
CHOOSING WORDS WISELY: INFLUENCES ON LITERATURE SELECTION IN OKLAHOMA CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

The study explores the challenges English teachers in Oklahoma’s secondary schools face when including diverse perspectives in their classroom literature selections. There is a disconnect between state standards that encourage inclusivity and the pressures from the local community, including conservative opposition to DEI initiatives, increasing political restrictions on curriculum content, and resource shortages. Through interviews, two English teachers explain how they work through these tensions, aiming to diversify the curriculum while also managing the expectations of more conservative viewpoints. Despite the challenges, the experienced English teachers actively strive to provide students with opportunities for self-reflection and exposure to diverse perspectives. Findings indicate a pressing need for increased institutional support, particularly in securing funding for contemporary and multicultural texts, and clearer guidance on navigating political and community pressures. Expanding thematic teaching approaches, such as integrating literature with broader discussions on social issues and fostering collaboration between educators, administrators, and local stakeholders, could help mitigate these barriers. Strengthening these areas would create more inclusive, critical-thinking classrooms that align with the intentions of state standards while addressing the realities teachers face.

Keywords: English curriculum, high schools, text selection influences, teacher choice, text selection practices, literary canon, non-canonical literature, controversial texts, teacher expertise

Introduction & Literature Review

I grew up in Oklahoma’s public schools, where I did not read one book by a non-white author or non-canonical text in class that I did not otherwise stumble upon in my outside reading. Now, as an aspiring English educator, I find myself asking what books make it into our classrooms and what stories are left on the shelves. We know that literature selection is an intricate dance of state standards, teacher passion, and the shifting tides of local politics and culture. As I prepare to step into the teaching world, I want to understand the “how” and “why” of literature choices and explore what these choices reveal about our collective values and aspirations. I am also considering my values regarding how I can create a classroom that honors diverse voices and encourages meaningful connections with each story we read. My research isn’t just about books; it’s about the stories we believe are worth sharing and the voices we choose to amplify in classrooms across the state. In exploring the influences that educators, including myself, will face, I aim to highlight a

process that prepares students for the future while helping educators make meaningful literary choices. To begin understanding this literature selection process, it's important to examine the frameworks that guide how and why teachers choose specific texts.

Intentionality in text selection is crucial when building a curriculum that reflects student needs and supports growth. Jackson (2023) expands upon Bishop's (1990) metaphor "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Door," emphasizing that diverse texts should not only include marginalized identities but also portray joy, resilience, and agency. Jackson argues that the purpose of inclusion is not simply to check a box but to provide a foundation for emotional connection, representation, and student growth. Similarly, Donovan (2021) promotes an anti-bias, anti-racist (ABAR) approach to curriculum, encouraging educators to go beyond neutrality and select literature that challenges stereotypes and centers lived experiences. These frameworks emphasize the need for a thoughtful, purposeful selection of texts that meet both ethical and academic goals, preparing students to be empathic and critically conscious citizens. While these frameworks offer a strong rationale for inclusive selection, they are also supported by research outlining the positive impact of diverse literature on students.

The inclusion of diverse literature has the potential to transform classrooms into spaces of affirmation and critical engagement. Bishop's (1990) foundational concept underscores that students should see themselves in texts and use literature to view and understand the lives of others. Donovan's (2021) work highlights how ABAR-informed literature selection can create healing and joyful communities. Ford and Tyson (2024) also argue that multicultural literature validates the experiences of students of color while offering their white peers opportunities to develop empathy and awareness. These selections increase student engagement and academic motivation while fostering a curriculum that values identity, social justice, and relevance. However, these benefits can only be realized when diverse texts are integrated with care, context, and support, not as isolated additions but as essential curriculum components. Kumar (2022) echoes this need for intentional inclusion, arguing that the severe underrepresentation of authors of color in standardized curricula like Guidebooks 2.0 limits the potential for student affirmation and engagement. She emphasizes that systemic barriers, such as a lack of resources in the curriculum and institutional support, prevent many teachers from accessing or implementing diverse literature. These challenges reveal how the ability to implement inclusive literature is often shaped by external pressures beyond the teacher's control.

