Kansas English

2025, Volume 106

Kansas Association of Teachers of English

Sun Seeker by Jenni Bader

In this issue ...

Kansas English

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2025, Volume 106

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Kansas English is published once a year by the Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE), a state affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. Annual memberships for KATE are $30 ($10 for students/retirees) and can be purchased at www.kansasenglish.org. Communication regarding *Kansas English* can be directed to the editor at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.

Kansas English Author Guide

Kansas English is the peer-reviewed journal of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE), edited by Katherine Cramer, Professor of English Education at Wichita State University. It publishes articles and materials on subjects of interest to English and literacy teachers at all levels, including practitioner pieces, scholarly articles, reflective essays, interviews, book reviews, teaching tips, and creative works. *Kansas English* publishes about 75 percent of the manuscripts it receives each year. Specifically, consider submitting the following types of manuscripts:

1. **Practitioner Pieces** describing how you teach a particular text, skill, or concept in your English language arts and/or literacy classroom.
2. **Scholarly Articles**, including research studies and academic arguments supported by research in English and/or literacy education.
3. **Reflective Essays** about teaching English language arts and/or literacy.
4. **Creative Works** (e.g., poetry, vignettes) related to teaching English and/or literacy.
5. **Interviews** with authors (children's, YA, and adult) and experts in the field of English language arts and/or literacy.
6. **Book Reviews** of recently published English/literacy pedagogy texts.
7. **Conversation Pieces** in response to previously published work in *Kansas English*.
8. **Kansas-Specific Articles** that would be of interest to English and/or literacy teachers in Kansas.

Learn more about manuscript and submission requirements on the "**Write for Kansas English**" page of the *KE* website. In addition, *Kansas English* features several editor-reviewed columns for which authors can submit the following types of manuscripts.

Children's Book/Media Reviews
Column Editor: Sun Young Lee
Associate Professor of Literacy Education
Wichita State University
Wichita, Kansas

Teaching Tips
Column Editor: Beth Gulley
Professor of English
Johnson County Community College
Overland Park, Kansas

Young Adult (YA) Book Reviews
Incoming Column Editor: Kevin Kienholz
Professor of English and Modern Languages
Director of English Education
Emporia State University
Emporia, Kansas

Learn more about column manuscript and submission requirements on the "**KE Columns**" page of the *KE* website.

DEADLINE for submissions for the 2026 issue of *Kansas English*: January 15, 2026

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Poetry (cont.)

Young Adult Book Reviews

Teaching Tips

FROM THE EDITOR: LET'S AFFIRM AND *CELEBRATE* DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Katherine Mason Cramer, *Kansas English* Editor-in-Chief
Wichita State University

Abstract
Kansas English Editor-in-Chief Katie Cramer is fed up with anti-DEI agendas at the state and national levels and urges readers to share their own efforts to uplift diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. She also previews the 2025 issue; offers thanks to outgoing YA Book Review Editor John Franklin and a warm welcome to incoming YA Book Review Editor Kevin Kienholz; and provides an update on indexing *Kansas English* in ERIC.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, DEI, sociopolitical climate, writing for publication, KATE

Kansas English Editor Katie Cramer

We live in unsettling and disheartening times: we face a daily barrage of state and national laws, policies, and executive orders that limit free speech, distort or erase history, and harm vulnerable populations locally, nationally, and globally. These efforts are mind-boggling in their breadth, scope, speed, and horrifying impact. For example, just a few months into its second term, the Trump administration has dismantled diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across a variety of sectors, including education, which "has been a major target of the administration's efforts to do away with DEI programs" (Flowers & Raychaudhuri, 2025). In Kansas, legislators have done the same to colleges and universities with the passage of Kansas Senate Bill 125, which requires that by August 1, "all state agencies have eliminated any positions that relate to DEI; eliminated any mandates, policies, programs, preferences and activities relating to DEI; eliminated any training requirements in DEI for any employee; canceled any state grants or contracts relating to DEI; and removed gender identifying pronouns or gender ideology from email signature blocks on state employee's email accounts and any other form of communication" (p. 254).

Just so we are clear, diversity, equity, and inclusion are *positive* attributes or aspirations. We should not be aiming for uniformity, inequity, and exclusion in our classrooms, curriculums, schools, or communities. The Kansas legislature's and the Trump administration's relentless pursuit of an anti-DEI agenda is unethical, immoral, and terrifying.

Earlier this year, a 2020 graduate of my program and current ELA teacher reached out to me because some members of her urban middle school community, including fellow educators, now felt empowered to espouse anti-LGBT rhetoric aimed at her and the school's Pride Club, which she sponsors. According to the school's website, the Pride Club is "dedicated to creating a safe and inclusive environment for all students. It promotes a sense of belonging and acceptance, providing a space for students to discuss important social issues, support one another, and engage in activities that foster community." This is an important mission, particularly in middle schools, which have higher rates of LGBTQ+ students who feel unsafe and have less access to LGBTQ+-related resources and curriculum (Kosciw, et al., 2022).

The teacher and her students invited me to participate in a question-and-answer session during a recent Pride Club meeting. Their questions included the following:

1. Why is LGBTQ+ inclusion a topic that public school staff need to be aware of and familiar with?
2. Is school generally a safe place for LGBTQ+ students? What makes it safe/unsafe?
3. How does being LGBTQ+ impact mental health outcomes in schools perceived as unkind or non-inclusive?
4. How can schools help kids who are trying to understand their identity without adding to a sense of shame or embarrassment?
5. How can we ensure we are shutting down and responding to anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech?
6. How can we ensure we are validating students' names and pronouns with respect to student privacy in class? How can we make sure students feel safe to share this information?

The intended—and invited—audience was faculty/staff members who cause harm—intentionally or not—to LGBTQ+ people and/or other marginalized groups through their words and actions. But, as you might expect, they did not opt-in for this after-school learning opportunity. Instead, about 10-15 students and 10-15 educator allies attended the meeting, including the school's principal. We had a productive dialogue—with energizing and thoughtful student and educator participation—using data from GLSEN's most recent National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, et al., 2022), The Trevor Project's 2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People (Nath, et al., 2024), and Learning for Justice's "Speak up at school: How to respond to everyday prejudice, bigotry, and stereotypes" (Burkhalter & Jones, 2022).

My hunch is that most readers of *Kansas English* are also engaged in similar conversations, actions, and instructional design that resist this harmful narrowing of who is affirmed and uplifted in our schools and curricula. And I urge you to share your stories, ideas, and advice with us—in *Kansas English*, at the KATE Fall Conference, and in KATE Pages. Raise your voices. Raise your pens and keyboards. Silence is not an option.

2025 Issue Preview

Welcome to another exciting and energizing issue of *Kansas English*. This year's authors provide us with scholarly and creative pieces that will both enlighten and delight.

KATE's new President **Caleb K. Thornton** offers a hopeful perspective on stepping into new leadership roles personally and professionally, in spite of obstacles and trepidation.

In a new column, KATE Fall Conference Chair **Nathan G. Whitman** provides a preview of and this year's conference, including the keynote speakers, as well as encouragement to attend and even submit a breakout session proposal!

In their practitioner piece, "Sound Foundations: Strengthening Reading Development through Phonological Awareness and Phonics Integration," **Reagan Murnan** and **Sandra Bequette** describe evidence-based practices for integrating phonological awareness and phonics instruction to support early literacy development.

Lael Ewy explores the challenges and opportunities of dual enrollment/dual credit programs in his reflective essay "Dualities of Dual Enrollment: Navigating the Literal and Liminal Spaces of a Community College Outreach Program."

In their reflective essay "*All American Boys* has Staying Power a Decade Later: Here's Why," co-authors **Kaitlyn Chain**, **Avery Gathright**, **Alice Huelskamp**, and **Sophia Loerke** discuss why Jason Renolds and Brendan Kiely's award-winning young adult novel remains relevant ten years after its publication.

In her scholarly article, "Choosing Words Wisely: Influences on Literature Selection in Oklahoma Classrooms," **Tyler Munson** explores how ELA teachers navigate tensions between state standards that encourage inclusivity and external pressures that restrict their curricular choices (e.g., anti-DEI initiatives and resource shortages).

Whitney Wrestler examines the effectiveness of explicit morphological instruction in improving vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension for middle and high school students in "Closing the Word Gap: Morphological Instruction Across Middle and High School Classrooms."

In an interview with Printz Honor-winning young adult author Lisa Fipps, **Kevin B. Kienholz** explores themes of storytelling and safe places across her verse novels *Starfish* (2021) and *And Then, Boom!* (2024).

Jayden Mitchell explores the tensions and contradictions of the teaching internship (a.k.a. student teaching) while also depicting the resilience and courage of the teacher intern in her poem "Something More."

In her poem "Jem Touches the Wall," **Deborah McNemee** imagines what must have been going through Jem's mind when he takes Dill's dare in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In his poems "Dawn over a Small Town" and "Lawn Deer," **Dave Malone** attends to the seemingly mundane details we might overlook, uplifting them so that we might also linger in wonder and appreciation.

In five young adult (YA) book reviews, **Amanda K. Stinemetz**, **Laney Roller**, **Halle Harbers**, **John Franklin**, and **Katherine Mason Cramer** elevate recently published YA books that we should add to our classroom and/or professional libraries (and, perhaps, curricula!).

And finally, the Teaching Tips column brings us pedagogical strategies that we can immediately integrate into our curricular design. Column authors for this issue include **Andrew Bellamy, Thomas Reynolds, Beth Gulley**, and **Katherine Mason Cramer.**

Well Done and Welcome to YA Book Review Column Editors!

