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## The Adolescent and the Classical Novel - A Study of How Required Reading Affects the Reading Habits of Teenagers

### Introduction:

“Yes, that’s right. I own books, but don’t *read* them!” Montag, in shock, awaits Beatty’s explanation. “Don’t you see the beauty, Montag? I never read them. Not one book, not one chapter, not one page, not one paragraph. I *do* play with ironies, don’t I? To have thousands of books and never crack one, to turn your back on the lot and say: No. It’s like having a house full of beautiful women and, smiling, not touching...one. So, you see, I’m not a criminal at all” (Bradbury 1996, 171).

The quote above is copied from one of Ray Bradbury’s most famous novels *Fahrenheit 451*. In the universe of the novel, reading books is considered a crime as shown by Beatty’s statement “So, you see, I’m not a criminal at all”. While reading is not a crime in America, it is a problem many continue to worry about. According to the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), “Although many older students can read words, they often struggle to fully understand what they read” (2009, 1). In addition to the statement above, in the NIFL handbook for secondary school teachers What Content-Area Teachers Should Know About Adolescent Literacy, the introduction states, “Despite the call for today’s adolescents to achieve higher levels of literacy than previous generations, approximately 8.7 million fourth through twelfth grade students struggle with the reading and writing tasks that are required of them in school” (2007, 1). The handbook also

states that, “They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives” (2007, 1). This suggests that having literacy problems in high school will make dealing with life outside of school difficult from job hunting to understanding the fine print of a contract (Campbell et al. 2007, 9).

Thus, for my thesis topic, it was my intention to gather the ideas, thoughts, and opinions of senior level high school students, and their English teachers with regards to the literacy problems of high school students. More specifically, I was going to look at their thoughts on the required reading lists of their respective schools and reading in general. Being a lover of reading myself, I am disappointed when I hear about American high school students hardly reading let alone being unable to read on grade level. Thus, I would have asked senior level high school students about their reading habits and thoughts on reading to see if there is a better way to get students to read more, gain practice in comprehension of the material they are reading, and read on or above grade level. Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond my control I was unable to fully pursue my topic of interest in this method. Instead, this thesis will involve an expanded look at studies similar to the one proposed above; followed with a glance at current trends of what adolescents are reading by comparing the bestseller lists of major bookstore chains.

**Why:**

While this may sound like a topic more suited to and studied by psychologists, education specialists, and those of other social sciences, the field of anthropology provides another approach to researching the issue of literacy in America. After all, what is more human than the ability to read except the ability to speak in symbols that other people may or may not understand the meaning of? According to the American Anthropological Association’s website, “Anthropology [is] the study of both ancient and modern peoples”. Therefore, the issue of

literacy in all populations falls under the field of anthropology in addition to psychology and the other social sciences. Long gone are the days of teaching the next generation through word of mouth only. There is so much more that is written down than a single person can keep in his or her memory. If humans cannot read or have trouble reading, then the written word no longer has meaning and so much knowledge is lost even though it is still intact and available. It would be the equivalent of looking through a translucent piece of glass. One can see what is on the other side, but the image is distorted and what is on the other side is just something on the other side. The knowledge of what is exactly on the other side cannot be obtained.

**Objective:**

The purpose for this particular research is to gather the ideas, thoughts, and opinions of high school seniors and their teachers about novels on any required readings lists for their respective schools and about reading in general. The main objective is to see whether the majority of participants say that the required readings are fine the way they are or if there should be changes made to the curriculum. If the students and teachers believe there should be changes, then the next question is what kinds of changes should be implemented to increase the students' interest levels with regards to reading in and out of school. If the majority says yes to the need for change in the reading curriculum, then from the surveys and interviews one could create and introduce a new reading curriculum that contains more contemporary novels that hold the same literary merit that society attributes to the "classic" novels on the required reading lists.

**Background Research:**

In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) issued the findings from its study the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), which compared adult literacy in 2003 with adult literacy in 1992 as reported through the 1992 NAAL test. For the 2003 NAAL

assessment, the test was distributed to 19,714 adults. Adults in this case were defined as those sixteen and older. This sample is meant to represent the 200 million adults in America (Baer et al. 2006, 1-4).

The test itself consisted of a prose section, an information document section and a quantitative section. The potential scores ranged from 0-500 for each section and the ranks associated with a particular range of scores are as follows: Bellow Basic level, Basic Level, Intermediate Level, and Proficient Level. Percentage wise, more than 40 percent of participants ranked at the Intermediate Level for the prose and document portions of the test in both 1992 and 2003 while only 30 and 33 percent ranked at the Intermediate Level for the 1992 test and the 2003 test, respectively. With regards to the Proficient Level, the prose and document section saw a percentage drop from 15 percent to 13 percent while the percentage of Proficient Level participants stayed at 13 percent (Baer et al. 2006, 1-4).

When laid on a graph, the results of the NAAL test stated above form a normal distribution curve; most of the participant's scores were in the middle (the Basic and Intermediate Levels) and fewer scores landing in the extremes of the curve (Bellow Basic Level and Proficient Level). Had the NAAL test been a standardized test, such as the SAT Reasoning test, a resulting normal distribution curve is great because it means most of the participants are scoring at or above what is required of them. However, the NAAL is not a standardized test; it is an assessment test.

A standardized test is meant to compare results obtained from one population to an established standard. An assessment test on the other hand, is designed to evaluate the skill levels of participants without comparing them to a standard. Thus, the ideal distribution of an

assessment test, and therefore the NAAL test, would have most of the scores in the highest rated skill levels.

According to the results of the NAAL test, most of the participants have an Intermediate or Basic level of skill in literacy. While not an ideal distribution, the skills that are associated with these levels are necessary to surviving the adult world. However, so are the skills associated with the Proficient Level. The skills that the NAAL test associates with the Proficient Level, the highest level, are required in a number of jobs both blue collar and white collar jobs. The example skills listed in the report include “comparing viewpoints in two editorials”, interpreting a table about blood pressure, age, and physical activity”, and “computing and comparing the cost per ounce of food items”, all of which a person should be able to do by the time he or she is in high school and after high school (Baer et al. 2006, 1-4). Therefore, if adults finishing high school or who are just out of high school are not at the skill level to complete these kinds of tasks, then the next level to examine is the high school level to see how the communication of this necessary information might be in jeopardy.

In the United States, high school is the last form of structured education that is required by the government for students to attend. Therefore high school is the last chance for the country to pass on the information we as a country have deemed necessary for our students to learn before they are given the choice of continuing their education or joining the working world. Unfortunately, according to an article in “Reading Today” journal, “national and international assessments find with depressing regularity that, in general, U.S. adolescents have widespread problems with comprehending more challenging material” and that “College professors and employers say many young people come out of high school unready for the complexity of the literacy tasks they face” (Brozo et al. 2007, 12). Even though problems with literacy start in

earlier grades, the general high school curriculum is not structured to remedy the problem.

