administrators need to work together to construct and implement strategies that impart literacy skills on all struggling and reluctant readers, regardless of age and grade level; but, they also need to collaborate to create a safe and supportive community of learning for all students.

### **Addressing the poverty achievement gap**

According to research statistics (School Leader’s Guide: 45 Ways to Support Struggling Readers), over 10 million U.S. students struggle to read, while only 2.3 million receive special help (n.d.). This staggering statistic has led many educators to call for school-wide programs that embrace different learning styles and implement effective intervention tools and techniques that allow all students an equal opportunity to learn and succeed in school (School Leader’s Guide:

45 Ways to Support Struggling Readers, n.d.). However, due to differing ideologies on poverty and how it affects learning, many strategies for addressing the poverty achievement gap and literacy deficiency are unhelpful and may even cause more harm than good.

One of the biggest obstacles for students who require literacy interventions is the deficit ideology held by many educators. According to Gorski, deficit ideology is the dominant view in the U.S., and is described as the belief that poverty is a result of deficiencies in the people who live in poverty. People with this belief tend to point to low performance of students and low rates of parental involvement in schools as evidence of inherent deficiencies in students and parents' lack of value in their child's education (2016). Deficit ideology completely ignores the true causes of poverty and its effects on students and families, which makes it impossible for teachers who hold this belief to address the poverty achievement gap in their lessons. Closely related to deficit ideology is grit ideology, another view that is detrimental to economically disadvantaged students' success in school and in literacy. Grit ideology is the belief that certain people have inherent attributes that allow them to overcome adversity while others do not (Gorski, 2016) This belief implies that students who struggle in school due to turbulent home-lives are simply lazy, and that if successful students were in their position, they would do just fine because of their superior work ethic. This is not only extremely offensive and damaging to people from low-income backgrounds, but it also completely ignores the fact that many of these students struggling through school because of poverty are already "the most gritty, most resilient students" (Gorski, 2016). Unlike deficit ideology, grit ideology does acknowledge the in- and out-of-school structural barriers students in poverty face. However, it focuses on increasing student grit to overcome obstacles, rather than addressing and working to eradicate the barriers through lessons and teaching strategies. According to Thomas (2016), living in poverty drains

mental capacities just as sleep deprivation does, so trying to “fix” students from low-income households by bolstering grit will not solve anything. Instead, the focus should be on addressing poverty directly to protect these students from its effects.

The educational outcome disparities seen in students from disadvantaged backgrounds are a result of structural barriers within society, in and out of school. According to Gorski, out-of-school factors like “coping with unstable housing, food insecurity, time poverty, and inadequate or inconsistent healthcare” are all barriers for underprivileged students (2016). Students in this position tend to have less access to internet technology, books, tutors, and other key resources that bolster academic achievement. These “inequitable distributions of opportunity and access” (Gorski, 2016) are seen in school as well, where students living in poverty are often cheated out of access to academic enrichers due to their grades that their wealthier peers take for granted. In order to create curriculum and implement strategies that are effective for struggling students living in poverty, educators need to understand and directly address these inequities in access and opportunity. Teachers need to develop a structural ideology that recognizes educational outcome disparities as results of economic injustice, exploitation, and inequity. Structural ideology recognizes that people experiencing poverty are the targets of injustice and inequity, not the causes (Gorski, 2016). Despite the inability to immediately eliminate structural barriers of inequity, this knowledge— also known as equity literacy— gives teachers the insight to develop policy and practice that is responsive to structural conditions that affect learning (Gorski, 2016). Teachers who possess a structural ideology and sound equity literacy are far better equipped to design lessons and activities to reach struggling and reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Teaching struggling or reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds**

Research shows that the gap between literacy attainment of poor children and their wealthy peers continues to widen and catching up after falling behind is increasingly unlikely as students progress through school (How to engage reluctant readers at secondary school, 2017). Because of this, it is becoming increasingly important for teachers to be responsive to the myriad of challenges faced by economically disadvantaged students. However, even with a structural ideology on poverty and learning, reaching reluctant or struggling readers can still be a significant challenge for ELA teachers. The key to overcoming this challenge is confidence.