Thank you to **John Franklin**, professor of English at Pittsburg State University, who has served as YA (young adult) Book Review Editor for *Kansas English* since 2019 and is now stepping down from the role. Prior to 2019 he served on the journal's Editorial Review Board, and he has previously served as Editor of *Kansas English*. John provided informed advice and encouragement as I assumed the role of Editor in 2017, even driving to Wichita from Pittsburg to share his wisdom in person over lunch at WSU's Shocker Hall. For the past six volumes of *Kansas English*, John has mentored authors, including undergraduate student authors, in publishing their reviews of YA books while also publishing his own reviews, which serve as models for other authors. Thank you, John, for sharing your wisdom and enthusiasm for YA books so generously!

Welcome to **Kevin Kienholz**, professor of English at Emporia State University, who will replace John as YA Book Review Editor starting with the 2026 issue. Kevin has served on the Editorial Review Board since 2017, and he frequently publishes interviews with YA authors in *Kansas English*. He is looking forward to receiving your YA book review submissions; you can find submission requirements on the *Kansas English* website.

Kansas English **indexed in ERIC**

Kansas English is once again indexed in ERIC, the free online library of education research sponsored by the US Department of Education and used by over 12 million students and researchers worldwide each year. In July 2024, in consultation with Journal Manager **Susan Matveyeva** and then-KATE President **Nathan Whitman**, I completed the agreement that gives ERIC permission to index *Kansas English* and specifies that ERIC provides a direct link to each article in WSU's Open Journal Systems (OJS) where ERIC users can download *KE* research articles. This allows OJS to continue to have an accurate account of the number of downloads for each piece.

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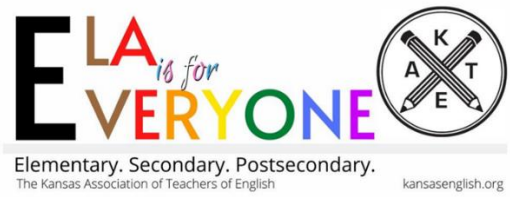
Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is starting her 16th year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools, and she has maintained her Kansas teaching licenses (ELA 5-9 and 7-12) so that a joyful return to the middle or high school ELA classroom is always possible. She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.



PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Caleb K. Thornton, KATE President
Andover Middle School

Abstract
KATE President Caleb K. Thornton reflects on transitioning into new positions—personally, professionally, and in a global sense—highlighting the transformative power of English education.

Keywords: teacher community, teacher connection, teacher resilience, growth, advocacy for self and others

KATE President Caleb K. Thornton

The last time that I held a presidential title was in high school student council—when No Child Left Behind was entering its last active semester, eggs cost $1.92, and Wiz Khalifa was #1 on the charts…

This isn't merely nostalgic reminiscence though (I couldn't even sing that Wiz Khalifa song if I tried); rather, it's a launching point for the exhilarating path ahead.

Stepping into a new leadership role—let alone, *this* leadership role—is daunting to say the least. However, I'm filled with genuine anticipation for the learning that weaves a network of roads before me. The coming years promise more than challenges to overcome, but also opportunities to reimagine what impactful, amazing English education looks like across the state of Kansas.

Moving forward into uncharted territory inevitably brings insecurity and doubt. With so many territories being explored at once, there is a guaranteed sense of discombobulation somewhere in the mix. Many of us are familiar with the sensation of *drinking from a firehose* (raise your hand if you've heard that one before!).

Personally, I strive to meet those challenges and obstacles with hope—not just for my own future, but for those whom I teach. Sometimes, I feel extraordinarily encumbered by all that comes along with teaching, or all that is teaching. However, I remind myself (often) how lucky I am to get to go to a job where I know that each and every day, at some point, I'll have an opportunity to laugh, or learn something new, or even witness one of the coveted a-ha moments that we all so earnestly crave. It truly does take a village!

Teaching—particularly, teaching English Language Arts—has afforded me the joy of getting to assist my students in building resilience in a world that might not be ready to hear them; to be creative and authentically themselves, in spite of who around us might disagree with what those definitions are; to explore and find their purpose—even if just for the present moment.

Regardless of the amount of evolution that the art of teaching will undergo, it is because of and thanks to (*so*) many teachers like you that I am in this position—celebrating and basking in the

multitudinous ways that English, pedagogy, and literature continually cultivate creativity, express the beautiful variety of identities, and allow us to discover and express our voices.

I believe that we—as educators *and* as Kansans—possess the power to create meaningful change in every school across our state, touching every student's life. I know I'll see you at our Fall 2025 KATE Conference, whether you're a first-timer or a decades-long veteran. Each gathering continues to nourish our growth at all stages of the journey.

Author Biography

Caleb K. Thornton (he/him), B.A. Secondary English Education and English, is the current President of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English and the editor for KATE's online publication, *KATE Pages*. He teaches English at Andover Middle School USD 385. Thornton has presented at past KATE conferences, and the 2023 NCTE Conference in Columbus, Ohio. He is a member of NCTE and the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN) and can be reached at calebthornton.wsu@gmail.com, kansasenglishblog@gmail.com, or kansasenglishpresident@gmail.com.

2025 KATE CONFERENCE PREVIEW AND INVITATION

Nathan G. Whitman, KATE Conference Committee Chair
Derby High School, WSU Tech

Abstract
KATE Past President and Conference Committee Chair Nathan G. Whitman previews the 2025 KATE Conference, including keynote speakers Colby Sharp (educator and co-founder of The Nerdy Book Club) and NCTE Executive Director Emily Kirkpatrick.

Keywords: KATE Conference, professional learning, Colby Sharp, Emily Kirkpatrick

KATE Conference Chair and Past President Nathan G. Whitman

Each day, students walk through our buildings, down our hallways, and into our classrooms. They expect us to keep them safe, to navigate complex issues and topics, to mentor them through all the rough patches that youth, adolescence, and adulthood bring. Each day, we carry out those tasks, add their hopes, dreams, and burdens to our own. Each day, we use our voice to give them voice—often at great cost.

But who is there for the teachers?

We know what human resources and public relations would say. However, we also know the truth. The truth is that teachers are there for each other. We keep one another safe. We help one another navigate the complex issues and topics of the day. We carry one another through the rough patches that no one else in the public seems to understand.

That is why professional organizations and conferences exist. That is why the Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE) exists. That is why our theme for the 2025 Fall Conference is **Empowering Voices, Inspiring Change: Navigating Change in Turbulent Times.** This is a conference that we know will bring English educators from all walks of life together to find camaraderie and solidarity. Our educational landscape is shifting more than ever: the dismantling of the Department of Education, funding cuts to higher education, ongoing attacks on academic freedom and the right to read, new technologies like generative AI, and attention-draining technologies like cellphones. The world of education is a frightful place to navigate on one's own.

So, who can guide us? We can. Propose a session at this year's conference! You are doing amazing things in your classroom, with your professional learning team, and on district committees. You have the answers and solutions other educators seek.

However, since we also know that we don't know *all* the answers, we've also asked for help from two very special keynote speakers.

ELA is more than the secondary and postsecondary classroom. A love for literature and literacy begins at an early age. Hence, we've invited **Colby Sharp**, the co-founder of *Nerdy Book Club*, co-host of *The Yarn* podcast, the co-author of *Game Changer! Book Access for All Kids* with Donalyn Miller, and the editor of *The Creativity Project: An Awesometastic Story Collection. A Commonsense Guide to Your Classroom Library,* written with Donalyn Miller.

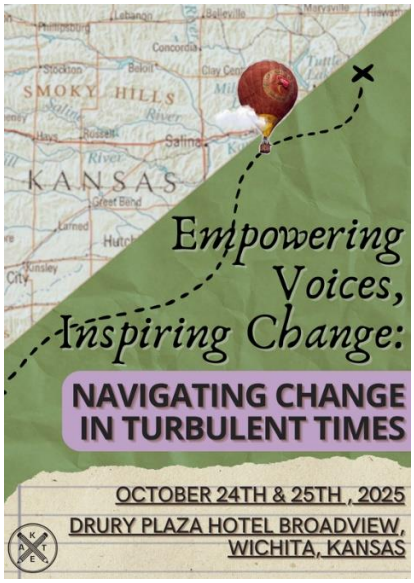
We are also exceedingly pleased to announce that our NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) Co-Sponsored Speaker is **NCTE Executive Director Emily Kirkpatrick**, a champion of literacy, educator voice, and equity in education. She is a visionary leader with a background in nonprofit strategy, innovation, and fundraising. She previously served as Vice President at the National Center for Families Learning, where she created the award-winning platform Wonderopolis®. With a career rooted in public service and civic engagement, Kirkpatrick continues to drive national efforts to improve student outcomes, support educators, and challenge systemic barriers to opportunity.

Both of these remarkable individuals believe in bringing educators and people together for the betterment of our students, our schools, our societies, and our world. Be a part of that collaboration at this year's Kansas Association of Teachers of English Conference on Oct. 24-25 in Wichita, KS.

I can't wait to work with you in October!

Author Biography

Nathan G. Whitman (he/him), M.A. English, B.A. Secondary English Education & Creative Writing, is the past Kansas Association of Teachers of English President, current KATE Conference Committee Chair, and the NCTE Standing Committee On Affiliates Region 5 Representative. He teaches English at Derby High School USD 260 and is also an adjunct professor at WSU Tech. He is a recipient of the 2014 Kansas Cable Telecommunications Horizon Award and a member of the Kansas Exemplary Educators Network. He can be reached at nwhitman@usd260.com.