Therefore, the literacy problem continues from adolescence into adulthood. Otherwise the issue of literacy would not be a topic of such fevered discussion.

In the year 1999, the International Reading Association (IRA) issued a position statement on the issues of Adolescent Literacy. “Adolescents are being shortchanged. No one is giving adolescent literacy much press” (Moore et al. 1999, 1). For the rest of the position statement, the authors go through a list of questions posed to them as to why adolescent literacy is an issue. For example, one question listed was “*Shouldn’t adolescents already be literate?*” (Moore et al. 1999, 3) which is a fair question considering all of the attention on teaching children to read. A current example of this attention is the program “Hooked on Phonics” which is marketed to younger children. One of my personal examples was a program called Accelerated Reader in elementary school. For this program, all of the library books were given a different point value depending on the difficulty of the book. After reading a book, there was a test on the book and if you got eight out of ten questions right or more you received the points for the book. When you got so many points you received a ticket for a personal pan pizza at Pizza Hut.

According to the IRA, however, “there are developmental stages of reading and writing” (Moore et al. 1999, 3) and these stages are not completed at the same time or when children finish a certain grade; they continue on into middle and high school. The trick with middle and high school is that the need for reading guidance must compete with the need for students to gain “content knowledge” (Ehren 2009, 194). Content knowledge is the subject specific knowledge students learn throughout school. For instance, students learn about the periodic table in chemistry. The knowledge of the periodic table is content knowledge. Thus, there is a battle

between teaching students the reading skills they need to learn the content knowledge and teaching students the content knowledge itself in the secondary education system.

During my research, I came across a statement in one of the articles that may, at least partially, explain the drop off of reading instruction in middle and high schools; “the major difference between reading in grades K-5 and reading in grades 6-12 is the transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*.” (Lee and Spratley 2010, 2). This statement refers back to the question in the above paragraph from the Moore article, “Shouldn’t adolescents already be literate?”. Based on the philosophy of first learning to read then reading to learn, yes, adolescents should be literate because they would have already learned how to “read” in primary school. I put the word **read** in quotation marks because in the field of education the word **read** has multiple meanings and associations. For this paper, the two meanings that will be focused on are: **read**-to recognize the words on a page, and **read**-to understand what is being read.

A perfect example of the miscommunication regarding the definition of what it means to read lies in the handbook for secondary school teachers published by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) entitled What Content-Area Teachers Should Know About Adolescent Literacy by Campbell et al. In this handbook, Campbell makes the statement “Although many older students can read words, they often struggle to fully understand what they read” (Campbell et al. 2007, 9). With the next set of articles, I will elaborate on these two meanings of the word **read**.

The first article is by Kamhi, (1997) who makes a case for his idea of schools utilizing what he calls the narrow view of reading. In the article he states, “The fundamental problem with the broad view of reading is that it conflates two very different abilities—word recognition (word-level reading) and comprehension” (Kamhi 2009, 175). Under the broad view, emphasis is placed on both word recognition and comprehension which he says are two different skills that

cannot be taught or measured the same way. Under the narrow view, the education of reading would be limited to word recognition alone. According to Kamhi, this redirection of education would allow people to focus on the “true crisis in American education: knowledge deficits” (Kamhi 2009, 176). To paraphrase, Kamhi is in favor of the definition of **read** that involves knowing what a word is in primary education and focusing on content knowledge in secondary education. My questions for Kamhi then is “what about learning to understand what one is reading” and “what about those who do not learn word recognition early on in school”?

Continuing with Kamhi’s article, he shifts his focus slightly from the reading issue to the issue of knowledge deficits the knowledge being content knowledge (there goes the answer to my first question). In this part of the article he states, “By late elementary school and beyond, comprehension ability accounts for almost all of the variability in reading levels” (Kamhi 2009, 175). Therefore, by this statement, if a student has not gained the skills associated with word recognition by late elementary school, he or she will face problems in middle and high school because he or she will be expected to read to learn and already know how to read. Again, there is this underlying notion that students should know how to read by a certain point in their lives and be able to use those reading skills to comprehend what they read in their upper level classes and gain content knowledge. Based on the articles covered in this paper so far, this is not the case. Even into adulthood, people are lacking in their literacy skills.

In response to Kamhi’s article on the narrow view, there was an article written by Ehren (2009). In this article, she points out what she considers the flaws with Kamhi’s article regarding the issue of adolescent literacy. The major flaw she focuses on is that the narrow view separates the concept comprehension from the concept of reading as scholars define the term; “Another slippery slope in the disassociation of comprehension and reading is the notion that once students



can recognize words, reading instruction is over and domain knowledge acquisition takes over” (Ehren 2009, 193). This statement, again, refers back to the notion in education of transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn when a child reaches a certain point in their academic career. Instead of teaching students how to understand what they are reading, reading instruction stops after students have supposedly learned how to recognize words.

From these articles, I gather that within the education system there is a preconceived notion that after a certain point in a students’ life, the student is done learning to read and must read to learn. In addition, this presumption lies at the heart of some of the problems associated with reading. The best expression of how this philosophy has been taken to heart lies in Ehren’s article, “my fear, then, is that the narrow view of reading would make it easier for teachers to divorce reading from domain knowledge. I can hear secondary teachers now—“See, I told you I’m not a reading teacher!”” (Ehren 2009, 193). If this truly is the attitude of secondary teachers, that they do not have to teach reading, then my question for these teachers and Kamhi would be “how would students learn how to comprehend what they are reading if they are not taught in primary school, because of the focus on word recognition, or secondary school because the teachers are focusing on content knowledge”? This is a problem.

All academic subjects require a different set of skills to comprehend what is being taught in addition to knowing how to word recognition. If teachers end up focusing on just teaching the “What” of their subjects then all adolescents are in major trouble because they will not know how to understand the information taught to them. All this is teaching is how to memorize information on all levels rather than how to think for one’s self and come up with one’s own conclusions.

This conflict between which reading skills are taught and when they are taught is just one of the issues surrounding adolescent literacy. There are other issues that contribute to the problem of adolescent literacy and must be addressed in order to fully understand the problem and establish a potential solution. One of these issues is best exemplified by the novel The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy by Hirsch et al 2002. There was hardly an article I read for this paper that did not bring up the controversy surrounding this book.

The concept behind this dictionary was for it to serve as a reference book of the cultural references that exist in American culture because, according to Hirsch, “reading ability, then, depends not only on broad knowledge but also on shared knowledge” (Hirsch et al. 2002, xiv). Hirsch has a point in this statement; in order to fully understand what someone says or, for the purposes of this paper, what someone has written, one must know and understand the cultural references that exists within and influenced the literary piece. It is this shared knowledge that Hirsch feels suffers as a result of the falling levels of national literacy in America.