According to Alig (2018), studies have shown that poverty has a detrimental effect on self-esteem and confidence due to factors such as negative perceptions and stereotypes. This lack of confidence in students from low-income homes directly contributes to low academic achievement and literacy attainment Alig (2018), and students without self-confidence have little to no motivation to learn, let alone push themselves through complex reading material. This psychological consequence of poverty is caused by the “scarcity mindset” that people enter when living in poverty (Foster, 2015). According to Foster (2015), the focus on short term survival and the immediate future narrows the attention span and causes the decision-making abilities of people facing poverty to fall apart. This makes it difficult for children living in poverty to develop effective planning skills, which has a direct impact on their academic performance (Alig, 2018). Low academic achievement, even at early ages, causes children in poverty to underestimate their intelligence and capability, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Foster, 2015). Even adults in poverty tend to be “less confident in their ability to succeed, leading to decreased professional and educational attainment, depression and anxiety” (Foster, 2015). The “scarcity mindset” is another example of a structural barrier that limits opportunities for success for those living in poverty. Without confidence in themselves, students from low income homes

fail to recognize their own capabilities and potential, making it near impossible to become motivated to achieve.

According to Ambe (2007), motivation is one of the most important and powerful tools for student success. However, motivating students to read is a challenge in and of itself. Unfortunately, many struggling and proficient readers alike see reading as a chore. The main difference is that proficient readers can force themselves to do the chore, whereas struggling readers are met with a task that they do not want nor possess the ability to do. As a result, their confidence, and therefore their motivation, drops to zero. To raise the confidence of struggling readers, and in turn raise their motivation for reading, teachers must incorporate texts that students can relate to and actually enjoy (Ambe, 2007). This requires a lot of time and creative effort. It also requires that teachers know their students and their backgrounds. Many teachers get to know their students by having them complete an “interest inventory” (Ciesla, 2016). Through this activity, teachers are able to gain insight on what individual students find interesting and important. Then, teachers can offer a range of texts that align with student interests from which students can choose what to read. This will show students that their interests and life experiences are important and valued and will further increase confidence and motivation to read. Furthermore, the background knowledge that students possess on the topic of the text they choose will facilitate comprehension, which also can increase self-confidence in struggling readers (Ambe, 2007). By offering students autonomy and allowing them to choose from a range of texts to which they can relate and apply prior knowledge, teachers can begin to work toward building confidence and motivation in struggling or reluctant readers. Maintaining that motivation is the next part of teaching struggling readers from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Discussion is just as important as reading in reaching students from disadvantaged backgrounds who struggle with reading. Students who are interested in what they are reading can still hit roadblocks while working through complex text, and for students that have struggled with reading for most of their academic career, this can be a confidence killer. Frequent discussions in class can affirm students' understanding of the text, keeping them motivated and confident that they know what they are doing. Furthermore, discussions are a great way to activate higher-level thinking (Ambe, 2007). However, it is important to ask the right questions to guide students in their discussions of a text. What you find meaningful will not always be meaningful to your students (Scullen, 2017). This is another reason why it is so important to know as much about your students as possible. The best way to ensure that discussions are meaningful, interesting, and engaging for students is to focus on a topic that is truly important to the students. Incorporating the right young adult text can be the key to all of this.

Many young adult literature (YAL) titles are full of topics and issues that directly relate to students today, especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds. With the proper YA text, students can make personal connections supplemented by prior knowledge and similar experiences, which increases comprehension, confidence and motivation. YAL is also perfect for discussions. According to Hays (2018), "the use of narrative YAL coupled with discussion-based learning can open the door for students to begin thinking about social justice issues" (p. 54). Many social justice issues that would surface with YAL are issues that students living in poverty have direct experiences with, making the connections all the more powerful and meaningful to their own lives. Furthermore, thinking and talking about social issues nurtures empathy, which is more critical than ever when teaching young people about poverty (Hays, 2018). This will bring

structural ideology to students as well as other teachers and help continue the shift toward responsive approaches to teaching students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Chapter Three: Application**