Despite these benefits to having a diverse literature selection, teachers in Oklahoma must navigate a politically charged environment that directly influences text selection. Gardner (2020) emphasizes the disconnect between the inclusive goals outlined in the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) standards and the reality of Eurocentric, traditional literature being prioritized. The standards call for "a wide range of historical, cultural, ethnic, and global perspectives," but Gardner shows how external pressures often undermine these goals (OSDE 2021, pp. 98, 106, 114, 122). Costello (2016) explains that educators feel compelled to maintain neutrality and avoid controversial texts that might trigger backlash from communities or administrators. PEN America (2023) has reported a growing trend of book bans nationwide and legislative restrictions, which disproportionately target books with themes related to race, gender identities, and social justice. This creates an environment where teachers may feel unsafe or unsupported in broadening the scope of their curriculum. In addition to political pressures, teachers must also contend with the practical challenge of accessing the materials needed to teach diverse texts effectively.

Even when teachers are willing to diversify their curriculum, limited access to resources and institutional support can hinder implementation. Sucio et al. (2023) note that while young adult

literature has grown more diverse, teachers often lack the financial and material resources to bring these books into the classroom. Budget restrictions, outdated textbooks, and limited access to multicultural collections are consistent challenges across many districts. According to Donovan (2021), without administrative and curricular support, ABAR approaches become difficult to sustain. Teachers must often rely on personal funds, outside donations, or local advocacy to secure the materials needed for inclusive teaching. These challenges are compounded in politically conservative areas where support for a diverse curriculum may be minimal or actively discouraged. Although Stotsky's (2010) national survey was conducted over 15 years ago, it reinforces how uneven curricular expectations and under-resourced instruction have long hindered meaningful literary engagement. Her findings—that literature assignments were inconsistent across grade levels and that analytical reading was underused in many classrooms—highlight how a lack of systemic structure and support continues to affect both what is taught and how it is taught. These longstanding patterns reveal how institutional gaps in curriculum design and resourcing limit diversity and burden teachers with navigating these issues largely on their own. Given these interconnected obstacles, a deeper understanding of how teachers respond to them is essential for identifying opportunities for change and support.

This literature review outlines the current sociopolitical complexities that Oklahoma English teachers face when selecting instructional texts. These challenges include the need for intentionality in text selection, the curricular and social benefits of diverse literature, the state's politically conservative climate, and the resource constraints that impact access to inclusive materials. As someone who did not experience a diverse curriculum in high school, I now see the critical importance of these choices in shaping students' academic and personal development. Teachers must carefully balance meeting standards, responding to community expectations, and maintaining professional safety. This research explores how two experienced Oklahoma teachers work within and against these tensions as they strive to provide inclusive, meaningful literary experiences for their students. Rather than presenting easy solutions, this study aims to highlight the realities teachers face and the creative, values-driven decisions they make to amplify a broader range of voices in their classrooms.

Methods

Data Selection and Collection

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine how Oklahoma secondary English teachers navigate literature selection, considering their perspectives on incorporating diverse texts alongside external influences such as community input and political pressures. I first collected background data through an initial survey, recruiting participants by contacting secondary English teachers through publicly listed school emails and posting calls for participation on social media. I then offered follow-up interviews to teachers who met specific criteria. Participants needed at least one year of teaching experience in ELA or ELA-adjacent classrooms (such as AP English or Honors English) and to have taught in grades 9-12 in Oklahoma public secondary schools in the past year. I began the data collection process with a Qualtrics survey that contained 11 questions designed to gather background information and identify those interested in a follow-up interview. I conducted this study using a qualitative case study approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008). I distributed the survey from May to August, during which two teachers completed the survey and agreed to participate in follow-up interviews. For the interview phase, I used a list of scripted, open-ended questions designed to encourage elaboration and detailed responses (see Appendix A for the full interview script). The interviews lasted 45 minutes and 1 hour, respectively, allowing for in-depth discussion of participants' experiences and perspectives on literature selection. I conducted all interviews via

Zoom, created transcripts using Otter AI, and reviewed them for accuracy to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, with an exemption granted under the IRB's guidelines before I began the study.