Learn more about the KATE Conference and register at https://www.kansasenglish.org/fall-conference.html.

SOUND FOUNDATIONS: STRENGTHENING READING DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND PHONICS INTEGRATION

Reagan Murnan
Wichita State University

Sandra Bequette
Emporia State University

Abstract
Phonological awareness and phonics are critical components of early literacy development, serving as foundational skills that support decoding and reading comprehension. This manuscript explores the integration of phonological awareness and phonics through explicit, systematic instruction. It highlights the importance of transitioning students from recognizing and manipulating sounds to connecting these sounds with written symbols. Using evidence-based practices, educators can effectively address diverse student needs, ensuring all learners build a strong foundation for reading. Practical applications, such as tailored lessons and activities, are provided to guide educators in fostering successful literacy outcomes.

Keywords: assessment, instruction, literacy, phonological awareness, phonics

Phonological awareness—the ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in spoken language—serves as the foundation for phonics, which links sounds to written symbols. Together, these skills play a vital role in reading development, supporting decoding and comprehension. The importance of phonological awareness to early literacy development continues to be an area of intensive research. It is considered one of the most valid predictors of reading ability lasting through adulthood (Seidenberg et al., 2020; Hulme et al., 2002; Ouellette & Haley, 2011).

Despite the importance of these skills, many struggling readers lack sufficient phonological awareness and phonics instruction. Without explicit teaching, students face barriers that impede their literacy progress. Explicit, systematic instruction in these areas is essential to improving reading outcomes. Research highlights that phoneme-level awareness is most important to reading development as phonemes represent the smallest unit of sounds (Ouellette & Haley, 2011). When combined with knowledge of the alphabet, young children learn to connect graphemes and phonemes into spoken and written words (International Literacy Association, 2019, 2020). The purpose of this manuscript is to provide educators with evidence-based practices for integrating phonological awareness and phonics instruction to support early literacy development. By emphasizing the systematic and explicit teaching of these foundational skills, the article aims to

address the diverse needs of learners, offering practical applications and assessment tools to bridge gaps in reading proficiency and foster successful literacy outcomes for all students.

Understanding Phonological Awareness and Phonics

Ms. Gimino, an early elementary teacher, recently began participating in a state-wide professional development initiative focused on literacy and reading instruction. As part of the program, she attended a workshop that emphasized the importance of foundational reading skills, including phonological awareness and phonics. While Ms. Gimino is passionate about improving her students' reading outcomes, she struggles to grasp the differences between the many terms used in the training. Words like "phoneme," "onset-rime," and "grapheme" feel overwhelming, leaving her uncertain about how they connect to her students' ability to read and comprehend text effectively. She wonders how these abstract concepts translate to concrete classroom activities and how they impact her students' long-term literacy achievement.

Phonological awareness is a broad term that encompasses the ability to detect and manipulate sounds at various linguistic levels, including word awareness, syllable awareness, onset-rime awareness, and phoneme awareness. These skills are often described as existing along a continuum of complexity, beginning with larger, more concrete units like rhyming and sentence segmentation before advancing to more refined skills like phoneme manipulation (Chard & Dickson, 1999). For instance, word awareness involves recognizing individual words within sentences, while syllable awareness focuses on identifying the parts of words. Onset-rime awareness allows learners to distinguish between initial sounds (onsets) and the remaining parts of syllables (rimes), ultimately culminating in phoneme awareness, the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds in words (International Literacy Association, 2020).

Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness and specifically refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate individual sounds, or phonemes, in spoken words (Hulme et al., 2002). While phonological awareness encompasses a broader range of sound manipulation skills, such as recognizing syllables or rhymes, phonemic awareness targets the smallest units of sound, which are critical for decoding and spelling (Chard & Dickson, 1999). For example, segmenting a word like "cat" into its individual phonemes (/k/, /a/, /t/) requires phonemic awareness, whereas clapping out the syllables in "table" involves phonological awareness at a broader level.

Phonics, on the other hand, builds on phonological awareness by teaching the relationship between phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (letters) (Tompkins & Rodgers, 2020). This instruction enables students to decode written text, which is critical for developing fluent reading skills. Research underscores the importance of phonological awareness as the foundation upon which phonics instruction is built, with phoneme-level tasks being particularly predictive of future reading success (Hulme et al., 2002; Ouellette & Haley, 2011). For example, students who can manipulate phonemes are better equipped to map those sounds to letters, thereby facilitating decoding and comprehension (Seidenberg et al., 2020).

Understanding the interplay between these components is vital. Phonological awareness provides the groundwork for phonics, allowing educators to scaffold learning effectively. By starting with auditory recognition of sounds and gradually introducing written symbols, students can bridge the gap between spoken and written language. This connection is especially important for struggling readers, as explicit, systematic instruction in these foundational skills has been shown to significantly enhance literacy outcomes (National Reading Panel, 2000; Ouellette & Haley, 2011).

Assessing Students' Skills

Ms. Gimino's kindergarten classroom is filled with students at varying levels of early literacy development. While some are confidently blending phonemes and identifying rhymes, others struggle to recognize letter-sound correspondences or segment simple words. As a new teacher, Ms. Gimino feels overwhelmed trying to pinpoint each

student's strengths and areas of need. She wonders how to use assessments effectively to gain insights that will guide her instruction and support every learner in her classroom.

Accurately assessing phonological awareness and phonics skills is crucial for identifying students' strengths and areas of need. Unveiling this information is a prerequisite for targeted instruction, as it allows educators to design interventions that directly address foundational literacy gaps, enabling all students to progress in their reading development (Kilpatrick, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2018). These assessments guide targeted instruction and inform decisions about interventions. As literacy research evolves, assessment tools continue to be refined, ensuring more precise identification of students' needs. Additionally, policy updates emphasize the importance of early screening and intervention, equipping educators with better resources to support diverse learners.

Identifying Students' Strengths and Areas of Need

Phonological awareness can be assessed through tools that measure students' ability to detect and manipulate sounds (see Table 1). Effective assessments not only identify areas where students excel but also illuminate specific gaps that may impede literacy development. These gaps might manifest in difficulty blending phonemes, identifying rhymes, or segmenting words into individual sounds. Recognizing these areas allows educators to create targeted interventions that address foundational skills essential for reading success (Kilpatrick, 2015). In Kansas, the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) mandates the use of state-approved dyslexia screeners to help identify phonological and phonemic awareness skills, decoding abilities, and other critical literacy components. These screeners provide educators with essential data to pinpoint student strengths and areas of need. This foundational understanding enables teachers to design interventions that are both strategic and responsive to individual learning profiles, supporting more effective and targeted literacy instruction (KSDE, 2023).

Common assessments include the Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST), which evaluates skills such as rhyming, blending, and segmenting (Kilpatrick, 2015). Another widely used tool is Acadience Reading (formerly known as DIBELS), which offers subtests like Phoneme Segmentation Fluency and Initial Sound Fluency (Acadience Learning, 2020). Additionally, the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness assessments provide a structured way to measure skills like phoneme isolation, blending, and deletion (Heggerty, 2021). These assessments provide a clear picture of students' abilities to work with sounds in spoken language.

Table 1.

Assessment Tools for Phonological Awareness and Phonics

Assessment Tool	Focus Area	Skills Assessed
Quick Phonics Screener (QPS)	Phonics, decoding, letter-sound knowledge	Letter-sound correspondences, single and multisyllabic decoding
Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST)	Phonological awareness	Rhyming, blending, segmenting
Acadience Reading	Phonological awareness, phonics	Initial sound fluency, phoneme segmentation, decoding
Heggerty Letter Identification and Sound Assessment	Letter identification, sound identification	Letter recognition, letter sound knowledge, automaticity

Assessment Tool	Focus Area	Skills Assessed
LETRS Phonics and Word Reading Survey	Phonics decoding, word recognition	Letter naming, decoding patterns
Informal Reading Inventories (e.g. Jennings Informal Reading Inventory[1], Qualitative Reading Inventory; QRI-VII)	Reading comprehension, word recognition	Word recognition, decoding, fluency, comprehension
KSDE-Approved Dyslexia Screeners[2]	Phonological awareness, decoding	Rapid naming, phoneme segmentation, letter-sound fluency
Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP-2)[3]	Phonological processing	Phonological memory, phonemic awareness, rapid naming

Phonics assessments focus on evaluating students' decoding and sound-letter knowledge (see Table 1). Tools such as the Quick Phonics Screener (QPS; Hasbrouck, 2006) and the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) assess skills like letter-sound correspondences, decoding ability, and word recognition (Leslie & Caldwell, 2016). The LETRS Phonics and Word Reading Survey is another valuable tool for diagnosing gaps in word recognition and phonics skills, including letter naming and advanced decoding patterns (Moats & Tolman, 2019). These tools are instrumental in pinpointing gaps that may hinder reading development and identifying students who require additional support.

Building on these findings, one effective method is the use of diagnostic teaching, where educators adapt their methods based on immediate observations and assessment results. For example, if a student demonstrates proficiency in phoneme segmentation but struggles with letter-sound correspondences, instruction might focus on activities that integrate sound and symbol recognition (Heggerty, 2021). Frequent progress monitoring ensures that adjustments can be made promptly to keep instruction aligned with the student's development.

Strategies for Meeting Diverse Classroom Needs

Ms. Gimino realizes that the diversity of student needs in her classroom makes implementing effective differentiated instruction a challenging task. However, she begins to explore structured strategies that align instruction with assessment data and target specific areas of need.