#### **Engaging Reluctant and Struggling Readers from Disadvantaged Backgrounds**

To close the achievement gap between students in poverty and their wealthier peers, teachers must develop ideologies and pedagogies that not only recognize the structural barriers certain students face, but also address those barriers in ways that allow students to see the causes of these inequities and give them the tools to rise against their oppressors and enact positive, lasting change in society. Because of the opportunities students have to discuss what they are reading, ELA teachers are in a unique position to address social injustice and related issues in their lessons. With this opportunity comes a responsibility for ELA teachers to act as gatekeepers at the secondary level, keeping underprivileged students from dropping out by lifting them from their spiral of doubt and discouragement and putting them on a path for success. The key to reaching reluctant and struggling readers from disadvantaged backgrounds and working toward closing the achievement gap between these students and their privileged peers lies in the incorporation of Young Adult Literature (YAL) paired with collaborative learning in the curriculum. YAL is crucial to reaching struggling and reluctant readers from low-income families because these diverse texts often contain themes and experiences that these students can relate to and actually enjoy reading about. Seeing themselves in these kinds of texts, low-income students can make powerful and meaningful connections to their own lives and see that their experiences and their voices are valid and important, thus boosting their confidence and

motivation to continue reading and learning. The right YAL, when paired with discussion and collaborative learning strategies, can also get all students—including those not directly affected by injustice—to start thinking more about social justice issues. Furthermore, critical discussions on issues like poverty, injustice, and oppression help all students involved develop empathy, which in turn allows them to develop their structural ideology. By having students read about and discuss social issues of injustice and inequality in YAL, teachers can empower all their students to recognize and fight against oppression and advocate for change without leaving reluctant and struggling readers from disadvantaged backgrounds behind. Struggling and reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds will benefit from the age-appropriate language and reading level of YAL and the overall shorter length of these selections, and they will be motivated to engage with the literature by the relatable themes in these books that reflect their own experiences. Furthermore, all students will see that the true incentive for reading is the power it gives us to confront deficit beliefs and social injustices and to create positive change throughout society.

The following is a list of fifteen diverse YAL selections that can be used in a variety of ways to address the needs of your students while engaging them in important lessons in social justice. Divided into units based on themes of empathy, identity, and social justice, these texts contain characters and experiences that students can relate to and enjoy reading about, especially if they are reluctant or struggling readers from disadvantaged backgrounds. The meaningful connections students will make to these YAL selections will demonstrate to them that their voices and experiences are valid and important regardless of their home life or socioeconomic status, further boosting the confidence and motivation to read and engage with the texts. Also, the reading level of these books will help prevent struggling readers from being overwhelmed by

complex language while still exposing them to important and complex issues. These YA books will also facilitate discussions on poverty, oppression, racism, and other social injustices prevalent in our society today, providing students with the means to speak out against real-world instances of injustice without leaving behind struggling or reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds. In each theme-based unit, I have also included activities that pair well with the selected YAL and support struggling and reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Empathy**

#### ***Dear Martin* by Nic Stone (2017)**

This YA book was written to make readers uncomfortable, which makes it a great selection to introduce the theme of empathy in English classrooms. Filled with highly empathetic characters, *Dear Martin* addresses the harm that stereotypes and deficit ideologies inflict on people of color. The story focuses on 17-year-old African American honor student Justyce McAllister who is profiled and falsely arrested, derailing his plans to attend Yale University and sending him down a path to better understand the racism and discrimination he faces daily. By writing letters to his hero, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Justyce explores his world through a lens of civil disobedience and raises some very important questions.

While reading along as Justyce questions the stereotypes and labels that are put on him and others, students will find themselves asking similar questions about their own world and how those stereotypes act as barriers to success for many. Students who have faced discrimination will see parts of themselves in Justyce, motivating them to read and engage with the text. Students will also empathize with Justyce as they read about the injustice he grapples with,

increasing their understanding of the impacts of stereotypes and deficit beliefs and how they prevent marginalized people from getting the resources and opportunities they need.

### ***Night* by Elie Wiesel (1956)**

Written by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, *Night* is a nonfiction account of the loss and tragedy experienced by millions of Jewish people during WWII told through the eyes of a 15-year old Wiesel. Throughout the book, Elie loses his home, his friends, and his family, revealing the shocking, absolute evil that led to the deaths of over 6 million Jews. This book not only emphasizes the horrors of the Holocaust, but also addresses important questions about why the Holocaust happened, and where that evil and hate really came from.

This nonfiction YA text was written over 50 years ago, but its message and themes are just as important and applicable in today's world. Since it is a true story based on the author's experiences, it is easy for readers to empathize with Wiesel. As students read Wiesel's accounts of the death and loss he experienced as a teenager they will put themselves in his shoes, and with proper guidance, explore their own feelings about the Holocaust and the true nature of hate.