Participant Information

The two teachers who participated in my study have a combined 50 years of classroom experience and are traditionally certified. Teacher A has 34 years of experience across multiple grades and schools. She has taught secondary English from 6th to 12th grades in urban, suburban, and rural school settings. For the past three years, she has been the sole English teacher in a rural high school in central Oklahoma, teaching grades 9-12. Teacher B has 16 years of experience across various grades and schools. She started her teaching career in Texas as a middle school English teacher, but most of her experience comes from teaching secondary English in Oklahoma. Currently, she teaches AP Language and Composition to juniors in a suburban high school in central Oklahoma.

Data Analysis

I began by analyzing the data using a thematic coding approach (Naeem et al., 2023). I started with a detailed review of the interview transcripts, carefully reading through each to identify meaningful statements. For example, Teacher A stated, "I tailor [the curriculum] to the needs of my students, what I think they might be interested in, and what I think they might identify with." I highlighted this as a key passage due to its relevance to teacher agency in text selection. I then used an inductive coding process to assign codes to the highlighted passages before assigning them to a broader category based on their context (Naeem et al., 2023). The codes I used came to be based on the context and were not pre-mediated. In this case, I initially coded the example statement as "Autonomy/Flexibility." As similar codes emerged throughout the data, I grouped them into the broader theme "Resources and Constraints," which captured both the freedoms and limitations teachers experience in curriculum planning. After generating the initial codes and categories, I conducted a second review to consolidate similar codes and ensure coherence across the dataset. I then performed another thematic review, finalizing the codes by categorizing them on sticky notes, which I organized into thematic clusters. I manually sorted the codes into four main themes: External Forces, Internal Forces, Standard Alignment, and Emerging Themes and Patterns. This thematic grouping helped me better understand the factors influencing literature selection in Oklahoma schools. I carefully validated the thematic groupings throughout the process, ensuring that the codes accurately represented the data and were consistently placed within the correct themes.

To guide my interpretation, I applied the lenses of Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy, Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Cultural Capital and Habitus, and Kincheloe et al.'s (2011) perspective on critical pedagogy in contemporary classrooms. Freire's Critical Pedagogy emphasizes the importance of education as a means for social transformation, encouraging teachers to critically engage with students and empower them through dialogue. Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital and Habitus focuses on how individuals' social backgrounds influence their access to knowledge, with cultural capital shaping educational opportunities and habitus affecting the dispositions students bring to learning. Kincheloe et al. (2011) build on these ideas, highlighting how critical pedagogy in modern classrooms addresses power dynamics and systemic inequalities. Edgerton and Roberts (2014) further explore how teachers can navigate and challenge the dominant cultural norms within education, particularly as they relate to diverse student populations. To analyze how teachers navigate systemic influences, community expectations, and curricular goals, I used these theories to operationalize my thematic development. For example, teachers' responses about

balancing student needs and institutional pressures were analyzed through Bourdieu's concept of habitus, revealing how teachers' background knowledge and social capital influenced their decisions regarding literature selection. Similarly, Freire's ideas about empowerment and dialogue were reflected in teachers' emphasis on student-centered approaches, which shaped the themes of autonomy and constraints in curriculum development.

Findings

The tables following each section describe the codes and illustrative quotes from the gathered interview data with the two teachers that led to the development of the four themes.

External Forces

Through my coding, I found that external forces, particularly community and parental expectations, strongly influenced teachers' literature selection. The participants mentioned significant pressure from local communities to avoid literature that might conflict with traditional values. This pressure was especially evident in more rural areas, where community influence tended to be conservative, pushing teachers to select "safe" canonical texts and avoid multicultural or non-canonical literature. The teachers told me of their frustration with this limitation, feeling it restricted students' exposure to diverse perspectives. Teacher A states, "the right as a parent... you know, to question anything, the only thing I'm gonna say is, I want you to read the whole book and talk to me about it. Before you say your kid can't read it." Codes like "Parent Involvement" and "Censorship Avoidance" highlighted the frequency of self-censorship, where teachers preemptively excluded specific texts to avoid potential backlash or how one of them refused to keep a list for the district of their personal books (see Table 1). These external forces of parents' expectations, political climate, and the weight of censorship impact teachers' autonomy and make it challenging to introduce literature to foster inclusive learning environments for students. These pressures indicate Oklahoma's broader sociopolitical climate, which frequently prioritizes traditional narratives over diverse representation in educational settings.