In the preface at the beginning of the dictionary Hirsch states, “reading is the most important academic skill and that there is a big reading gap between the haves and the have-nots. Reading skill is not just a key to a child’s success in school but also in the information age, to his or her chances in life.” (Hirsch et al. 2002, vii-viii). Therefore, not only are there problems with the instruction of reading to students at all levels, but there are also issues with the transfer of content knowledge, even cultural knowledge, to students of all levels. In addition, Hirsch’s statement reflects those of Campbell (2007) in the NIFL mentioned in the first paragraphs of this chapter. Reading is the key to so many aspects of life especially in today’s society it is embarrassing that this is still a problem.

Ultimately, this appears to be the formula for teaching students to read in American education: In elementary school, students are taught word recognition and they learn how to pronounce words and decode their meanings. After elementary school, there is a shift from teaching students how to read to making them read in order to learn the content knowledge of their academic subjects. However, experts, like Ehren and Torgesen, on adolescent literacy are saying that in middle and high school, the students are only somewhat being taught the reading skills they need to understand the content knowledge presented to them in their upper level classes. Therefore, if the secondary level students are not being taught the skills to comprehend the knowledge presented to them, then they are not learning what they need to in order to pass their classes. To take this argument a step further, according to Hirsch, the falling levels in national literacy are affecting America's ability to obtain and transmit cultural knowledge because this knowledge exists in reading mediums, which adolescents are having trouble understanding or are just not reading at all. This is a problem.

Due to the literacy problems stated above, "professionals, the federal govt. and now most states have started to place an enormous emphasis on reading" (Hirsch 2009, viii). For instance, in Ehren's article, she quotes the Director Emeritus, Dr. Torgesen as saying, "adolescent literacy professionals are trying to counter the popular and oft-quoted idea that before fourth grade, children are learning to read and after that they are reading to learn (Torgesen et al., 2007)" (Ehren 2009, 193). In this quote, we can see that in the realm of academia, scholars are attempting to reach into the heart of the matter by debating the presumption of learning to read then reading to learn. So, what efforts are being made on the state and government levels? This is the subject of the next paragraph.

One of the articles I found on the subject of solving national literacy problems at the government level was written by Haynes, 2007 in which she focuses on the different levels of literacy including adolescent literacy. For her article Haynes presents a list of steps to improve adolescent literacy and her recommended actions to transform these steps into workable policies (Haynes 2007, 7-12). A trend I noticed in all of these steps was that they call for actions at the state and district levels and creating standards for teachers and students. The problem with these steps is that only one called for input from the teachers and students, but even so, the recommendations for applying the step do not mention anything about teachers or students other than telling them what they must accomplish. Why is the input of the teachers and students not valued? It is the students who know if they are learning what is being taught to them and if they are reading or not. Also, it is the teachers who see their students everyday and would have a better idea about a student's reading issues than people at the state and district levels.

Another document I found with regards to solving the adolescent literacy problem featured more of Torgeson's ideas about solutions. In it he states, "Because of the variety and complexity of issues that affect current levels of reading proficiency among adolescents, significant improvements will be achieved only through a comprehensive effort involving changes in state- and district-level policies, improved assessments, more efficient school organization, more involved and effective leadership, and extensive professional development for all leaders and teachers" (Torgeson et al. 2007, 1). Once again, the methods proscribed to solve the adolescent literacy problem involve changes at the district and state levels. Though I agree with Torgeson's statement here and in previous paragraphs, there is still no mentioning of investigating the teacher and student levels. Just changing a policy is not going to solve the entire problem.

However, further inspection of the document revealed a section entitled “Motivation and engagement” (Torgeson et al. 2007, 9). Under this section Torgeson states, “There is strong evidence that motivation and interest in reading decline after the early elementary grades” (Torgeson et al. 2007, 9). In addition, he states that, “This decline in motivation has two unfortunate consequences, both of which have a direct impact on the growth of reading proficiency in adolescents. The first is that students with low motivation and interest in reading do not read as much as students with stronger motivation (Baker & Wigfield, 1995; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997)... The second consequence is that students who are less motivated to read are usually less engaged with their text while they are reading” (Torgeson et al. 2007, 10). To paraphrase, at some point in elementary school, interest in reading declines and does not pick back up in secondary schools. In addition, the lack of motivation has negative impacts on reading in secondary school. It is a downward spiral and I have yet to see signs of a safety net to break up the spiral. While making an effort at the elementary level is important, I think having something in secondary schools to ignite or even reignite this initial interest in reading would be beneficial.

The section of the Torgeson article on motivation and engagement is one of the few instances I have found where a program for increasing literacy levels discussed a topic that could be applied on the student level. This topic is also the driving force behind this thesis paper. I believe that if students have the chance to read about subjects they are interested or just read something that can engage them in general, then they are more likely to want to read more about it and stop looking at reading as a school assignment. Instead students will see reading as something to do besides at school.

I am not the only scholar to focus in on researching the reading interests of adolescents. In my research I have located many other authors of articles that focus on how adolescents view reading and what they are reading outside of the classroom. For example, in a book by Hidi et al. (1992), she posts a different theory toward increasing literacy levels. According to her research, “Research on individual interests has shown that children as well as adults who are interested in a topic or an activity pay more attention, persist for longer periods of time, and acquire more knowledge than subjects without such interests” (Hidi et al. 1992, 217). Based on this theory, if a high school student reads something they are interested in, then he or she should retain more knowledge and want to continue reading similar books. This is a good starting point for attempting to engage students in reading. After all, if a person likes, for example, a television show then that person would continue to watch that show.

In support of Hidi’s theory, there was a survey distributed by the National Education Association (NEA) and analyzed by Pamela Paul examining teenagers and their reading habits. The survey was conducted by Hart Research Associates, which is an independent public opinion research firm whose clients include politicians, non profit associations, and universities including Duke University, George Washington University, and the College Board Association. The survey itself targeted twelve to eighteen year olds across America and asked questions about their reading habits and interests. In the results, analyst Paul states, “teens consider reading to be the most important skill a young person needs to be successful in life” (Paul 2001, 12-13). At this point in the paper, there have been examples of teachers, students, and administrative officials have stated that reading is a crucial skill in life. If all levels agree to this, then what is the problem regarding adolescent literacy and what is the solution?

In the survey mentioned above, the results showed that “Forty-one percent say they've read more than 15 books during the past year, almost half of which were for their own pleasure. An additional 38 percent of teens say they've read between six and 10 books this past year” (Paul 2001, 12-13). Based on this survey, adolescents are reading in their spare time. Therefore, there must be another factor affecting literacy skills. As mentioned in previous paragraphs, there is a difference between reading a book and understanding a book. While this survey does not investigate this issue, it does tell experts that this is not the first issue that requires attention.