Strategies include station-based learning, small-group instruction, peer-assisted learning, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Station-based learning provides a structured approach where students rotate through targeted literacy activities designed to reinforce phonemic awareness and bridge into phonics instruction. This approach ensures that students engage in hands-on, differentiated practice while receiving support tailored to their skill level (Puzio et al., 2020). For instance, one station may focus on phoneme segmentation, where students use Elkonin boxes to

[1] Jennings, J. H., Caldwell, J. A., & Lerner, J. W. (2017). *Jennings informal reading inventory* (4th ed.). Pearson

[2] Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE). (2023). *Approved dyslexia screening assessments.* https://www.ksde.org

[3] Wagner, R. K., Torgesen, J. K., Rashotte, C. A., & Pearson, N. A. (2013). *Comprehensive test of phonological processing (2nd ed.).* Pro-Ed.

break words into individual sounds, strengthening their ability to manipulate phonemes orally. Another station might incorporate letter tiles or magnetic letters, allowing students to match phonemes with graphemes, reinforcing the connection between spoken sounds and printed letters (Ehri & Roberts, 2006). A teacher-led station can provide direct instruction in blending and decoding, guiding students through word-building exercises that transition from oral phonemic awareness activities to phonics-based reading tasks (Treiman, 2018). Additionally, a technology-enhanced station may integrate adaptive literacy software, such as Lexia Core5, which provides immediate feedback on phoneme manipulation and decoding skills, ensuring individualized practice based on each student's needs (Fletcher et al., 2018).

Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) involve pairing students to work collaboratively on literacy tasks. PALS can strengthen phonemic awareness and early decoding skills by providing structured opportunities for students to engage in phoneme segmentation, blending, and letter-sound correspondence activities (McMaster & Fuchs, 2015). For example, structured peer activities, such as paired reading with a focus on phoneme manipulation or word-building exercises, allow students to reinforce their skills while supporting one another. UDL principles emphasize creating flexible learning environments that accommodate a wide range of learners. By offering multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, UDL allows students to access content in ways that suit their individual needs (CAST, 2018). Examples include integrating visual aids, auditory supports, and hands-on materials, which can enhance engagement and comprehension for all students. Technology-based interventions also play a key role in addressing diverse needs. Adaptive literacy software and digital tools provide individualized practice and immediate feedback, making them valuable for supplementing classroom instruction. Programs like Lexia Core5 adapt to students' skill levels, ensuring targeted practice in areas of need (Fletcher et al., 2018).

Instructional Strategies for Bridging Phonological Awareness to Phonics

Ms. Gimino reviewed her students' assessment data and considered how to guide their transition from phonological awareness to phonics. Recognizing the diverse needs in her classroom, she planned lessons that utilized explicit instruction to introduce sound manipulation and small-group activities tailored to specific skills like blending and sound-symbol connections. By combining effective lesson planning with targeted strategies, she aimed to support all her students in building a strong foundation for reading.

Effective reading instruction requires thoughtful integration of phonological awareness into phonics lessons. Transitioning from phonological awareness to phonics involves a deliberate progression from recognizing and manipulating sounds to connecting those sounds with written symbols (Adams, 1990; National Reading Panel, 2000). Evidence-based and practical applications can support educators in guiding students from oral sound work to decoding and fluent reading. For example, when teaching the vowel teams "ea" and "ee," focus on hearing and manipulating the sounds of words like "tree," "see," "bean," and "team" before mapping the sounds to their corresponding letters. This reinforces auditory processing before linking it to visual symbols (Snow et al., 1998).

Effective Lesson Planning

Beginning lessons within an explicit instruction framework is critical to successfully bridging phonological awareness to phonics. Lessons should start with activities focused on hearing and manipulating sounds, such as identifying rhymes or segmenting phonemes, before progressing to connecting these sounds to written symbols (Carnine et al., 2015). For instance, students might practice blending the sounds /s/, /ee/, and /m/ to form "seem" and then identify the vowel team "ee." A structured approach, like the one below, ensures that students receive clear explanations, modeling, guided practice, and opportunities for independent application (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

1. **Stating the Objective.** Clearly define the goal of the lesson in student-friendly language while emphasizing the relevance. For example, "Today, we will learn to read and spell words with the vowel teams 'ea' and 'ee.' Knowing these vowel teams will help us read many words we see in books and spell words correctly when we write."

2. **Phonological Awareness Practice.** Engage students in sound-based activities, such as identifying the long /ee/ sound in spoken words. For example, say, "Listen carefully. Do you hear the /ee/ sound in 'tree' or 'cat'?"

3. **Reviewing Previously Learned Content.** Review prior phonics patterns, such as short vowels. For instance, ask students to identify the vowel sound in "bed" and compare it to the sound in "bead."

4. **Direct Instruction: Explicitly Modeling the Decoding Process.** Explicitly teach the new concept, such as explaining that "ea" and "ee" both make the long /ee/ sound. Use visual aids like word cards with examples (e.g., "tree," "beam") and model how to decode them. Teachers can also model how to decode words with "ee" and "ea" using a think-aloud strategy. For example, write the word "see" on the board and say: "I see two vowels together—'ee.' I remember that 'ee' makes the long /ee/ sound, like in 'tree.' I'll say the sounds: /s/ - /ee/. Now, I'll blend them together: see." Then, model with "seat." "I see the vowels 'ea.' I know that 'ea' can make the long /ee/ sound. Let me check—/s/ - /ee/ - /t/, seat! It sounds right, so 'ea' must be saying /ee/ in this word." This step ensures students hear the blending process and see how to apply decoding strategies when encountering new words (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

5. **Guided Practice.** Provide structured opportunities for students to practice decoding words with "ea" and "ee." Display words like "see," "team," "bean," and "green" on word cards. Call on students to: (a) Point to the vowel team in each word; (b) say the sound it makes; (c) blend the sounds together to read the whole word; (d) identify whether the vowel team "ea" or "ee" is used. During this step, use scaffolding by prompting students who struggle, such as guiding them to say each phoneme before blending.

6. **Dictation.** Dictate sentences containing "ea" and "ee" words, such as "I see a green tree" or "The team won the game." This activity helps reinforce sound-letter mapping and spelling.

7. **Connected Text.** Incorporate decodable books or passages that include words with the target vowel teams. For example, read a short story about a "team" on a "green" field, encouraging students to highlight or underline "ea" and "ee" words as they read.

This lesson plan references the LETRS General Phonics Lesson Plan framework[4], with modifications to focus on specific vowel teams and integration of phonological awareness activities.

[4] LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) is a professional development program designed to equip educators with knowledge of the science of reading, focusing on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Moats & Tolman, 2019).

Teachers can adapt these steps to align with LETRS guidelines while emphasizing hands-on practice and connected text reading.

Explicit modeling and guided practice ensure that students understand the connections being made. By systematically demonstrating the decoding process and providing structured opportunities for students to apply these skills, educators can help them build confidence in recognizing and reading vowel teams (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Educators can also leverage generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enhance their lesson planning by generating additional examples of sound manipulation tasks or providing differentiated activities tailored to students' needs. For example, AI platforms can create lists of words with specific phonics patterns, such as "ee" or "ea," or develop interactive digital sound-matching games, which engage students in meaningful practice while reinforcing core concepts (McNamara et al., 2004).

Practical Activities for Bridging Skills

Incorporating engaging and structured activities can enhance the transition from phonological awareness to phonics. Below are practical classroom strategies divided into two key areas:

Phoneme Segmentation and Blending to Introduce Decoding

1. **Segmenting Words with Manipulatives**: Use counters, chips, or blocks to represent sounds in words. For example, students can push a chip forward for each sound they hear in "ship" (/sh/, /i/, /p/) and then blend the sounds to read the word (Adams, 1990).
2. **Blending Drills**: Provide students with spoken phonemes, such as /k/, /a/, /t/, and ask them to blend the sounds into "cat." This can be done with visual support like letter cards or a whiteboard for mapping sounds to letters (Ehri, 2005).
3. **Elkonin Boxes**: Students segment sounds into boxes using manipulatives and then write the corresponding letters in each box. This technique bridges phoneme segmentation with letter-sound mapping (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Sound Manipulation Games Tied to Phonics Patterns

1. **Phoneme Substitution Game**: Challenge students to change one sound in a word to create a new word. For example, substitute the /m/ in "mat" with /s/ to form "sat." This activity can reinforce the concept of phoneme manipulation while introducing new phonics patterns (Snow et al., 1998).
2. **Sound Matching Relay**: Create a game where students sort word cards by phonics patterns, such as vowel teams "ea" and "ee." For instance, students can place "tree" and "green" in one group and "team" and "bean" in another (Carnine et al., 2015).
3. **Interactive Digital Tools**: Use AI-powered games or apps to provide immediate feedback on phonics practice. For example, apps like Starfall or Teach Your Monster to Read offer interactive phonics games where students match sounds to letters or words in a gamified environment.

Multi-Sensory Activities for Phonics Instruction

Multi-sensory approaches engage multiple senses to enhance learning, such as using tactile, auditory, and visual elements in phonics instruction. While these strategies can be effective for some students, Earle and Sayeski (2019) caution that their effectiveness depends on the quality of implementation and should be paired with explicit, systematic instruction. Below are examples of multi-sensory activities:

1. **Sand Writing:** Students write letters or words in a tray of sand while saying the sounds aloud, reinforcing the connection between phonemes and graphemes.
2. **Magnetic Letters:** Use magnetic letters to build words on a board. Students manipulate the letters while pronouncing the sounds.
3. **Sky Writing:** Have students use their fingers to trace letters in the air while saying the corresponding sounds.
4. **Play-Doh Phonics:** Students shape letters or words out of Play-Doh and practice saying the associated sounds.
5. **Sound Walk:** Incorporate movement by having students hop, clap, or step for each sound in a word.
6. **Tactile Cards:** Use textured alphabet cards that students can trace with their fingers as they vocalize the sounds.