Table 1.

Thematic Analysis for External Forces Theme

Categories	Codes	Quotes
Challenges & Censorship	Book Ban/Control in Education	"so [State Superintendent] tried to ban <i>The Glass Castle</i> and <i>Kite Runner</i> from [Edmond] library. Tried to get it out of the library they sued... thankfully, the Supreme Court sided with them and said, That's a local school board issue, which is good" (Teacher B).
	Parental Involvement	"Okay, guys, sorry, this came in [book with gay characters], but I'm not gonna put it on the shelf. Because you know, of this, and they're, like, 'put it on the shelf. We're big enough.' You know, the kids are fine with it. Yeah, it's the parents that are, you know, and I was like, if you don't want to read it, don't read it. I don't care. So it's on my [classroom library] shelf right now" (Teacher A).
External Influences	Censorship Avoidance	"And they suggested that I make an inventory of my personal books [in classroom library], but I said, I'm not going to do it because you don't want this on paper. So, you know, that book [that is causing waves] is easily just moved to my house" (Teacher A).

Internal Forces

Internal forces were also prominent factors in teachers' literature choices. The participants reported a need for current and updated materials, sometimes relying on textbooks more than a decade old, limiting their access to newer or multicultural literature. Codes like "Resource Constraints" and "Administrative Structure" showed that teachers work with limited budgets and outdated resources. These challenges left teachers often unable to procure contemporary texts (besides what they could find free online) that might better align with their instructional goals. Teacher A stated, "my curriculum is fluid, it changes all the time. I choose my curriculum based on what I have at hand, what I can find online, you know, maybe a free PDF." Additionally, school administrators often limited teachers' choice of literature in favor of standardized, canonical texts that are easier to assess and less likely to draw controversy. Despite these limitations, teachers expressed a strong desire to select literature that reflects the backgrounds, cultures, and lived experiences of their students, recognizing that this representation fosters meaningful engagement and helps students feel seen.

Table 2.

Thematic Analysis for Internal Forces Theme

Categories	Codes	Quotes
Resources & Constraints	Resource Constraints	"when I got here, the textbooks were so old, and in such disrepair, I threw them all out... And they hadn't bought books since, you know, 15, 20 years ago" (Teacher A).
	Administrative Structure	"I mean, I do wish we have more flexibility with books. The kind of bureaucratic side of it, like going through a committee and growing your team, I get why we have to do that, especially in the big district, but it's also cumbersome. And so it's, you know, that's kind of a bummer" (Teacher B).

Standard Alignment

Teachers recognize that aligning literature selections with state standards is the cornerstone for effective curriculum planning. With that in mind, the teachers use the Oklahoma State Department of Education's 2021 standards when considering a text that actively promotes a variety of diverse historical, cultural, and global perspectives. While the use of these standards in curriculum design varies, there is an opportunity for growth through enhanced support for educators, ensuring that all students benefit from a rich and inclusive curriculum. Codes like "Standard Alignment" and "Standards-Based Rationale" showed that teachers often referenced state standards when justifying their literature choices, frequently seeking out non-canonical texts that were reliable in meeting these requirements and engaging students. Teacher B described how the school's curriculum director responded to a book challenge using a standards-based rationale: "She gave our rationale, like we have typed up rationales for all the books that we teach." While the standards theoretically allowed for flexibility in text selection, the teachers implied that introducing diverse literature often required additional justification or having pre-written rationales available to align with district and community expectations. As a result, these teachers reported that many of their colleagues use canonical texts as safer options to meet curriculum goals, but they still emphasized that they try to include diverse and newer texts when given the chance. Clearly, there is a difference between the OSDE's goals for inclusion and what happens in the classroom.