Another article that supports the NEA survey indirectly is by Clark (2008) where she states that adolescent's not only have time to read but also like to read series books based on the responses she received to an online request she sent out to schools across the nation. “High school age teens don't have time to read, let alone read series books. An accurate statement? Not based on what I heard from older teens and high school librarians in North Carolina, Michigan, Kentucky, California, and states in between who responded to my online request for information on older teens and series books.” (Clark 2008, 22). Again, here is a paper stating that adolescents are reading. Therefore, if the issue is not whether adolescents are reading or not, then the issue may be with the content of the novels read in school and those read in an adolescents leisure time. Another example of support already stated was from Torgeson about the need for an increase in motivation and engagement.

Throughout the rest of her article, Clark goes into some of the more recent popular series novels such as Harry Potter and the Twilight novels which were popular and therefore read by enough people to have movies made out of them and have sub-cultures based off of the fandom of these novels all over the internet. These are not the only novels with a following, there are many out there that adolescents are reading in their spare time. Thus, my question is why is the

American education system not taking advantage of the interests in these novels? I agree with Hirsch's idea of having a core set of literature that students read or what one article in the Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy calls, "the classic literature canon" (Goodson 2007, 1), but why not combine that with more contemporary novels as they work their way into American culture? As these novels become a part of American culture they become a part of the cultural literacy that Hirsch champions.

Also, if it is known that adolescents enjoy reading certain novels or even particular genres, it would be a disservice of the education system to the students to not take advantage of these novels to promote reading in general. According to Harris et al. (1989), "Educators must recognize, therefore, that academic skills do not develop in a vacuum. One acquires reading skills by reading something that engages the imagination and excites interest, a principle endorsed by more and more reading experts" (Harris and Baskin 1989, 31). As stated above, this principle of engagement has been repeated by experts such as Torgeson, Clark, and Hidi and institutions such as the IRA.

Should this principle of engagement be applied to the American education system, there is already a study similar to mine done by Koss and Teale (2009) where they compiled a catalogue of Young Adult books from published from 1999 to 2005 to look at some of the more recent trends in Young Adult literature which, as the name suggests, is target to adolescent readers. One example of a trend they found was a shift from "coming-of-age novels to teen issues such as finding oneself, fitting in" (Koss and Teale 2009, 569). Based on this trend alone, Koss and Teale state, "Reading allows teens to play with their identities in a safe and controlled manner, and to explore who they want to be in this ever-changing world" (Koss and Teale 2009, 569). From the research done for this project, reading is apparently important in the life of an



adolescent. Yet the education system seems to be missing this information. Adolescents do read novels outside of school. They find reading to be an important skill. In addition, there are all ready studies done investigating what adolescents are reading and, in some studies, why.

Thus, if educators pick up on what adolescents are reading in contemporary society they will have some new material to work with and be able to come up with new solutions to the problems of adolescent literacy. According to Hirsch's dictionary of cultural literacy there have been issues with literacy since 1965 (Hirsch 2002, xii). The year of the writing of this thesis is 2009; that is a forty-four year difference. I think it is time to try something new because the old methods are not working.

One final snippet of Koss and Teale's study is when they state, "This knowledge [about what adolescents are reading and why] can be useful to teachers and school librarians in deciding on books they choose to include in their classroom, school, and public libraries, and can help them be more aware of what is and what is not being represented in the literature" (Koss and Teale 2009, 570). Therefore, there is current data already available for educators to utilize and in this statement they have already provided a use for that information that can be implemented in schools of all levels.

What I have found in this research can be summarized as such: within the reading debate there is a prevailing notion that once students reach a certain grade, about the end of elementary school, they are done learning how to read and must then read in order to learn the content knowledge of their academic subjects. Within this content knowledge is the cultural knowledge that Hirsch says is not being taught and that literacy level are failing partially because of the lack of that knowledge. When dealing with content knowledge, there is a dilemma of students not

comprehending the content knowledge because they are not being taught how to comprehend what they are being taught.

To make matters worse, each subject has a different method for comprehending the knowledge that goes along with the subject. This contradiction makes reading difficult for adolescents and may turn them off of reading altogether. However, research shows that those who read something that engages them or speaks to a person's interest are able to retain more of the information and understand subjects related to that interest.

Therefore, to offset the discrepancies of secondary educators to teach both content knowledge and the skills to comprehend the knowledge, educators may want to look toward adding more reading sources that appeal to the interests of adolescents to provide a medium for adolescents to apply what they are learning to something they are familiar with.

**Hypothesis:**

Based on the research already done, the hypothesis driving this research is that the majority of those surveyed/interviewed will say that there needs to be a modernization of required reading curriculum. The reasoning behind this hypothesis is that the novels schools usually require their students to read are not engaging, motivating, or gaining the interests of the students. In my education experience, when given the choice, I read novels in and out of school that I thought would be interesting to read. So why can it not be the same for other students.

**Research Setting:**

All research was to be performed at two local high schools. The surveys for the research were to be distributed and filled out by participating students during their English classes. Interviews were also be held at the school. However, the interviews were going to be done on separate days from the day of survey distribution either before or after school so as not to disrupt

classes and to minimize travel requirements for the participating teachers. If before or after class was not feasible, then the teachers could decide on a time and place that worked for them and for me.

### **Research Methods:**

Based on background research of studies on reading in high school and concerns about the literacy levels of adolescents, a survey was constructed and distributed to students in senior level English classes. Interview questions were also chosen for English teachers at these high schools. The purpose of these two methods is to gather a sampling of what senior level high school students and their teachers think about required readings in high schools.

Part of the why these schools were chosen is they are either located in close proximity to the University of South Florida or along the Tampa Hartline bus routes. The other reason for choosing these schools is one is a high performing school and one is a low performing school. The basis for determining which schools were high performing and low performing was the grades given to the schools through the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

The purpose of the FCAT test is to “measure achievement of the Sunshine State Standards” (FDoE) which are Florida’s academic standards. Based on the students’ achievement of these standards, all Florida public schools are given a grade based on the scale of A, B, C, D, and F “A” being the highest grade and “F” being the lowest grade. Depending on the grade each school receives, the school receives a financial package. For example, “Schools that improve a letter grade or receive an “A” are eligible for School Recognition funds of \$100 per student” according to [http://www.flgov.com/a\\_plus\\_plan](http://www.flgov.com/a_plus_plan).

The objective of this reward system is to increase the amount of students in Florida’s public schools who test at or above the Sunshine State Standards. According to a study done by

Dr. Greene, “An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program”, the effectiveness of the A+ Plan for education is statistically significant in that the lower a grade a school receives in one year the greater the improvement rates in the students’ test scores in the next year. For this study, Greene compared the results of the 1999 FCAT of 2392 schools in Florida with their 2000 FCAT scores for the purpose of observing the effectiveness of the A+ program with regards to schools that receive an “F” based on their FCAT scores. As stated above, the program has proven effective in raising FCAT scores and thus the students at those schools have been improving in their academics.