Additional Activities for Bridging Skills

1. **Onset and Rime Sorting**: Provide students with cards displaying onsets (e.g., "tr") and rimes (e.g., "ee"). Have them mix and match to form real words like "tree" or "free." This activity builds an understanding of word families and phonics patterns (Treiman, 2018).
2. **Word Chain Challenges**: Start with a word like "seat" and ask students to change one letter at a time to form new words, such as "beat" or "meat." This activity emphasizes letter-sound relationships and builds decoding skills (Ehri, 2014).
3. **Phonics Pattern Bingo**: Create Bingo cards featuring words with specific phonics patterns, such as "ea," "ee," or "ai." Call out words or sounds, and have students cover the matching word or pattern on their cards. This reinforces phonics patterns in an engaging way (Carnine et al., 2015).

These activities offer practical ways to bridge foundational phonological skills with phonics instruction, ensuring students develop the decoding skills needed for fluent reading.

As the weeks passed, Ms. Gimino saw noticeable growth in her students' ability to decode words and apply their phonics knowledge to reading and writing. By incorporating station-based learning and small-group instruction, she was able to provide targeted support, ensuring that students received the instruction they needed. Students who once struggled to blend sounds were now using explicit decoding strategies, such as segmenting phonemes and mapping them to graphemes, to read unfamiliar words with greater confidence. During whole-group lessons, she continued to emphasize sound manipulation activities before introducing new letter-sound relationships, reinforcing phonemic awareness as the foundation for phonics instruction. One student, who had previously relied on guessing words, began applying word chaining exercises to recognize spelling patterns, a shift that reinforced the importance of systematic, scaffolded instruction. Through careful planning and intentional teaching, Ms. Gimino realized that bridging phonological awareness and phonics was not just about teaching skills—it was about creating structured, supportive opportunities for all students to build the confidence and tools they needed to become successful readers.

Conclusion

Phonological awareness and phonics form the backbone of reading development, enabling students to decode and comprehend text effectively. By leveraging assessment data and implementing explicit, systematic instruction, educators can bridge gaps in foundational skills and support diverse learners. Integrating sound manipulation with phonics instruction ensures a deliberate progression from auditory recognition to written language comprehension. With targeted strategies and practical activities, educators can empower all students to achieve literacy success, laying the groundwork for lifelong reading proficiency.

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DUALITIES OF DUAL ENROLLMENT: NAVIGATING THE LITERAL AND LIMINAL SPACES OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE OUTREACH PROGRAM

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Abstract
The rise in popularity of dual enrollment/dual credit (DE/DC) programs offers both challenges and opportunities for students and faculty alike. The voices and experiences of faculty, while less often studied, provide insights into the nature of these programs and the ambiguities and liminalities they create. This reflective essay, while presenting the experiences of only one faculty member in only one of these programs, may be useful for faculty, administrators, and students.

Keywords: dual enrollment, dual credit, outreach, community college, high school

I found myself frantically calling the front desk at Little River High School at 8:50 one snowy morning, hurtling west on Highway 56 at the fastest I dared.

"Hey, uh, this is Lael Ewy, and I teach the second-hour college comp. class for Hutch Community College, and I'm going to be a few minutes late."

The voice at the other end was calm, as any successful school secretary's must be.

"OK. I'll let the kids know and make sure the room is open. Stay safe!"

I did. My car has good traction control and decent tires, and my role requires enough windshield time to make for an experienced driver.

The role of an instructor in a community college outreach program requires planning, patience, and the sort of flexibility to throw all of that to the wind at the flash of a text or the appearance of an unexpected squall while responding to the complexities and ambiguities these programs present.

Where Have We Been?

Definitions

"Outreach" is only one term for programs that allow high school students to bank college credits from local institutions. Most people are familiar with International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) programs, but these represent a different category. Based on set curricula and meant to fit with existing high school culture, IB and AP programs present the level of academic rigor of a postsecondary class but are not taught under the aegis of a college or university.

Dual enrollment or dual credit programs (DE/DC)—"Outreach" in the parlance of Hutchinson Community College (properly shortened to HutchCC according to our communications team)—are mirrors of the courses college freshmen would be likely to take their first academic year.

Usually focusing on common general education classes (e.g., English composition, speech, and college algebra), these courses are taught through dedicated programs via local or regional community colleges or public universities, often alongside career or technical education programs. They are taught either by qualified (Master's or above) high school teachers or, as in my case, by faculty from local colleges. Some classes are "blended," which means an on-site teacher does all of the in-class instruction, and the "teacher of record," working for the local college, grades the work and provides feedback online.

The teaching modes in DE/DC programs can take many forms: in-person classes at high schools themselves, online courses, through videoconferencing at dedicated camera-and-microphone-equipped rooms at satellite campuses, or various combinations of these. I have taught classes that included in-person students at a HutchCC satellite campus and students Zooming in from two high school classrooms in nearby towns. Most of these courses are marketed to high school students first, but if there is a slot in a class that meets at a satellite campus, I might have students in the room ranging in age from 16 to 65.

Thus, preparation is key.

While most DE/DC courses use common syllabi shared by, say, all of the composition classes at the accredited college, academic calendars vary by high school. Since any given instructor may teach at half a dozen regional high schools, she must plan according to half a dozen academic calendars. Fortunately, those schools publish their calendars on their websites prior to the start of the academic year, giving the instructor a clear idea of what to expect.

Except when they don't.

On Schedule

The school schedules published at the beginning of each academic year are baselines from which variations on the theme are played. My first year working in the Outreach program saw one high school at which I taught add inservice days late in the fall semester due to delayed union contract negotiations. I have shifted class start times due to conflicts with AP classes, and when one particularly small school at which I teach sends a team to a state tournament (any team), literally the whole district shuts down, trundles onto buses, and follows the team to cheer them on. School spirit is great, but this sort of thing also has me scrambling to revise my lesson plans. Inclement weather is a given in Kansas, but my situation is complicated by the fact that it is also local: the same weather system that leaves the main campus dry can dump six inches of snow on a remote high school or satellite campus. Severe weather has me scanning media and email and text threads to see where I need to be and to reconsider whether or not I need to invest in an all-wheel-drive car. And then there are the realities of teaching the higher-achieving, more engaged tier of students at each high school and finding that only three out of the fifteen students will be in class because the choir will be at a competition 100 miles away—and the higher-achieving, most engaged students are, of course, in choir.

The lesson here is not only to always have a plan B but to always be able to scrap that at the last minute, to push back lessons, due dates, and learning units, and always to be ready to give a handful of students a "work day" so they can get things done while we wait for the rest of the class to come back from their extracurricular adventures.

On Being Liminal

Being a teacher in a dual enrollment program means being neither here nor there—or rather, both here *and* there. It means being *in* everything but not *of* anything. The word "liminal" is used frequently when describing the role, for example, by Russo (2020), McWain (2018), and Wilkinson (2019). Since I teach at several different high schools, I carry laminated identity cards from those

schools in order to access the buildings (to "badge in" and "badge out") and to show other teachers and administrators that I belong there for the three or so hours a week I am on campus. This is a necessity in the age of heightened security at public schools—a constant reminder of the reality of school shootings, even at rural schools, even at schools that have their own trap-shooting teams, schools to which students routinely drive pickups with filled rifle racks in the back windows. In order to be aware of changes that may affect me, I am signed up for the high schools' email lists, the districts' texts. Ninety percent of these communications have nothing to do with me, but I end up with a sample of the schools' cultures, of which teachers get the shout-outs, which ones routinely make their students late to other classes. I "know" these people the same way one might know someone exclusively over social media, except I am the eternal lurker: for what purpose would I ever interact?

My situation also creates other issues, though: if a high school has a lockdown drill, a tornado drill, or a fire drill I need to know what the building protocol is, and, for the sake of the students and good Outreach relations, follow it. But it may also just get in the way: if a lockdown drill goes past the class time, I usually need to leave in order to meet some other class at some other campus. Officially, I'm out, but what do I do with the kids? Just leave them there in a dark classroom, waiting for the all clear?

The same situation with only slightly more connection applies to my relationship with my employer as well. My office is at a satellite campus (Newton, Kansas), some of my classes are at another (McPherson, Kansas), and my other classes are scattered across a variety of high schools, some of which I never set foot in, serving those students either over Zoom or with "blended" classes consisting of a classroom teacher doing the fun part, and for which I just grade the course materials via our online learning platform.

During an average academic year, I am on the main campus in Hutchinson, Kansas only a handful of times; I use videoconferencing to attend department and committee meetings. I have colleagues, but it is difficult to establish collegiality. I am a faculty member of Hutchinson Community College in more or less good standing, but I am forever marginal, limning the edges of its service areas, pursuing its mission but not exactly one of the crew.

This ambiguity extends to my place on the organizational chart. Officially, I report to the co-chairs of Department 3, Fine Arts and Humanities, but my schedule is set by the Outreach team. Professionally, I am evaluated by Department 3, but Outreach also evaluates the courses I teach. Outreach serves the needs of the high schools and their communities, which aligns with the mission of the college, but which also sometimes creates friction when we who teach in these programs enforce college-level academic standards and expectations for attendance and communication with parents (or a lack thereof). I joke about certain standards or expectations, about materials that contain more sex or foul language or high-level thinking than high school students are used to, with a shrug and the tagline "Welcome to college, kid," but it also isn't fair to throw a perhaps sheltered student into this situation without some support and some explanation, which I also have learned to provide. (For examples, see the "Navigating Difference" and "Where We Are" sections below.)