Table 3.*Thematic Analysis for Standard Alignment Theme*

Categories	Codes	Quotes
Curriculum & Instruction	Standards-Based Curriculum	“I think the way that we choose curriculum in our district, we do start with the standards” (Teacher B).
		“I’ve been doing it so long, I know what the standards are. And I did have, I felt like at one point, this last year, I didn’t have enough nonfiction. And so I did have to go back” (Teacher A).
Assessment & Standards	Standard Alignment	“[Standards] were all looked at when books were chosen.... Um, I forgot how they phrased it. But it’s something about like, world literature, basically, like multi perspectives. And so that’s why those were chosen.... So yeah, those standards were front and center” (Teacher B).

Patterns and Emerging Trends

Several patterns emerged from the thematic analysis, particularly the growing tension between traditional and contemporary approaches to literature instruction. Codes like “Diverse Texts,” “Student Engagement,” and “Teaching Philosophy” highlighted an emphasis on thematic units in which literature selections focused on overarching questions or concepts rather than individual novels. This approach enabled teachers to incorporate a wider range of voices and perspectives within a cohesive instructional design, such as pairing canonical works with multicultural texts to explore shared themes. Participants emphasized the importance of students seeing their own lives and identities reflected in literature and developing empathy by encountering experiences different from their own, with Teacher B stating, “they like seeing themselves reflected in literature, I think, or, or just learning about things they never heard about.” These inclusive approaches support both representation and cross-cultural understanding—critical components of student engagement and identity development. While many educators value these inclusive practices, external and internal constraints challenge their implementation in everyday classroom settings.

Table 4.*Thematic Analysis for Patterns and Emerging Trends Theme*

Categories	Codes	Quotes
Student Engagement & Choice	Student Engagement	“ <i>Glass Castle</i> , I hate that it’s become like this lightning rod for hate for these groups, because so many students on level, below level—it’s one of the books that hooks them so early, because it’s just something they’ve never heard about, never read about” (Teacher B).
		“The ones that have been here long enough, trust me enough, it’s like, ‘what’s next? What are we reading next?’ And so, you know, they’re along for the ride” (Teacher A).

Teaching Philosophy & Approach	Thematic Units	“So instead of it being like a <i>Great Gatsby</i> unit, we would center on a question like, ‘What is the American dream?’ ... And then our core piece is <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , and then we would pull in poems” (Teacher B).
		"Jason Reynolds, the author, believes that literacy is the answer to, you know, stopping gang violence and giving people a more peaceable way to resolve conflict. And so, you know, we talked about literacy, the role of literacy in the world, and how books change the world. That's kind of my thing is, books change the world" (Teacher A). [Teaches <i>Long Way Down</i> alongside other texts like <i>Hamilton</i>]

Discussion

Interviews with these experienced English teachers revealed a complex and often discouraging landscape for literature selection in Oklahoma's secondary schools. While the Oklahoma State Department of Education's standards promote diverse voices and global perspectives, this study's participants consistently face challenges that limit their ability to fulfill those goals. Specifically, three major themes emerged: first, a continued reliance on traditional, Eurocentric texts despite efforts to diversify; second, significant resource limitations that make it difficult to update or expand classroom libraries; and third, a deeply felt need for representation, inclusion, and cultural resonance in the literature students read. These themes echo findings from Gardner (2020) and others, and they illuminate the difficult realities teachers navigate in their efforts to make meaningful, inclusive choices in literature education.

The findings confirm a reliance on “safe” texts and a hesitance to teach potentially “dangerous” or controversial works, especially in politically charged environments (PEN America, 2023; Kumar, 2022). Teacher A and Teacher B both demonstrate how external pressures shape curricular choices. Teacher A specifically avoids teaching *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, explaining, “there are some things that I just know better than to do. You know, I can push it a little bit...But I do know better than to, you know, put something out there that I know is against, you know, red, white and blue America?” Teacher B uses student book clubs to allow more freedom of choice in reading but still operates within clear boundaries. The book club lets students decide for themselves if they want to engage with potentially controversial topics without making them read specific books and allows Teacher B to offer a variety of perspectives. Each teacher's compromises reveal how teachers balance student engagement while protecting themselves from possible backlash. Even with a deep desire to include diverse perspectives, teachers face external influences that prevent the curriculum from being as inclusive as possible. This tension is not just theoretical for me as a senior in pre-service teacher education; it's a frequent topic in our courses, where discussions often leave us discouraged and on edge, uncertain about the political climate and the challenges we'll face in the classrooms we're about to enter.