### ***The Distance Between Us* by Reyna Grande (2012)**

This memoir is a heartbreaking account of the author's experiences as the child of illegal immigrants from Mexico. In the first half of the book, Grande's parents have crossed the border into the U.S., leaving her and her siblings behind with their abusive grandmother. In the second half, Grande's father returns to bring the family to the U.S., where she discovers that life in Los Angeles is just as difficult as it was in Mexico and that her parents are not who she thought they were.

Reading the personal accounts of Grande as she faces obstacle after obstacle to find happiness, students will easily empathize with her and question the injustice **she** and her family face because of their race and socioeconomic status. Students who come from immigrant families, low-income households, or neglectful or abusive homes will also be able to relate to many of Grande's experiences, motivating them to read and engage with the text.

**[Excerpt from] *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah (2009)**

Although this novel is not officially a YA text, it has many of the characteristics of YA literature. Told from the point of view of a young Pakistani woman named Arissa, *Saffron Dreams* is a fictional story about Arissa's tragic loss of her husband in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. As she deals with her grief, Arissa faces many obstacles on her journey to healing. Instead of using the whole book, I would recommend a specific excerpt that encapsulates the empathy theme with an interesting twist. Furthermore, using shorter pieces of reading along with small group activities would help struggling or reluctant readers understand critical concepts of a story without having to read an entire novel. The excerpt I chose describes a pregnant Arissa being assaulted by three young men who harass her because of her race and highlights a key event in the story that gives a unique perspective on empathy.

This excerpt is a great way to have students explore and analyze the theme of empathy in a context that challenges the typical narrative of empathy. Yes, students will empathize with Arissa as she is profiled and judged by the color of her skin, a common experience for many students from diverse backgrounds. However, the interesting part of the excerpt comes when Arissa momentarily expresses empathy for her attackers, noting the pain of loss in the voice of the leader as he blames her and her religion for the 9/11 attacks. Instead of continuing to argue with him, Arissa lets him speak, even as he threatens her with his knife. This complex example

of empathy will lead to students asking important questions about what they believe about people who are different from them, and if they are right to believe such things.

### ***Wonder* by R.J. Palacio (2012)**

R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* is about a ten-year-old boy named August who was born with a facial deformity. As he enters fifth grade at his new private school, August worries about typical middle-schooler issues, like if he will make friends and if his teachers will like him. However, he also worries about how his new classmates and teachers will respond to his appearance.

In telling this story through the eyes of August and a range of other people in his life, students are exposed to various points of view. If they don't see themselves in August, they will see themselves in a character who interacts with August and see the effect that interaction has on him. This will open students' eyes to how their own actions can affect others and lead them to practicing empathy to avoid doing harm.

### **Empathy Activity**

Since these YA texts deal with empathy, it is important to design assignments that reflect and explore that theme. For example, students could record their thoughts and feelings about a text in a learning journal as they read. This journal would be a great tool for students to gain a clearer picture on how they feel about a subject before classroom discussions occur, but it also creates opportunities for unique student projects at the end of a unit on empathy. By tracking their thoughts and emotions throughout the readings, students will see how their feelings about a character or event may have changed from the start of the book to the end, which demonstrates learning and indicates personal growth in terms of empathy. These journals could then inform any number of projects that allow students to demonstrate their understanding of empathy

outside of the book like letter-writing initiatives, anti-bullying campaigns, and interviewing members of civil rights groups.

One particularly useful closure activity for a unit on empathy is a Word Cloud, a collection of terms or concepts related to the central topic and placed randomly around the topic header. Using their journals, students can create their own Word Clouds to analyze how they empathize with specific characters in a story. For example, while reading Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* (2012), students would record their feelings about the situations faced by young Grande, like being stuck with an abusive grandmother in her poverty-stricken Mexican village, or when she discovers that her parents are not who she thought they were after she is reunited with her father. At the end of the unit, your students can use their journals to create a Word Cloud focusing on words related to the emotions they experience while reading. Once the Word Cloud has been created using any one of many online generators, students can use it to analyze their own feelings toward Grande's childhood experiences and how their perspectives may have shifted throughout the reading. Their Word Clouds would also be great tools to support classroom discussions in which students explain why some words are larger than others in the graphic, and what that means to them in terms of their understanding of empathy. Students could also compare their Word Clouds with their peers', exploring how their own life experiences may have led to differences in how they empathize with Grande and the words in their unique graphics.