Henceforth, the FCAT grades provided a suitable indicator of whether a school is a high performing or a low performing school. If the schools receive a grade of C or higher then the schools are performing on par with standards and are therefore average. Ergo, B or A schools are performing higher than average while a D or F school is performing lower than average. Thus, the high performing school is an A or B school while a low performing school is a D or F school.

For the initial project, surveys were to be submitted to at least one English class at the Honors/AP/IB level, the mainstream level, and the ESE level for a total of six classes. Survey data was to be analyzed using the SPSS Statistics Program to sort through the data and determine what the majority of participants think about their high school reading curriculums and reading in general. The surveys take, at the most, no more time than that of the English class period itself, which is between forty and fifty minutes.

In addition to the surveys, there were going to be at least 6 interviews with the teachers of the classes to which the surveys are distributed for their opinions on the survey and the required reading lists they use for their classes. The interviews would have been recorded with an audio recorder if permission is granted and then transcribed by myself should the interviewees grant

me permission to do so. Regardless of whether I can use the audio recorder, I was going to take notes during the interviews unless the participants say otherwise. Any information gathered about the identity of the interviewees would be destroyed after the interview. Data gathered through the interviews was to be compared to the responses to the survey as well as to the responses of other interviewees. Interviews were going to take place at the schools to minimize travel requirements and each interview was to last approximately one hour.

In total, it was estimated that 246 participants would be included in this study; accounting for up to forty students per class, six classes worth of students, and the teachers of each of those classes if they all volunteer for the interviews. The data gathered from the participants was then to be analyzed utilizing the means stated above to see if there are any patterns. For instance, there may be a pattern of what genre of novels are popular with a majority of high school students or what genre that they would like to see more of on required reading lists. As stated above, however, these methods could not be utilized. Therefore, the results of this project are a compilation of information gathered from various studies; all of which are public secondary sources that focus on adolescent literacy and adolescent interest. In addition, the results will also include primary research done utilizing secondary sources.

**Ethics:**

This is a minimal risk project that would not ask any personal questions other than age, sex, and opinions on reading and reading curriculums. Informed consent was to be obtained from all participants involved in the study including students, parents, teachers, and necessary administrative officials. Those who did not consent or did not have parental consent would not be allowed to participate in the study and would not be mentioned in the study other than to state that they have requested not to participate.

**Secondary Research Results:**

Due to circumstances beyond my control, the research for this project was unable to be completed. Therefore, the results of this project will consist of a compilation of the results of other studies similar to the one proposed in this paper. To begin this section, I will provide a brief summary of the NEA, Clark, and Koss and Teale studies mentioned in the background chapter of this paper. In addition to these, I will be analyzing other similar studies to widen the scope of information related to adolescent literacy and make connections based on those results. To these results, I will add a brief segment of my own research regarding what adolescents are reading based on secondary resources. As a final addition, I will discuss some studies where there was an attempt made to improve adolescent literacy, what their results were, and where those studies could lead in the future.

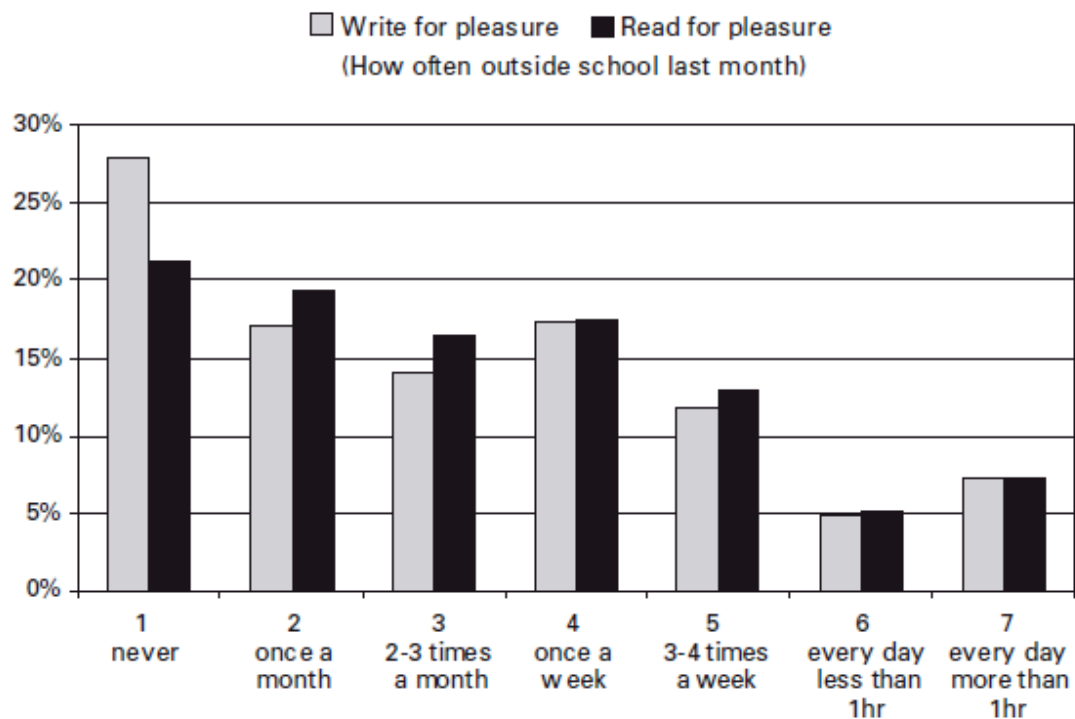
In my background chapter, I mention three studies/articles I would like to mention again as a lead-in to this section. Since the purpose of this project was to gather information about adolescent's reading habits and interests, I will start with the survey by the NEA. As mentioned in the background chapter, of those who took part in the survey, "Forty-one percent say they've read more than 15 books during the past year...an additional 38 percent of teens say they've read between six and 10 books this past year" (Paul 2001, 12-13). Based on this survey it becomes apparent that adolescents are reading novels to some extent.

The other two previously mentioned articles I want to bring up again are those by Clark, Koss and Teale. These articles focus more on what kinds of novels adolescents are reading as opposed to if they are reading novels. From these articles, it is apparent that adolescents prefer reading novels from the mystery or horror genres. In addition, they are drawn to coming of age novels or novels about fitting in. These last two types of novels are appropriate because the period of adolescents involves the search for who one is and transitioning from being a child to

being an adult. These articles are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg, however. Therefore, in the next few paragraphs their premises will be expanded upon.