Resource limitations significantly shape the literature available to teachers, constraining the inclusion of diverse and contemporary texts, a challenge echoed by both teachers in this study and reinforced in previous research on access and equity in young adult literature (Sucio et al., 2023; Kumar, 2022). Teachers A and B reported relying on outdated books and freely available PDFs due to a lack of funding, illustrating the material barriers that hinder diverse curriculum development. Teacher A noted having to discard inherited books that were “15 to 20 years old,” and turning to “what I can find online, you know, maybe a free PDF.” Teacher B shared, “I don't

think we have a set schedule for looking at replacing books. It's crazy expensive, right.” While the Oklahoma ELA standards encourage the inclusion of diverse perspectives, limited budgets often leave teachers without the necessary resources to meet those goals (OSDE 2021, p. 98, 106, 114, 122). This disconnect between policy and practice underscores how even the most dedicated educators must rely on personal ingenuity to fill systemic gaps. Creating inclusive classrooms is not only about selecting appropriate texts but also navigating and advocating within systems that frequently lack the infrastructure to support equity. After speaking with these teachers, I realized that creating an inclusive classroom might not just be selecting the “right” texts but also learning to work within, and perhaps challenge, the system that sets teachers up with so few options.

The interview findings underscore the importance of using literature to promote representation, character agency, and equity, core values emphasized in scholarship on inclusive and socially just curriculum design. These values include affirming students’ identities and exposing them to diverse perspectives and experiences. Bishop’s (1990) influential framework of literature as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors remains central to this conversation, expanded upon by Jackson (2023) and Donovan (2021), who argue that diverse texts should not only represent marginalized backgrounds but also celebrate joy, agency, and resilience. Neither teacher explicitly referenced this framework, but their insights aligned with its principles. When asked about student engagement, Teacher B responded, “they like seeing themselves reflected in literature, I think, or, or just learning about things they never heard about.” Teacher A echoed this: “I think when they see themselves in literature, I think it makes them feel better about themselves. And I think it gives validation to who they are,” and added, “I’m also trying to, you know, promote some empathy. Because when you get kids that are insular, and they don’t get out very much, it’s very hard to open or broaden their minds. And so I tried to do that through my selections in my curriculum.” These sentiments reflect how the teachers actively select texts like *A Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds to validate student identities while fostering empathy and understanding of others. Their perspectives emphasize literature’s power to reflect lived realities and shape more compassionate, inclusive classrooms. Their insights only bolster my belief that classrooms should be spaces where students find validation in their identities and engage with stories that challenge and expand their worldviews.

Connections, Implications, and Future Research

The challenges described by educators highlight the difficulty of translating the ideals of diverse and inclusive literature education into practical application. My experience of growing up in Oklahoma’s schools without encountering multicultural or contemporary texts has shown me what’s at stake when students are not exposed to a broad spectrum of voices. Writing this article has been my journey and professional commitment to understanding the forces shaping literature selection. It comes down to a commitment to advocate for the stories that deserve a place in our classrooms. Despite the constraints, I am more determined than ever to teach texts that speak to all students because I believe that is one of the most powerful ways to cultivate empathy, understanding, and critical thinking in the next generation. Reflecting on my findings, I am reminded of the deep tensions between the ideals of literature education, rooted in diverse perspectives, inclusivity, and empathy, that many, including myself as a pre-service teacher, value, and the realities educators face in Oklahoma’s public schools.