### **Identity**

***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007)**

Despite being banned by some schools around the country, Sherman Alexie's first-person narrative about Native American teenager Arnold Spirit Jr. is an important addition to this list for teachers looking for ways to engage struggling and reluctant readers with YA fiction. Told from the perspective of 14-year-old Arnold, also known as "Junior", the story focuses on life on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington and Junior's decision to attend an affluent public high school outside of the reservation. As he navigates his new school and the obstacles that come with it, Junior gains a better understanding of white culture and a new perspective of the culture on the reservation.

By reading along as Junior learns more about his new classmates and himself, students will see how being exposed to difference and diversity is crucial to forming one's identity. The controversy around the novel's discussion of alcohol, violence, and sexuality, as well as its use of harmful slurs and stereotypes, is also the reason this book is so important for the discussion of identity in English classrooms. Alexie does not sugarcoat the story's events, which makes it all the more realistic and exposes students to the harsh reality of discrimination and oppression that many groups face each day. Furthermore, as Junior explores the aspects of his own identity like race, ability, and culture, students will start to do the same with their own.

### ***American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (2006)**

This award-winning graphic novel tells three different stories. The first is an adaptation of a legendary Chinese folk tale about the Monkey King, an ancient monkey who was buried under a mountain for five hundred years after attempting to overthrow the gods and goddesses who rejected him. After being freed, the Monkey King accompanies his savior on his journey, which is where the graphic novel picks up the narrative. The second is the story of a first-generation child of immigrants who struggles to fit in at his new mostly white school. After

moving from Chinatown in San Francisco, Jin Wang faces biases and stereotypes perpetuated by his classmates and even his teachers. The third story is about Danny, a white American boy who is troubled by the yearly visit of his Chinese cousin named Chin-Kee, a cringeworthy caricature of pretty much every offensive Chinese stereotype.

Through the unique use of three seemingly unrelated narratives, Gene Luen Yang, the author and illustrator of this text, reveals the common barriers and pitfalls that many young culturally and linguistically diverse students must navigate while attempting to understand and form their own identities. While the graphic novel format of this YA text will support struggling and reluctant readers, the familiar theme of identity exploration in an oppressive society will help convey to all students the importance of dispelling stereotypes that propagate that oppression.

***The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* by James McBride (1995)**

James McBride's autobiography is a tribute to his mother, a white, Jewish woman who married a black man. In alternating chapters, McBride switches between recounting his own early life and describing the life of his mother, Ruth. Connecting his own life to his mother's, McBride describes the many ways her philosophies on race, religion, and life greatly influenced his own identity.

While McBride's book technically falls into the autobiography genre, there are many elements that make it an invaluable resource for young adult readers and place it in the YA category. For example, the emphasis on McBride's struggle to determine who he was as a black son to a white mother is a perfect example of how culture and family have a significant impact on identity, especially at a young age. McBride also describes his experiences with racism and poverty as a child and a young adult and the barriers created by the prejudice and hate he faced.

***Cuba 15* by Nancy Osa (2003)**

This YA text is a fictional story about Violet Paz, an American teenager of Cuban and Polish descent who struggles with her identity as many young people do. Things get even more difficult when her Cuban grandparents make it clear that they want her to have a traditional quinceanera to signify her transition into womanhood. Seeing herself as American and lacking knowledge of such Latin American traditions, Violet resists the idea of a quinceanera. However, her family insists upon having the celebration and the various traditions that accompany the occasion, so Violet takes the initiative to learn more about her heritage and her family's culture. As she learns more and more about where she came from, she begins to accept the idea of a quinceanera and embraces her heritage as part of who she is, albeit on much of her own terms.

This YA text is a great book to use in teaching identity in the English classroom. Not only does the story clearly emphasize identity formation and what influences that process, but it also highlights the additional barriers faced by mixed-race individuals in discovering and deciding who they are and who they want to be. An important message that students will receive in reading this book is that while coming of age and forming one's identity is important, it is also crucial to stay true to oneself.

***It's Not Like It's a Secret* by Misa Sugiura (2017)**

Told from the perspective of two teenage women of color, this book deals with race and identity while exploring important LGBT themes. The main protagonist, 16-year-old Sana Kiyohara, has trouble with honesty. It bothers her that her friends do not invite her to parties, but she keeps that to herself. Her father may be having an affair, but who could she tell about that without tearing her family apart? Sana also realizes she might have a crush on her best friend,

Jamie—but admitting that to herself, let alone her friends and family, might be the biggest challenge of all.