It is difficult not to try to serve two masters here—including the high schools, maybe three or four. In order to make the situation work, I have to be creative at times, adjusting lessons and writing prompts to make them more relevant to the lives of my students, providing more activities in class than I would in a "normal" college classroom. I get students moving around and working in small groups. I run Kahoot!s and often gamify lessons that would otherwise be more straightforward lecture or textual analysis.

Navigating Difference

Some differences, though, are hard to breach: public school students have gotten used to a minimal amount of homework, but in college, *all* the work is homework, and class is generally the location of enrichment, discussion, lecture, the place to add perspective to the material. I have had to throw all that out the window: we routinely read through course materials in their entirety, and I often reserve class time to finish assignments posted online. I also use our online learning platform as a place to upload the products of class activities, creating quick and easy formative assessments and giving students an incentive to participate; public school kids will not do anything unless they get "points" for it. One-to-one technology (school district-supplied laptops) makes this possible, but it also creates barriers: so locked-down are these computers by districts terrified that students will look at porn or guns that students often cannot open the links I use for enrichment. In one memorable example, the McPherson district blocked access to *The New Yorker*, from which I had linked a benign but descriptive article on monster trucks.

Since it takes both time and often substantial effort to get their IT departments to unblock web sources, I often just have students do research on their phones, putting me at odds with increasingly draconian public-school anti-cellphone policies. As often, I just tell students that, when they are doing research and run across a blocked source that otherwise looks good, they should send me a link and I will print the page to a .pdf and send it back. It is a clunky workaround. No student has sent me a link to porn yet.

When it comes time to assign grades, other differences emerge: most college teachers think nothing of flunking a student who ghosts the class or underperforms. While it is not necessarily true that public schools will pass everyone, there is substantial pressure to "get students through," and so due dates and what constitutes a "D" may slide. In public schools, a "D" is passing, the bare minimum to which disengaged students aspire. In my composition classes, a "C" is required to move on to the next level, leaving the "D" students with credit holes to fill the next semester. Likewise, if students fail to pass my college class in the spring of their senior year, it is possible they will not be able to graduate, as the high school credits my class was to provide are not there. In a normal college situation, this would not be considered the teacher's problem, but in DE/DC programs, it constitutes something of a crisis.

In public school classrooms, much effort is put into "engagement," and failure to get all the students on board with the lessons at all times is considered a failure by the teacher. In college, if a student chooses to play games on their laptop or text their friends all through class, many teachers will just think "Hey, that's on you kid. It's your money, and you can spend it as you like." While declining enrollment in higher education is changing that situation somewhat, the onus for giving a rip about one's education and the responsibility for engagement are still primarily on the student. In order to address these differences, I often explicitly state what students will be responsible for and why. If an assignment is ambiguous, I try to point out to students that this is purposeful: "*You* get to decide how long this paper should be given the expectations of the prompt."

This solution is imperfect since most of the students I serve have never had to make these choices before. In order to achieve a standard outcome, public school teachers have had to create standardized student experiences. The formulaic writing of ChatGPT looks good to students because it is an idealized version of what they have been taught to write.

Classroom standards for "seat time" are set in public school classrooms by the Carnegie unit, in the college classroom by standards for a credit hour that may or may not involve actually sitting in class. Because my students receive both college and high school credit, my classes run longer in the year than those on the main campus and are supplemented by online materials. While I do get paid extra for that work, my extended academic year further distances me from the main campus community. But the situation also leads to confusion: my classes typically start a week after students'

high school classes and end a week or two before, leaving some students literally not knowing where to go a few weeks out of the year or expecting me to accept late work after my grading deadline.

Where We Are

This clash between academic cultures and expectations has led to criticism of the quality and lack of equity of DE/DC programs. This criticism is not without merit. The vast majority of the students I serve are middle class, white, and would be destined for college no matter what. Many already have colleges picked out (not the one for which I teach), several each semester already having secured athletic or academic scholarships. Matherly (2023), writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, cites Fink's assertion that DE/DC is a "program of privilege," serving primarily white, wealthy, and English-speaking populations and allowing them to rack up college credit at little to no cost. These issues are explored more deeply by Hooper and Harrington (2022), who identify a variety of factors, from barriers to access to lack of institutional support for diverse learners.

Mangan (2016) explores questions about the academic rigor of DE/DC programs: are the high school students signing up for these programs academically prepared for college work? Will instructors "dumb down" these classes in order to meet unprepared students where they are? Are the students who enroll in them intellectually and emotionally mature enough to handle the work (and its concomitant stress)? In a qualitative survey, Ferguson, Baker, and Burnett (2015) found that teachers perceived their DE/DC enrolled students' abilities and maturity levels to be as high as those of traditional college students, though, notably, only 3 of the 15 surveyed had taught at both high school and college levels. These same teachers reported that there was no difference between the design of college courses and the DE/DC courses they teach.

My experience is similar, but with a caveat. Aside from the aforementioned differences in the classroom experience, the online course shells I use with my composition classes are the same ones that other HutchCC students use; indeed, a certain level of standardization for required general education courses is a common feature of higher education. Having taught at both colleges and at a high school, I pitch my composition classes at the level expected of a "grade 13"/lower division college class. Maturity and academic preparation, though, vary by student: most of the students enrolled in my courses are intellectually able to do the work, even if they are not always prepared for the time commitment it requires. As most Outreach students at HutchCC are planning on going to college, many already have experience with college-prep classes, honors courses, and advanced-placement programs.

Some, however, are neither academically nor emotionally prepared, with a handful academically prepared but not emotionally prepared. Behavior issues are common in ways that would not seem typical of college classes. However, using an online 200-level literature course at Wichita State that I also teach as a comparison, many of the "traditional" college students enrolled in that course are also not academically prepared for college level work, and a reduction in emotional maturity for Gen Z and Gen Alpha students is generally understood (Twenge, 2017). Possibly, any lack of preparation or decline in maturity notable in DE/DC students is just part of a larger trend.

Getting It Out of the Way

Perhaps the more worrisome problem is what DE/DC classes reveal about general education classes, both within the organization and out of it. Speech, college composition, college algebra, and basic psychology classes, the ones most typically offered in DE/DC programs, come off as necessary evils, courses that need "taking care of" (Hassel, 2012, p. 1), and "getting out of the way" before the real education, the one geared towards students' interests and career goals, can begin. I cannot claim to create very many English majors in my first and second level composition classes (though I have warned a few students they de facto already were), but I do think that what

we offer in these classes has real value. From the most basic skills, like learning to use a semicolon, to more complex, like learning different patterns of formal argumentation, composition classes not only make students better writers but more attentive and better thinking people. There is a reason, after all, that general education classes are still required. Even if a student is destined to be a welder, that welder will have to communicate with coworkers and create documentation. If she goes out on her own, she will have to write business proposals and, if her firm gets big, create quarterly and annual reports. We do not just prepare students to write well for other classes–though that, too, is an important part of what we do.

I cringe, then, when students say, on the first day when we go over why they signed up for the class, that they want to "get it out of the way." It gives me a chance to preach a bit, but even a semester's worth of sermons will not necessarily convert people from 12-years' worth of proselytizing by the One True Faith of the strictly economic value of education.

Where We Might Go

None of this is to say that DE/DC programs do not provide the fulfillment of teaching and even some touches of the sublime. By focusing on students at a critical time of their lives, DE/DC teachers are able to help students make important decisions about their futures and, hopefully, instill in them a little more confidence and perspective than would be typical of most entering freshmen. It is still possible to create positive academic relationships with students, even with the barriers of distance and time. By adapting teaching practices to something closer to what DE/DC students are used to, and by ratcheting up academic expectations more gradually than in a traditional college class, by being clear about why we are studying what we are studying, and by remaining flexible in terms of the academic calendar, DE/DC instructors can achieve something close or equal to what students will experience their freshman year on campus.

Further, there is little more beautiful than having moon-set on the left and dawn on the right as I ply my way north on I-135, and there is little more satisfying to see than a student finally "get it," as I typically have the same students for Comp. 1 and Comp. 2.

With DE/DC programs increasing in enrollment (Matherly, 2023), it behooves us to face the challenges they pose and leverage opportunities for these programs to be conduits for students to move toward greater levels of achievement, not just to more credits earned.

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ALL AMERICAN BOYS HAS STAYING POWER A DECADE LATER: HERE'S WHY

Kaitlyn Chain, Avery Gathright, Alice Huelskamp, and Sophia Loerke
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Abstract
Four future English language arts teachers explain why Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's 2015 award-winning young adult novel *All American Boys* remains relevant a decade after its publication.

Keywords: Jason Reynolds, Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys*, police brutality, social justice, systemic racism, young adult literature

Background and Overview

Avery Gathright and Sophia Loerke

Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's award-winning 2015 young adult novel *All American Boys* is a powerful read that is still relevant in 2025. The story is told from the perspectives of two high school students. Rashad Butler is a Black 11th grader and member of the JROTC who is wrongly accused of stealing at a convenience store and brutally beaten by Officer Paul Galluzzo, who is white. Quinn Collins is a white 12th grader and varsity basketball player who looked up to Officer Galluzzo like a father figure and experiences confusion and disillusionment after watching him brutalize Rashad.