I will likely be a first-year teacher in Kansas when someone reads this. I’m especially interested in future endeavors of mine to explore how thematic teaching affects student engagement and empathy, especially with multicultural literature. Future research could also explore this area, specifically the long-term impact of thematic, inclusive curricula on student identity development, empathy, and academic motivation. It could also examine how schools and educators collaborate with their surrounding communities to bridge cultural and ideological

divides while still maintaining curriculum integrity and inclusivity. This work could be meaningful for both preservice and in-service teachers, shedding light on the everyday tensions teachers face when trying to diversify their curricula, especially when navigating resource limitations or fear of sociopolitical pushback from their community or beyond. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution, this project highlights the importance of context, adaptability, and support in curriculum decisions. I am excited to apply these insights in my teaching and grow into a thoughtful, responsive educator.

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Author Biography

Ms. Tyler Munson holds a B.S. in Psychology and B.S. in Secondary Education (English) from Oklahoma State University. As a proud member of Oklahoma State University's Honors College, she began her research to fulfill the Honors Undergraduate thesis requirement. However, it quickly evolved into a wholehearted study of the influences on literature choices in Oklahoma's public secondary schools. Ms. Munson is passionate about creating engaging, inclusive classrooms where students connect with literature that broadens their perspectives and sparks their creativity. With her interdisciplinary background, she brings an enthusiastic, research-driven perspective to English education and is excited to get started in her teaching journey, where she can inspire and learn alongside her future students. She is excited to start her first year teaching ELA at a middle school in Kansas and can be reached at ms.tylermunson@gmail.com.

Appendix A Interview Script

Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the English curriculum in secondary schools. Examine the literature selections, genres, and themes included in the curriculum. Evaluate how these choices align with educational standards and goals. Examine patterns in book lists, usage of non-canonical texts, usage of "banned books" or issues that stem from book challenges, and usage of diverse literature.

Introduction: Greet and thank the participant for their time.

Your insights are invaluable as I aim to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the English curriculum in secondary schools. My name is Tyler Munson, and I'm here to facilitate this conversation. The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of the choices made in the English curriculum, specifically focusing on literature selections and genres. We are interested in how these choices align with educational standards and goals, as well as in exploring patterns in book lists, the use of non-canonical texts, and the inclusion of diverse literature. This analysis is being conducted by myself and overseen by my thesis advisor. I want to assure you that all information shared will be kept confidential. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and your identity will remain anonymous in any reports or publications from this study. While the analysis is intended for publication, no identifying information about you or your school will be included. Additionally, if it's comfortable for you, we may record this interview to ensure accuracy in capturing your insights. Before we begin, do you have any questions or concerns about the interview process? And may I have your consent to proceed with the interview, including the possibility of recording our conversation?

Section 1 Background Information:

Before we delve into the specifics of the English curriculum, let's start with some background information.

1. Could you share a bit about your teaching experience, such as what grades you teach, and perhaps touch on your overall teaching philosophy? [Allow the participant to provide their teaching background.]
2. What about your own education? Were you a part of a teaching degree program? [Allow the participant to provide their teaching background.]
3. How do you define curriculum? Does it mean something specific to you? [Allow the participant to respond.]
4. Thank you for sharing that. Now, to provide a broader context, could you tell me a bit about the demographics of the school where you teach? Are there any special programs or unique aspects of the school that might influence the decisions with the English curriculum? [Allow the participant to provide information about the school's demographics and any unique factors.]
5. Great, that gives us a good foundation. Now, moving on, are there any specific challenges or strengths you've observed in the current educational environment that might impact the English curriculum decisions at your school or in your classroom? [Allow the participant to discuss any challenges or strengths they've observed.]

Thank you for providing that context. It's helpful in understanding the broader landscape. Now, let's shift our focus to the English curriculum itself.

Section 2A Curriculum Overview:

Now, let's discuss the overall structure of the English curriculum.

1. How is it organized, and what would you consider as the key components? Additionally, how are literature selections made, and who is typically involved in the decision-making process? [Allow the participant to share insights about the organization and decision-making process of the curriculum.] Refer to the curriculum document (if provided ahead of time) if further explanation is needed.
2. How involved are you in the curriculum-building process? Does the school provide a comprehensive curriculum? Does the school give a list of what is expected to be in the curriculum? Is there an English department or committee that collaborates in the building process, or are you the sole builder of the curriculum? [Allow the participant to share insights about the process of curriculum building]

Thank you for providing that overview. Moving forward, let's delve into the literature selections themselves.