As Sana struggles to come to terms with who she is, students will empathize with her as they too are likely facing similar questions about themselves. Students will also recognize that the process of coming of age and determining one’s identity is extremely complex, and individuals face unique obstacles on the path to self-discovery. These obstacles become tougher to overcome when discriminatory ideals from an oppressive society come into play, which students will also read about in this YA novel about a culturally diverse young woman coming to terms with her identity.

### **Identity Activity**

During an identity unit, it is crucial that students explore their own identity and what makes them who they are while they read about characters going through similar processes. Again, having your students keep journals as they read is an effective way to ensure that they are asking important questions about the topic at hand. In the case of identity, students should be taking note of the characteristics and other elements that make up a character’s identity while questioning the effects of their own experiences and how their unique backgrounds inform their own identities, including the presence or absence of structural barriers in their lives.

One of my favorite projects to end an identity unit with is the Self-Portrait Museum, in which students curate a “pop-up museum” on their desk as a personal exhibit on their identity. As students read a novel like *Cuba-15* (2003) by Nancy Osa, have them keep a journal where they reflect on the aspects of Violet’s life and background that make up her identity, like family, home life, heritage, and culture. After finishing the book, give students a few days to collect

objects (or less tangible items like music) that they see as integral parts of their identity related to what they thought made up Violet's identity. For example, students might bring in family photographs that represent where they come from; or, they might include a piece of jewelry that has been passed down from their great-grandparents. The possibilities are endless, so you will rarely see the same items twice. With each object in the exhibit (I would recommend no more than five items), have students write a brief explanation on the significance of the item and what it has to do with their identity. Then, have students check out each other's mini-museum and ask them to compare their exhibit to one or two others. In doing this, students will see that while similar facets of one's life will influence identity, we all have different ways of translating those facets into our self-image, whether we realize it or not. Struggling and reluctant readers will also benefit from this activity whether they read parts of the book or none at all, since they will gain an understanding of identity formation by observing their classmates' exhibits and the types of items they chose to display.

## **Social Justice**

### ***The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017)**

Narrated by 16-year-old Starr Carter, a black girl from a poor neighborhood attending an affluent private school, this powerful book tells a story of injustice and police brutality in its rawest form. When Starr and her friend Khalil are stopped by a white police officer, a confrontation leads to Khalil being shot and killed. Being the only witness who can dispute the police officer's claims of self-defense, Starr agrees to share her side of the story with the police. However, after the officer is acquitted by a grand jury, Starr resolves to take a stand and demand justice through a television interview and by speaking out during protests.

This New York Times Bestseller is loaded with themes of social justice, empathy, and racial identity, exploring issues such as police brutality, discrimination, code-switching and more. In reading about these issues, students will gain an understanding of the importance of staying true to oneself while speaking out against injustice and providing a voice to the voiceless.

***All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely (2015)**

Wrongly suspected of shoplifting and assaulting a woman, Rashad is savagely beaten by a police officer. His friend Quinn witnesses the attack but struggles with the decision to speak out against the brutality inflicted on Rashad because the police officer is a close family friend. As a white teenager, Quinn had always seen police officers as protectors and grapples with the contradiction between what he believes and what he saw. Quinn's decision may cost him his relationships with friends and family, and even an important scholarship. But it is a decision he must make. Meanwhile, as Rashad heals in the hospital, his supporters speak out with graffiti and the phrase, "Rashad Is Absent Again Today".

This YA novel is a fictional tale that serves as a reflection of real-life instances of police brutality. Its power is in its realism and the parallels it draws from well-known recent occurrences of racial profiling and violence against young black men. Some students will see themselves in Rashad, having their own experience of being profiled and discriminated against because of their race. Others will see themselves in Quinn as people who have seen injustice and not known what to do about it. Either way, this book has a powerful message about social justice for all students.