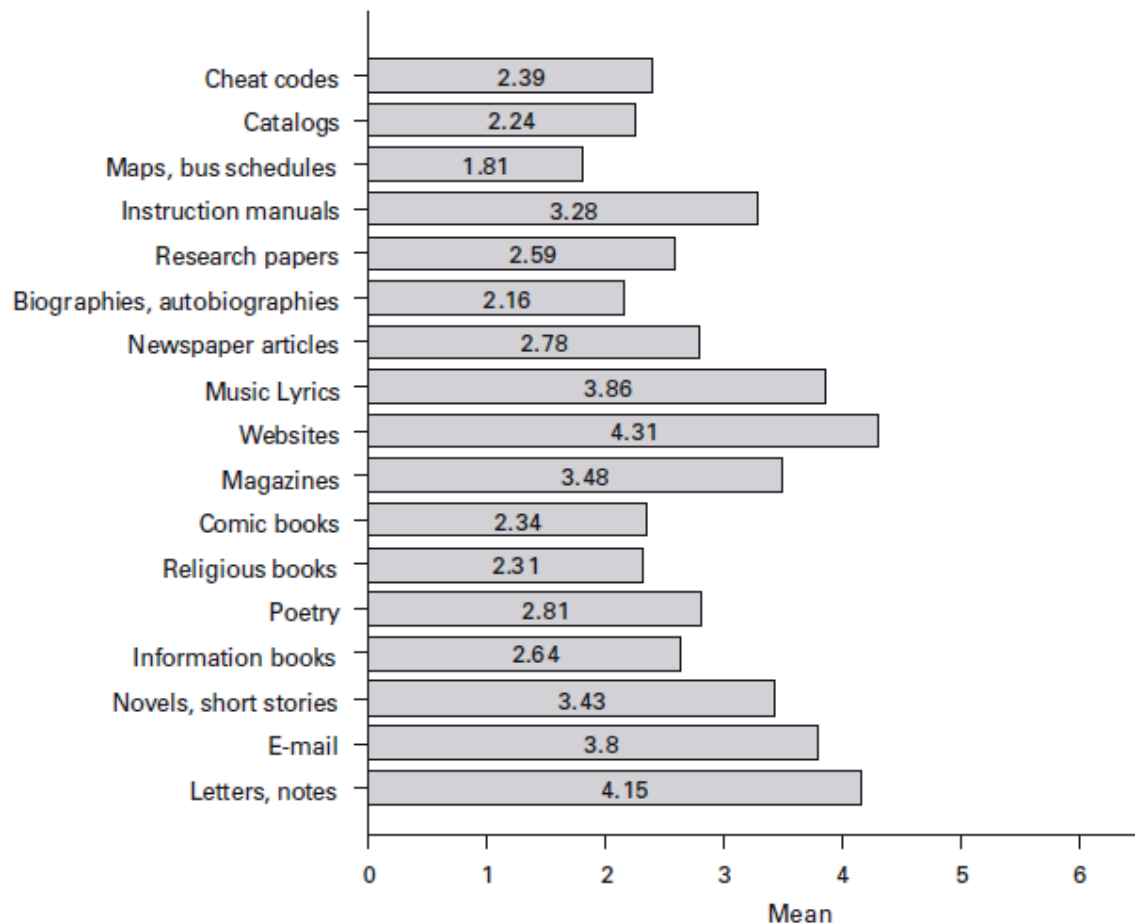
The first premise I will cover is that generated from the NEA study. As stated earlier, according to the NEA survey, adolescents admit to reading novels. Another study by Moje et al. relays a similar idea. Out of the 716 adolescents they interviewed, approximately twenty-two percent said that they never read outside of school. However, this means that seventy-eight percent of those interviewed read outside of school. In addition, based on the choices the participants could select when answering that question, that seventy-eight percent read outside of school at least once a month. For a full breakdown of the options, please see Figure 1 (Moje et al. 2008, 122).

**FIGURE 1** *Frequency of Reading and Writing for Pleasure — Percent of Student Responses (n = 716)*



Unlike the results of the NEA survey, however, this particular question from Moje's study did not specify if the students were reading novels outside of school. Instead it asked if the participants were reading outside of school in general. Further in their survey though, Moje asks the participants the frequency of which they read various reading mediums outside of school. This chart was based on a Likert scale ranging from one to six; one being the least frequently read and six being the most frequently read. Their results are shown in Figure 2 below (Moje et al 2008, 124).

**FIGURE 2** *Average Responses of Frequency Outside School Reading by Text/Genre (n = 716)*



While the categories of novels and short stories is not the most frequently read of the options listed above, they are also not the least frequently read. Out of these seventeen options,



novels and short stories are the 6<sup>th</sup> most frequently read medium of reading. Based on the NEA and Moje studies, adolescents are reading novels in and out of school. Therefore, as stated in the background chapter, whether adolescents are reading novels or not is not the issue that requires immediate attention. Thus, in the next section the discussion will focus on what kinds of novels adolescents are reading and trends in young adult literature.

From the articles by Clark, Koss and Teale, it has already been established that some of the types of novels that adolescents are interested in include but are not limited to those of the mystery and horror genres. In addition, coming of age and fitting in novels are also of great interest. Another article of interest is that of Ellis who summarizes the evolution of young adult literature as a genre.

In Ellis' article, he states some of the major fluctuations that have occurred in the realm of adolescent literacy from the 1960s to the 1980s. The first change he mentions is that, "Up through the 1950s and into the '60s, most books so identified were didactic and formulaic, presenting characters who moved through predictable plots and reasonably safe settings. Then came the social revolution often simply referred to as "the 60s," with its call for "relevance" and its focus on various shortcomings of society" (Ellis 1985, 94). With this change, young adult novels were closer to adult novels with regards to content. Since adolescents are in the process of transitioning from children to adults, the availability of novels that are more relevant to an adolescent's reality generates a greater interest in such novels. For example, referring back to the Koss and Teale study, adolescents are drawn to novels that involve coming of age stories; where the protagonist is transitioning from one part of their lives to another.

Despite the shift in the 1960s from a conservative effort regarding content to a more liberal one, at the time of Ellis's article he notes a shift back towards a more conservative

approach to adolescent literature. According to Ellis, there was a search to find the “thin dividing line” that separates young adult novels from adult novels (Ellis 1985, 95). These shifts in what content can be utilized and still keep a novel with a young adult rating are a factor to keep in mind when determining what adolescents are interested in. Like the fields of politics and economics, adolescent interest shifts as the social climate changes. However, Ellis cite some novels that, “are "withstanding the test of time” as novels that are of interest to adolescents (Ellis 1985, 97). These novels are listed bellow in List 1.

- Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl
- The Catcher in the Rye
- Johnny Tremain
- The Light in the Forest
- Lord of the Flies
- Old Yeller
- The Outsiders
- A Separate Peace
- Seventeenth Summer

**List 1** (Ellis 1985, 97)

If these novels have truly stood the test of time, then these novels are an excellent starting point for determining what kinds of novels are of interest to adolescents regardless of the cultural factors that change over time.

Another article regarding adolescent interest is by McBroom. In his article, McBroom provides a summarized look at the results of various studies done regarding reading interests.