Section 2B Literature Selections:

1. Let's start with a basic one. What are you reading in your classroom now? [Allow the participant to discuss the literature selection.]
2. Are there any assignments that are tied to that selection (e.g., essays, write-ins). [Allow the participant to discuss.]
3. Can you share more about the literature selections within the overall curriculum? [Allow the participant to discuss the literature selection; prompt further if necessary.]
4. What criteria are typically used for selecting literature, and how often is the curriculum revised? [Allow the participant to discuss the criteria for literature selection and the frequency of curriculum revisions.]
5. Are there specific factors or events that prompt revisions? Are there any policies regarding literature within the school? [Allow the participant to discuss factors influencing those revisions.]

6. How are classic and contemporary texts balanced in the curriculum? [Allow the participant to respond.]
7. Are there intentional efforts to include non-canonical texts in the curriculum? If so, how are these texts integrated, and what benefits do you see in using non-traditional literature? [Allow the participant to share insights about the inclusion of non-canonical texts in the curriculum.]

Interesting perspectives. Now, let's shift our focus to any experiences related to banned books or challenges.

8. Have there been instances of book challenges in your teaching experience, and if so, how were they handled? How does your school navigate potentially controversial literature including the use of so-called “banned books”? [Allow the participant to discuss experiences with banned books, book challenges, and the school’s approach to controversial literature.]
9. Thank you for sharing that. Lastly, let’s explore the inclusion of diverse literature in the curriculum. How does the curriculum reflect diversity, including considerations of race, gender, and cultural perspectives? Are there intentional efforts to include voices from underrepresented groups in the literature selections? [Allow the participant to discuss how diversity is considered in the curriculum and efforts made to include underrepresented voices.]

Great insights! These perspectives are crucial for understanding the depth and breadth of the literature selections. Moving forward, let's discuss whether any patterns have emerged.

Section 2C Patterns in Curriculum:

Now, let’s explore the patterns in the book lists within the curriculum.

1. Are there any noticeable trends or recurring themes across different grades in your experience? Have you included selections because you heard it was a good book for a certain grade group? [Allow the participant to discuss patterns and trends in book lists.]
2. Thank you for sharing that. Now, considering the student experience, have you observed any particular genres or themes that seem to resonate more strongly with students? How do students generally respond to the mix of classic and contemporary literature in the curriculum? [Allow the participant to share insights about students’ preferences and responses to the literature selections.]
3. It’s interesting to hear about the student perspective. Are there specific strategies or methods employed to engage students with the literature? For instance, do you incorporate discussions, projects, or activities that enhance their understanding and connection to the texts? [Allow the participant to discuss strategies used to engage students with the literature.]

Great insights. Now, let’s touch on the broader aspect of how the curriculum aligns with standards.

Section 3 Alignment with Standards:

Now, let's discuss how the English curriculum aligns with educational standards and goals.

1. How does the curriculum address national or state standards? Are there specific learning objectives or goals set for students, and how do the literature selections contribute to achieving those objectives? [Allow the participant to share insights about how the curriculum aligns with educational standards and goals.]
2. Thank you for providing that overview. To delve a bit deeper, can you give specific examples of how the literature selections are tied to these standards and learning objectives? Are there any particular texts or units that are especially effective in meeting these goals? [Allow the participant to provide specific examples and discuss the effectiveness of literature selections in meeting educational standards.]

3. Great insights. As we continue our exploration, how does the curriculum incorporate assessment methods to ensure that students are meeting the established standards? Are there specific assessments or evaluation criteria used to gauge students' understanding of the literature and achievement of educational goals? [Allow the participant to discuss assessment methods and criteria used in the curriculum.]
4. Thank you for sharing that perspective. Lastly, are there any challenges or areas where you feel there could be improvements in aligning the curriculum with educational standards and goals? And what strategies or changes could be considered to address those challenges? [Allow the participant to discuss potential challenges and suggest strategies for improvement.]

Your insights are invaluable for understanding the alignment of the curriculum with educational standards and goals.