***How it Went Down* by Kekla Magoon (2014)**

After an unarmed black teen named Tariq is shot and killed by Jack Franklin, a white man who claims self-defense, a frustrated community attempts to find out what really happened. Through multiple points of view and misaligned accounts of the shooting, this story illustrates the harmful reality of racial bias, and why there needs to be real change to prevent more black lives from being lost. Although this YA text is a fiction novel, it has many clear connections to the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. For example, a central focus of the story is whether Tariq had a gun. Details emerge later in the story that suggest Franklin had mistaken a candy bar in the young man's pocket for a gun. Despite his assailant's claim to the contrary, Martin was also unarmed, and among the few items he was carrying when he was murdered was a bag of candy. Another connection is seen in the way that Franklin and his supporters try to paint Tariq as a gang member and a criminal, just as some media outlets attempted to make Martin out to be a criminal by highlighting the traces of marijuana found in his system, his recent ten-day suspension from school, and even his clothing.

The connections to the Trayvon Martin shooting and this novel's strikingly realistic account of the aftermath of an unjustified shooting make this YA text an invaluable resource for English teachers doing a social justice unit. Students will see how racism not only causes the loss of black lives due to racial violence but also obstructs justice for those affected after such events. Students will empathize with Tariq and his family and friends, and exploring the many connections to real-life examples of injustice will motivate them to seek their own role in improving social justice in their own communities.

***I am Alfonso Jones* by Tony Medina (2017)**

After being profiled and shot by a police officer, 15-year-old Alfonso Jones wakes up on a ghost train in the afterlife, where victims of past police shootings share their stories and teach

him about his new reality in the spirit world. Back in the world of the living, Alfonso's friends and family seek justice while grieving for their lost loved one.

This graphic novel, illustrated by Stacey Robinson and John Jennings, is a great selection for all readers in an English classroom. Struggling and reluctant readers will find the gorgeous illustrations helpful in navigating the story, but the real impact of this text comes from its haunting exploration of social justice issues through the eyes of real-life victims of police brutality. Many struggling and reluctant readers from low-income families also tend to have firsthand experiences with discrimination, profiling, and even police brutality, allowing them to connect with Alfonso Jones and his family, which will increase motivation to engage with the text and explore issues of social justice. Furthermore, all students reading this text will gain an understanding of the importance of standing up to injustice and speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves, as Alfonso's friends and family do for him.

***Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (1999)**

Through a mix of third-person screenplay and first-person diary formats, *Monster* tells the story of a Steve Harmon, a black teenager awaiting his trial for the murder of a Harlem drugstore owner. As an amateur filmmaker, Harmon copes by writing a movie script about his trial. Myers uses the alternating format throughout the novel to allow the characters to disclose their version of events themselves without telling readers what actually happened, forcing the readers to decide on their own who is telling the truth.

The ambiguity of the story's central events and the unique storytelling method the author uses will demonstrate to young readers the complex issues and flaws within the justice system. Regardless of who students believe when reading this story, they will understand that nothing is

truly black and white and that it is important as ever to bring about reform within our criminal justice system and society as a whole.

### **Social Justice Activity**

As an English teacher and social justice advocate, I firmly believe that classroom discussion is by far the most powerful and effective way to teach social justice. Not only does collaborative discussion reflect the ideals of democracy and freedom of speech in our country, but it also allows the issues talked about in the selected text to be brought into discussions of the real world. Once again, having students keep journals and engage in close reading of the literature is a great way to prepare them for deeper discussions on complex topics of racism, discrimination, police brutality, and other examples of injustice. However, you could make things interesting by supplementing the journal with collaborative discussion activities at various points throughout a reading. For example, at the end of each chapter, have students select and print out an excerpt from that chapter where they will underline the parts that they find most provocative, intriguing, or confusing and include an explanation for their choices and a question for their classmates. Students will then exchange papers and read each other's excerpt, explanation, and question. After that, they will write their own response to their classmate's explanation and question, posing an inquiry of their own. Students will then exchange papers again, repeating the process as many times as you think is necessary for students to have enough information to discuss the chapter. This will lead into deeper group discussions throughout the reading, allowing students to practice valuable speaking and listening skills with complex issues before putting them to use in a larger class discussion. Furthermore, it will allow struggling readers to clear up parts of the selected chapter that they might not have understood, and

reluctant readers will who may not have read the chapter will still gain valuable insight by listening to their peers' discussions of their selected excerpts.