Some of these results include:

- “Boys have a narrower range of reading interests and prefer such subjects as adventure, outdoor life, sports, and science fiction”
- “Girls prefer sentimental and romantic stories and are more inclined than boys to share good books with friends, seeing reading as a social opportunity”
- “Studies indicate girls will read boys' books, but the reverse is not true”
- “In general, all adolescents prefer narration”
- “Popular adult novels, novels with media tie-ins, and those with humanistic concerns are frequently cited as favorites”
- “Adolescents like science fiction or fantasy”

- A predominant theme is “the maturing adolescent, the quest for adulthood...self discovery”

**List 2** (McBroom 1981, 75-76)

These results reflect those from Clark, Koss and Teale as well as add a few more genres that have not previously been stated. For example, McBroom cites the results of studies that divided their data by gender preferences. While it is unlikely teachers would purposefully choose one novel for females to read and another for males to read, there are factors that transcend the gender barrier. For instance, “all adolescents prefer narration”. If that is the case then this one factor in whether a novel is interesting or not opens a whole slew of novels to choose from as narration novels exist in all categories. Also, I would like to point out that in McBroom’s article one of the results listed was that a predominant theme in young adult novels was “the maturing adolescent, the quest for adulthood” which can be paraphrased as “coming of age” being a predominant theme as stated by Koss and Teale. In addition to these results, one can now add the genres of science fiction and fantasy to Clark’s list of genres adolescents are interested in.

In addition to summarizing the results of reading interest studies, McBroom also writes about some of the approaches taken by researchers to utilize young adult novels in the classroom. One of these studies examined extensive reading (maximum number of books; minimum discussion) versus intensive reading (minimum number of books; maximum discussion) in class. It was found that students received more enjoyment out of extensive reading and still retained the same amount of information as intensive reading. Moving along the thread of enjoyment, McBroom cites a study where students were encouraged to read young adult novels to associate reading with pleasure. The final study listed states that “YA novels can be used as effectively as the classics for reading and studying the novel as a genre” (McBroom 1981, 76-77). Ultimately, what all of the studies mentioned by McBroom promote the use of young adult novels in the

classroom because it motivates the students and utilizing young adult novels does not take away from the learning experience.

With the studies listed my McBroom in mind, I will now shift from examining what novels adolescents are interested in reading to what attempts have been made in the educational system to address the adolescent literacy issue. However, before examining the attempts made to solve the adolescent literacy problem, I will first introduce an article by Jacobs where she analyzes the “crisis” (Jacobs 2008, 7) of adolescent literacy and the actions taken regarding said crisis in an effort to put the crisis into perspective.

In her article, Jacobs states that after the results of studies done by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1985) were released. According to these studies, the literacy capabilities of adolescents had either flat-lined over the years or decreased; causing the issue of adolescent literacy to be labeled as a crisis that required immediate attention out of “concern about the ability of the nation’s youth to participate productively in a workforce that was facing an increasingly complex world economy” (Jacobs 2008, 7-8). Further into her article, Jacob states that in response to these data the Department of Education and multiple academic groups established various statements and programs regarding the issue of adolescent literacy (Jacobs 2008, 8-11).

For the rest of her article, Jacobs give an overview of the history regarding the issue of adolescent literacy while examining the issues surrounding adolescent literacy; many of which have been covered in the background chapter of this paper. Some of the issues that should sound familiar are debate over when a student should be taught the different reading skills such as word recognition and reading comprehension and what the role of secondary school teachers is

regarding reading (Jacobs 2008, 16-20). These are the same issues raised by the articles by Kahmi and Ehren.

After placing the adolescent literacy debate in its context, Jacobs establishes a list of four issues that need to be addressed and how to address them to reduce the crisis of adolescent literacy. These issues can be summarized as such: the learning reading comprehension skills need to begin in primary school after word recognition has been achieved, reading comprehension needs to continue into secondary education, and the roles of primary teachers, secondary teachers, content knowledge teachers, and reading specialists need to be defined so there are no gaps in curriculum for learning to read (Jacobs 2008, 21-24). Without these confusions, all students will have the chance to learn the skills they need to read at their respective grade levels. In addition, more emphasis can be placed on getting students to read more and keep improving rather than trying to figure out when various reading skills should be taught.

Like the end of McBroom's article, the practice guide created by Kamil et al. is the result of a compilation of various studies regarding adolescent literacy. From these studies, the authors of the guide establish a series of recommendations for improving adolescent literacy. Essentially, this guide is a summary of all of the articles mentioned in this paper in addition to the assessments made by the researcher regarding the issue of adolescent literacy. In summation of Kamil's guide: 1) reading is an extremely important skill for all students to master. 2) Reading is a skill that requires years of practice to master. 3) There is confusion about when students should learn the various reading skills and who should be teaching those skills. 4) Attempts at implementing reading programs have targeted only a small portion of the student body instead of the problem inherent in the educational structure (Kamil et al. 2008, 4-5).

As stated in the previous paragraph, Kamil's guide combines the content of the other articles mentioned in this paper. Further evidence of this repetition exists in the recommendations made in the guide. These recommendations are (List 3):

- "Provide explicit vocabulary instruction"
- "Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction"
- "Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation"
- "Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning"
- "Make available intensive individualized interventions for struggling readers that can be provided by qualified specialists"

**List 3** (Kamil et al. 2008, 9-10)

In other words, the recommendations made by the practice guide are the same as those made by Kahmi, Ehren, Torgeson, Jacobs, etc. Figure out whose job is to teach what, make sure all of the required reading skills are taught, get the students interested in reading so they can build up their skills, and be sure to provide the necessary help to those who are struggling.

Up to this point of the paper, we have covered the various segments of adolescent literacy as well as some of the solutions academics have created to improve adolescent literacy. The last article I will cover before delving into my own research as to what types of novels adolescents are currently interested involves an examination of literacy plans implemented by various states after being assisted by "professional development institutes offered in 2001 and 2002 by the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices" (Snow et al. 2008, 211).

According to Snow, "the institutes' curriculum focused on the skills teachers need to provide initial literacy instruction (phonological awareness, phonics, fluency) and to prepare students during the primary and postprimary grades for later literacy development (supporting oral language skills, vocabulary development, comprehension, and world knowledge) (Snow et

al. 2008, 212-213). All of the subjects the state representatives were instructed in are the same that have been stated throughout this paper; word recognition and reading comprehension.

In this article, the literacy plans based on the lessons of the institute of four states were examined; Florida, Louisiana, Maine and New Jersey. Under the cross comparison section of the article are some of the steps taken that were similar between the states. Two of the steps listed were, “professional development is a central focus” and all of the schools’ plans included modifications of the standards for student performance and teacher preparation (Snow et al. 2008, 221-227). In response to these plans, Snow states that steps taken by these four states are a step in the right direction and that there is now an acknowledgement that reading instruction must continue into secondary school (Snow et al. 2008, 227). I am, however, disappointed in the efforts made by the schools. Instead of focusing on restructuring the reading curriculum to cover all of the skills required for reading, the states emphasize increasing the education of teachers and adjusting standards.