Instances of racism, police brutality, and hate crimes can (and do) happen suddenly in the real world, without justification, and have long-lasting impacts on everyone, not just the single person attacked. Although certainly relevant in 2015 when the book was published as a commentary on how systemic racism is still an issue over 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement, *All American Boys* might be even more relevant now, a decade after its initial publication. In 2025, we are seeing our government regress at an alarming rate, and marginalized people are targeted more and more with each passing day.

All American Boys brilliantly holds space for anger and frustration with the injustices that people of color face, but it also empowers the characters and the reader to channel that anger in effective, safe, and peaceful ways in order to be the voice and force of change. On this 10th anniversary of its publication, we—future English teachers—want to highlight important themes in *All American Boys* and argue for its continued inclusion in school and classroom libraries and English language arts curricula.

Authentically "All-American"

Alice Huelskamp

I think one of my favorite aspects of *All-American Boys* is its discussion of that titular concept: "all-American." That term seems straightforward, but in a country defined by its diversity and indefinability, describing anything as "American" is rife with ambiguity. Really, to fully exemplify the values of America, you have to embody a set of values that accepts, uplifts and protects everyone's culture and identity. Unfortunately, our general social concept of "all-American" does instead tend to be confined to the box of affluent, independent, invincible, male, Christian, and— most prominently— white. Especially growing up in a very homogenous rural town, I have seen most people in my community use these ideas to define "American." It always felt uncomfortable to hear people around me talk about other people as "un-American" and realize what demographics they gave that description. No one ever looked at a violent police officer or a racist politician and called them un-American, but they were always ready to slap that word onto someone peacefully protesting or discussing the history of institutional oppression.

I appreciate that the novel brings up this misuse of the term "all-American." At the start of the story, Rashad and Quinn actually both fit several of the stereotypical American ideas, like independence, hard work, and loyalty; but only one of them— Quinn— fits the most important standard, whiteness. The novel also makes a point to show how Quinn actually is often less representative of stereotypically American morals and character, by pointing out that he smokes and is quick to duck out of work. As the novel goes on, I really like that it moves beyond those stereotypical standards for American-ness, though. Gradually, it shows that it's not actually important who does or does not smoke, or who works harder—Rashad and Quinn are "all-American" because they choose to exemplify the most core values of their country. They stand up for acceptance and progress, and, perhaps more noteworthily, stand *against* intolerance and oppression.

One of my favorite quotes from James Baldwin touches on this very idea: "I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." So many people whom I have heard or directly spoken to seem to believe that America is untouchable, that to acknowledge any issues in its institution makes you unpatriotic, un-American. However, this belief actually seems more "un-American" to me, seeing as our country was originally founded on ideas of questioning and resisting unfair, oppressive, and faulty institutions. Most of our major "American heroes" were people who spoke up and acted against oppression in our country—people like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Harriet Tubman. Perhaps one of the most "American" things we can do is to continue on that foundational mindset, and have the courage to hold our country accountable, demand it uphold its values of diversity and equality, and work to make the world around us better for everyone.

That's why stories like *All-American Boys* are incredibly important. This book shows that—no matter who you are—you can be truly American, so long as you lead a life defending everyone's right to liberty, safety, and joy. Rashad and Quinn become all-American when they have the courage to openly acknowledge the injustice around them and demand better of their community, and the book makes that distinction clear and unavoidable. On top of that, it's especially important to have stories like this that break down these ideas in a way that kids can approach and understand them. The themes of *All-American Boys* are complex and often scary to deal with in real life, but the book gives kids an example of people like them navigating such a difficult conversation with support and courage. Kids of all different backgrounds have to live in this country and experience all its successes and faults. They should be given a way to understand their country in its entirety, so that they can feel seen and supported through all that complexity. *All-American Boys* gives kids a path to

not only understand their country, but to also go out into their lives and redefine what it truly means to be "all-American" in a nation founded on the unflinching fight for equality.

Silence or Solidarity: The Role of Educators in *All American Boys*

Kaitlyn Chain

Several moments stood out to me in *All American Boys*, but the one that left the deepest impression was the contrast among the teachers' reactions toward Rashad's attack. Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely do an excellent job of showing how adults, like students, can respond to injustice in very different ways.

On one side of the spectrum, Mr. Fisher, a history teacher, takes an active role in protesting after Rashad's attack. He offers to speak to students after school about the police officer's assault on Rashad, and he designates a class period to discuss the history of police brutality in America and Rashad's beating. Additionally, Mr. Fisher helps students organize the protest. Rashad's close friend English describes Mr. Fisher's support, claiming "'He kept saying how we are part of history. How this is part of history'" (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, pp. 200-201). Mr. Fisher's actions demonstrate his belief that educators have a responsibility to engage students in critical conversations about social justice rather than remaining neutral in the face of oppression.

Mrs. Erlich, Quinn's trigonometry teacher, also uses her class time to actively talk about police brutality, sharing statistics regarding police-involved killings of Black people in the United Kingdom versus the United States. She goes on to state, "'I'm not much of a talker … You know that. But I know numbers. The numbers don't lie, kids. The numbers always tell a story'" (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 255). Though Mrs. Erlich does not take as direct of an activist role as Mr. Fisher, she presents an objective yet powerful argument to her students, showing them the undeniable reality of racial injustice through facts rather than opinion. Both Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Erlich use their positions and voices within the school to actively speak out against the injustice within their community; however, not all teachers at Springfield Central High School do the same.

In comparison to Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Erlich, Ms. Webber, Quinn's econ teacher, prefers to keep silent on the beating of Rashad, placing herself in a neutral position on the topic. This can be seen in her lesson plans after the attack, where she instructed students to "work on a practice section for the next test. Quietly. She emphasized that. *Quietly*. But as we got started, it was all too easy to see Ms. Webber twitching, smiling like she was reminding herself to, and anybody could tell she was nervous and just wanted a silent and nonteaching day of class" (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 133). When pressed on the topic, she suppresses the students and sends them to the office for disrupting the silence. This reaction illustrates how avoidance can inadvertently uphold injustice, as silencing discussion prevents students from engaging in critical conversations about racism and inequality. Her unwillingness to address the issue directly reflects how some authority figures choose neutrality in difficult situations, hoping to avoid conflict rather than confronting injustice head-on. As the novel teaches, silence is another kind of violence, reinforcing the idea that ignoring oppression only allows it to continue (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 290).

Finally, Mrs. Tracey, Quinn's English teacher, struggles to deal with Rashad's beating. Like her colleague Mr. Fisher, Mrs. Tracey was previously known to talk about race actively within her classroom, but she struggles to take an active stance on the injustice within the school, crying in front of her class because her department chair Mr. Godwin wants her to move on to the next unit instead of allowing students to write papers on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Her internal conflict highlights the difficulty some educators face when institutional pressures challenge their convictions. Quinn speaks of the hypocrisy of Mrs. Tracey's reaction after the attack: "I remembered Mrs. Tracey making fun of Mr. Godwin, saying she'd never follow what the department head or the

administration wanted her to teach. But now, suddenly, when they did direct her, she was blaming them for not talking about the book" (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 215). This moment emphasizes how fear and institutional pressure can cause even well-intentioned individuals to waver in their convictions, revealing the challenges of taking a firm stance against injustice. In the end, Mrs. Tracey attends the protest alongside Mr. Fisher, showing how her personal beliefs conquered the fear of administrative actions.

The differing reactions of Mr. Fisher, Mrs. Erlich, Ms. Webber, and Ms. Tracey raise several thought-provoking questions surrounding educators. One major question is how educators and leaders should navigate their roles when injustice affects their communities. Should they prioritize neutrality to maintain order, or should they speak out and risk division? Another question is about the long-term impact of these choices: does silence protect, or does it perpetuate harm? The book doesn't provide easy answers, but it pushes readers to think deeply and engage in difficult conversations regarding the role of educators in the classroom.

Ultimately, *All American Boys* highlights the power and responsibility educators have in shaping students' understanding of justice and activism. The novel demonstrates that silence is not truly neutral and has consequences that can either uphold or challenge systemic injustice. By showcasing the contrasting reactions of Mr. Fisher, Mrs. Erlich, Ms. Webber, and Mrs. Tracey, the book forces readers to reflect on the ways authority figures influence conversations about race and inequality. It challenges us to consider how we, as individuals and as a society, can foster environments where difficult yet necessary discussions are encouraged rather than suppressed. In the end, *All American Boys* serves as a call to action, urging educators, students, and communities to actively stand against injustice rather than remain passive observers.

A Model for Effecting Change

Avery Gathright and Sophia Loerke

What's truly powerful about this novel is that Reynolds and Kiely not only guide young readers through the complexities of racial injustice and the harm of indifference in a way that is digestible, but they also empower readers. They don't just point out problems; they point out solutions like the peaceful protest Rashad's community organizes and creating hashtags like #RashadIsAbsentAgainToday to help spread awareness through social media.

Like Quinn in the story, readers might also be prompted to self-reflect on their role in the world around them and their ability to make a difference. The scene in which the students protest against the administrative curriculum change in their English class and read aloud Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is particularly powerful. It shows the significance that words can have, the impact that literature can make, and the commentary it can provide on society, especially given the right setting. It shows the importance of having (and teaching) books that deal with real, diverse, and tough topics.

Students and teenagers are brilliant, and often they want to effect change but may feel overwhelmed and defeated and not know where to start. Reynolds and Kiely speak the language of kids today, and they appeal to and present options for young adults about how to peacefully and effectively cultivate change. This is the main reason why we will include not one, but multiple copies of *All American Boys* in our classrooms. In addition, we have provided an interdisciplinary unit plan using Wiggins and McTighe's (2006) Backward Design template (p. 22) to illustrate how educators can go beyond classroom library inclusion and teach *All American Boys* as a whole-class novel.