One of the best-structured discussion strategies for social justice is the Socratic Seminar, where students lead discussions on a central text using their own open-ended, higher-level questions. By allowing this activity to be dictated by your students, you will be giving them autonomy to choose what they discuss, which will encourage participation in the discussion. Your role as the teacher during a Socratic Seminar is not to lead the discussion, but to be a guide of sorts ensuring that students are staying on task and not breaking any class discussion norms. Other than that, it is up to your students to ask the important questions. Before starting a Socratic Seminar, have students use the journals they kept during the reading to create a list of essential questions that are important to them. You might give them some examples of good essential questions and provide guidelines to keep them on topic, but it is crucial that your students come up with their own questions, making the discussions more personal and encouraging engagement.

An important aspect of a social justice Socratic Seminar is that it is connected to the real world as well as the central text. For example, if you are doing a Socratic Seminar for a unit on social justice with the graphic novel *I Am Alfonso Jones* (2017) by Tony Medina, you should encourage students to make connections to real-life occurrences of police brutality and injustice, like the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, or the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 by George Zimmerman and the protests that followed those events. These connections turn theoretical classroom conversations into discussions that have real-world implications, emphasizing the importance of talking about social justice issues and speaking out against injustice.

## **Chapter Four: Conclusion and Recommendations**

Despite the billions of dollars spent each year in attempts to close the achievement gap between high- and low-income students, many young people living in poverty continue to struggle in school for reasons beyond their control. These reasons include unstable housing, food insecurity, inadequate access to healthcare, limited reading material, and limited modeling of good reading habits, all of which are structural barriers to success. These and other structural barriers, or inequitable distributions of opportunities and access to resources due to poverty, have a direct impact on the academic achievement of low-income students and are the driving force of the widening achievement gap. By embracing Young Adult Literature (YAL), English teachers will have more opportunities to address structural barriers in their lessons, boost motivation in their struggling and reluctant readers, and empower all students to take action against social inequities.

One major effect of structural barriers is low literacy skills, so students living in poverty often struggle or are reluctant to read. The problem of low literacy and low success among students living in poverty is significant to the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom because English teachers have a unique opportunity to act as gatekeepers at the secondary level. By understanding the structural barriers and inequities that impede their students' acquisition of literacy skills, English teachers have the power to keep underprivileged students from dropping out by lifting them from their spiral of doubt and discouragement and putting them on a path for success. While ELA teachers are not going to easily rectify the complex structural conditions that result from and perpetuate poverty and inequality, they can give their students the knowledge and tools to do their part in fighting oppression and injustice.

Studies show that the focus on short-term survival in people living in poverty has a detrimental effect on self-esteem and confidence (Foster, 2015) . Low-income students with low confidence struggle with literacy because they underestimate their intelligence and capabilities, significantly decreasing their motivation to push through complex reading material. It is well known that motivation is one of the most powerful tools for student success. However, when students see reading as a chore, they are met with a task they not only struggle with, but also want to avoid (Ambe, 2007). In order to increase motivation to read in struggling and reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds, ELA teachers need to engage these students' interests. For that to happen, the texts these students are asked to consume must have meaningful connections to their lives and experiences. While this is helpful for all students, using texts that reflect the lived experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds will show them that their experiences are valid and important, raising their confidence in their knowledge and boosting their motivation to read the material, even if it is difficult. The best way for ELA teachers to increase interest and motivation is to incorporate Young Adult Literature (YAL) into the curriculum. YAL is crucial to reaching struggling and reluctant readers from low-income families because these diverse texts often contain themes and experiences related to structural barriers and social inequity that these students can relate to and actually enjoy reading about. Using strategies with YAL that address structural barriers and other social justice issues, ELA teachers can bolster confidence and motivation in students who have struggled their entire academic career, and keep students from dropping out by opening their eyes to the power of literacy and encouraging them to finish strong and apply what they learn in the real world.

While many new teachers may be entering the field with good structural ideologies, it is important to recognize that many schools still have curricula that avoid using YAL, instead

choosing to emphasize canonical literature. This avoidance of diverse texts such as YAL is an indication that deficit beliefs are still present in much of our education system. Further study needs to be done to find solutions and create curricula that emphasize ideologies that recognize and respond to structural barriers faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. With the decline of literacy and the widening of the achievement gap in the United States, it is crucial that we continue to find ways to reach struggling and reluctant readers from disadvantaged backgrounds in our ELA classrooms. Teachers need to understand the effects of poverty and structural barriers on students so our lessons are responsive, not just to the needs of these students, but their lived experiences as well. By addressing the obstacles low-income students face on the path to success, all students will obtain the knowledge to take action of their own against the social injustices and inequities faced by so many.

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