As of this point in the paper, the research into what others have studied is concluded. From this point on, the results are gained from the research done by me into what novels adolescents are reading currently. The findings of this research are then compared to a list of novels recommended for adolescents by a branch of the American Library Association known as the Young Adult Library Services Association. Following these results will be a conclusion of what has been stated in this paper regarding adolescent literacy.

### **Primary Research Results:**

Since I could not utilize the methods stated in the methods section of this paper, I decided to compare a list of novels recommended for adolescent readers (ages 12-18) by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) with the young adult top ten best seller lists of two

major book store chains; Barnes & Noble and Borders. Before comparing these lists, I would like to point out some details regarding the choices as to which lists to compare.

Beginning with YALSA, a purpose of this organization is to establish a committee whose job is to annually create a list of “The Best Books for Young Adults”. According to their website the committee, “each year selected and annotated a list of significant adult and young adult books, as well as chooses a list of top ten titles from the full list. It is a general list of fiction and nonfiction titles selected for their proven or potential appeal to the personal reading tastes of the young adult”. In addition to this statement, the YALSA website includes a list of qualifications to become a member of the committee. That list is featured bellow in Figure 3.

#### Qualifications:

- Current membership in YALSA
- Experience in evaluating library materials, such as relevant course work, on the job materials evaluation experience, writing reviews and/or relevant articles, previous selection committee experience, etc.
- Ability to attend both ALA's Midwinter Meeting and Annual Conference during your term of appointment on the committee.
- Ability to dedicate a significant amount of time to seeking out and reading relevant titles.
- No conflicts of interest in accordance with YALSA's Award & Selection Committee Conflict of Interest Policy.
- Good time management and organizational skills
- High ethical standards
- Previous service on a YALSA committee/jury/taskforce is preferred.

#### **Figure 3 (YALSA)**

While I commend the YALSA on its attempts to establish a list of adults for adolescents to read, there is a flaw to their method. The Best Books committee contains no adolescent members. The recommendations are made by a committee of people who a) must be a member of YALSA and b) must have prior experience in “evaluating library materials” (YALSA). These two qualifications alone eradicate the possibility of an adolescent being a part of the committee.



With this sentiment in mind, I examined the young adult best seller lists of two major bookstore chains and compared them to the top ten lists from the YALSA. If one wants to know what adolescents are reading, a good place to start is to see what they are buying. Ergo, with this data I constructed a table comparing the top ten of every list (See Table 1).

<b>Young Adult Library Services Association 2010</b>	<b>Borders Best Sellers 4/07/2010</b>	<b>Barnes &amp; Noble Best Sellers 4/07/2010</b>
Demon's Lexicon	The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner	The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner
The Orange Houses	Fang (A Maximum ride novel)	The Reckoning (Darkest Power Series)
The Great Wide Sea	Eclipse	The Reckoning
The Reformed Vampire Support Group	Breaking Dawn	Burned (House of Night Series)
Alligator Bayou	The Return: Shadow Souls	Spirit Bound (Vampire Academy)
Stitches: A Memoir	These Boots are made for Stalking	Will Grayson, Will Grayson
When You Reach Me	Twilight	The Hunger Games (The Hunger Games series)
Marcelo in the Real World	Catching Fire	The Twilight Saga Collection
Lips Touch: Three Times	The Hunger Games	Eclipse
Written in Bone: Buried Lives of Jamestown and Colonial Maryland	Burned	Fang (Maximum Ride series)

**Table 1**

When examining Table 1, it becomes clear that there is a disconnect between what academics are saying adolescents should read and what adolescents are actually reading. While

the best seller lists of the bookstores do not match exactly, they have more titles in common than either of them do with the list from the YALSA.

**Conclusions:**

For the conclusion section of this paper, I have summarized the assessments made throughout this paper for quick reference as well as added overall thoughts regarding the matter of adolescent literacy. In addition, a portion of this conclusion will be dedicated to a brief reflection on the process of completing this study and thoughts about what could be done in the future.

At the beginning of this paper, it was stated that there are concerns about the lack of literacy skills in adolescents. Studies into this matter have confirmed that adolescents are not leaving high school with the reading skills they need for the jobs and/or colleges they apply to; especially the more advance jobs that require skilled or specialized workers. While there is a general consensus that adolescent literacy is an issue, there is a lot of debate involved in the issue of adolescent literacy. Some of the major debates revolve around what reading skills to teach at what grade level and what is expected of teachers with regards to reading at all grade levels. Another major debate is what content should be taught along with reading skills.

One factor that serves as the focus of this project is lack of motivation and engagement from adolescents with regards to reading. In many of the solutions to the issue of adolescent literacy, the input of adolescents is neglected. A driving belief of this project is that if schools want to engage students in reading, they would be doing a great help for themselves to find out what kinds of novels adolescents are interested in. Despite these concerns regarding adolescent literacy, studies have found evidence of adolescents reading outside of school. When examined further, these studies have found that novels are a prominent medium for reading amongst

recreational readers. Since the major issue of adolescent literacy is not if students are reading outside of school or not, focus can be shifted to what the students are reading.

Based on multiple studies, I have compiled a short list of some of the types of novels adolescents like to read. These novels include (List 4):

- Coming of age novels
- Novels about fitting in
- Series novels
- Mystery
- Horror
- Science fiction
- Fantasy
- Novels written in a narration style

**List 4**

Fortunately, these studies into what adolescents are interested in reading have not gone unnoticed. As shown by the studies listed by McBroom and the existence of YALSA, there are efforts being made to incorporate young adult novels into the education realm with some positive results. However, despite these efforts, there exists a disconnect between what committees say are the best books for adolescents and what adolescents are actually reading. In addition, even with all of the research done regarding how to solve the adolescent literacy issue, states are not taking any of the repeated recommendations and incorporating them into their education policies. Ultimately, there are solutions out there to solve the adolescent literacy issue and steps are being made in the right direction. However, it will be some time before the results of these states are known and further steps taken.

**Reflections:**

In the beginning of this paper, I mentioned how there is almost nothing more human than the ability to read and understand the written symbols we call words. After doing this research, I see that the issue of reading exceeds that sentiment and is not only human, but is now a major

skill in order to survive in the present day world. Should I continue with this study or this study be recreated, I recommend preparing for data collection in the spring and executing data collection in the fall to avoid clashing with end of the year tests. Also, involving more schools is a plus to increase the range of potential responses.

In addition, as an addendum to this study, it is recommended that from the answers to the survey and interview questions be utilized to compile a list of novels that fit the various interests of those who participate. The constructed list can then be utilized in a different study to see what effects the change in curriculum material has in and out of the classroom. This study has a lot of untapped potential and like the adolescents who are the subject of this study, it too will one day come of age and mature into adulthood.

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