Interdisciplinary Unit Plan

Avery Gathright

Unit Title: "Are we all treated equal?": *All American Boys* and Social Justice

Grade Level and Course: 11th Grade English

Unit Texts

- Young Adult Novel: *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely
- Historical Documents: The United States Bill of Rights, The Declaration of Independence

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Stage 1 – Desired Results</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">KSDE English Standards
Reading:
• RL.11.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
• RL.11.13 Read and comprehend high-quality literary text (e.g., drama, prose, and poetry) of appropriate quantitative and qualitative complexity for grades 11-12.
Writing:
• W.11.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
• W.11.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
• W.11.10 Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing.
Speaking & Listening:
• SL.11.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

KSDE Social Studies Standard and Related Benchmarks
Standard 2: Individuals have rights and responsibilities
• 2.1 The student will recognize and evaluate the rights and responsibilities of people living in societies.
• 2.3 The student will investigate and connect the rights and responsibilities of individuals with contemporary issues.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Understandings: Students will understand that …
1. Identifying and fixing issues of social injustice requires advocating from the voices of the oppressed, not just the privileged.
2. People's backgrounds and life experiences will impact their perspective on social issues and play a large role in their opinions.</td><td>Essential Questions
<u>Overarching:</u>
1. Do all people really have equal rights? Why or why not?
2. What rights and responsibilities do we have regarding social justice as citizens of our country?
3. How can I make a difference in my community and be an advocate for others?</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td>3. Members of oppressed groups do not experience the same privileges as the majority, even if they have the same rights on paper.
4. Social change takes effort, including putting oneself in uncomfortable situations.</td><td><u>Topical:</u>
1. How do the characters' perspectives influence their actions and the story as a whole?
2. What lessons can we take from Rashad and Quinn into our own lives?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Knowledge: Students will know …
• To recognize and be aware of their privileges.
• The power of perspective, how bias and media can work together and separately to influence how people understand social issues and specific incidents.
• Media literacy and analysis through a lens of social justice.</td><td>Skills: Students will be able to …
• Identify their biases and privileges.
• Identify and explain the role of privilege in All American Boys and in real life.
• Distinguish between fact, fiction, and opinion in the media.
• Provide examples of modern social injustices from credible resources and articulate the driving forces behind them.
• Use credible resources to create and defend an argument relating to social justice and human rights.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Stage 2 – Assessment Evidence</td></tr>
<tr><td>Performance Task

<u>Authentic Performance:</u>
Major Unit Assignment: Op-ed over All American Boys
Students will be asked to write an op-ed article of around 1000 words reviewing the young adult book, how it relates to real-world human rights issues in our country, and what they are inspired to do about it.

Students will be encouraged to take this project seriously as their work will be displayed in the school library to encourage other students to read the book and take action. The teacher should also look for places to encourage students to actually publish their op-eds, like the school newspaper or website, submit to contests or sites like the Washington Square Review or even Goodreads.

<u>Criteria by which performance is judged:</u>
• Accurate and relevant use of examples from All American Boys in context</td><td>Other Evidence
<u>Informal Assessments to Check Understanding</u>
• Students' participation in class and group discussions, seminars and lectures
• Daily bell work
• Exit slips
• Review Kahoot
• Writing workshop
• Conferencing with individual students
• Giving feedback to peers
• Self-reflection and review

<u>Academic Activities/Prompts:</u>
• Quick writes submitted for review, over issues of social justice, human rights, and privilege
• Revising the Bill of Rights Activity
• Handouts to turn in at the end of Socratic seminar and book clubs</td></tr>
</table>

• Use of modern real-world examples from credible sources and news sites to relate the book to real world issues. • A clear stance and thesis • Clear purpose and audience • Fluent writing and correct conventions	• Written analysis of historical documents and non-fiction writings <u>Quizzes/Tests:</u> • Low-stakes reading comprehension quiz comprised of short answer questions • Quiz over the Bill of Rights

Stage 3—Learning Plan

Learning Activities (with elements of *Understanding by Design*'s WHERE TO framework identified in parentheses)

1. Students complete an anticipation guide relating to the novel and unit essential questions and participate in an interactive classroom discussion/debate in which they move around the room in accordance to the beliefs stated in their anticipation guides. (W, H)
2. Teacher introduces essential questions and explains expected performance tasks for the unit. Teacher states purpose for the project: to get students involved in social justice, and to make them aware of their own privileges and rights in society. (W, E)
3. Students answer the following academic prompt in writing: "What are some privileges you think you have? Provide some examples to support why you have this privilege." (H, E)
4. Teacher introduces the text by having students read the first two pages of both Rashad and Quinn's perspectives. Students make inferences and write their initial impressions about the characters and their lives. Engage in class discussion on the same topic. (H, E)
5. Students read first two sections of the book ("Friday" & "Saturday") as homework and participate in a book club over the events of the book, including initial thoughts, predictions, how it relates to social justice, and how it reminds them of real-world events. Students choose what role to take in prior class meeting with their book club groups, and have a handout to complete during/after discussion regarding what they talked about with their groups which will be turned in for assessment. (E, T)
6. Teacher lectures while students complete guided notes about the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, emphasizing the first amendment. (E)
7. Students discuss what they think the most important amendment is in the Bill of Rights with their table groups and come back together for a whole class discussion of the question.
8. Students participate in a Socratic Seminar over the first half of the novel, discussing it in relation to human rights, privilege, and EQs. (W, E, R)
9. Students respond in writing to the academic prompt: "Do all people really have equal rights?" (E2)
10. Students work with their groups to discuss and evaluate the Bill of Rights. Then, with human rights and the novel in mind, students will revise them. They should consider what amendments should be kept, which should be replaced and with what, and make revisions to existing amendments. They should also write at least a paragraph explaining their changes. (E, R, E2, T)
11. Students participate in a Kahoot over the Bill of Rights. (H, R)
12. Students complete a quiz over the Bill of Rights. (E2)

13. Students explore the front pages of different news sites such as CNN, Fox, Al Jazeera, and AP News to compare headlines and discuss current events regarding human rights and how perspective effects them. (E)
14. Students discuss the impact of perspective with their table groups. (R)
15. Students complete a reading quiz over the second half of the novel. (E2)
16. Students participate in their book clubs; they will have worked with their groups in the prior class to choose (new) roles for their book club discussions. (W, E, R)
17. Students engage in writing workshops over a few class periods for their Op-Ed major writing assignment. The teacher will hold mini-lessons before each workshop day, reminding students of EQs and relating instruction to the writing process. Teacher emphasizes students are not only to review the text, but also discuss the responsibilities it instills onto the reader. (W, E, R, T)
18. After the mini-lesson and during the workshop time, the teacher should conference with each student individually to meet with them, discuss their thoughts on the texts and their progress and approach on the major writing assignment.
19. Students submit a rough draft before class electronically for the teacher to review and bring physical copies to review with their peers. Table groups work either as a whole group or partner up (depending on the number of students) and swap papers, providing constructive feedback and positive encouragement. (R)
20. Students have time in class and at home to review and consider feedback and develop their final drafts. (E, R, T)
21. Teacher displays the Op-Eds in the school library and in the classroom. Students engage in a gallery walk to review their classmates' work. They will submit a written sheet afterword, reflecting on what they liked in their peers' work and what perspectives their peers shared that they had not considered. (R, E2)
22. The class return to the EQs, both overarching and topical, in a whole-class discussion and talk about what steps they can take in their lives to make a difference. (W, H, R)

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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 *The Glass Castle* and *Kite Runner* 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	"*Glass Castle*, 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 *Great Gatsby* unit, we would center on a question like, 'What is the American dream?' ... And then our core piece is *The Great Gatsby*, 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 *Long Way Down* alongside other texts like *Hamilton*]

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.

CLOSING THE WORD GAP: MORPHOLOGICAL INSTRUCTION ACROSS MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract
This literature review examines the effectiveness of explicit morphological instruction in improving vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension for middle and high school students. Socioeconomic disparities in early language exposure contribute to a significant word gap, limiting students' ability to access complex academic texts. Morphological instruction—focused on teaching roots, prefixes, and suffixes—provides students with strategies to analyze unfamiliar words and build word consciousness. Research supports the use of derivational morphology to strengthen comprehension, especially for English learners and struggling readers. The review draws on two theoretical frameworks—atomistic and abstractive—to explain how students process word structure. Evidence suggests that embedding morphology within meaningful literacy tasks leads to improved outcomes. Instructional recommendations include prioritizing high-utility morphemes, integrating vocabulary across content areas, and supporting teachers through professional development. Despite time constraints and the need for foundational training, morphology-based instruction offers a high-leverage approach to addressing literacy gaps and promoting academic equity.

Keywords: morphological awareness, vocabulary instruction, reading comprehension, academic language, English learners, word study, literacy equity, derivational morphology

Morphology-Based Instruction in Secondary Grades and Impact on Student Comprehension

Students enter school with a wide variety of background knowledge. The most significant variable in language acquisition is socioeconomic status (SES). Research indicates that children from higher-SES families are exposed to significantly more child-directed speech than their lower-SES peers, contributing to disparities in vocabulary and later academic success (Ellwood-Lowe et al., 2020). This word gap stems from differences in the language environments and experiences children have from birth through age three. Conversations and reading typically expose children from higher SES backgrounds to more words, building their vocabulary and linguistic skills. In contrast, children from low-income families often experience less child-directed speech and fewer reading experiences, leaving them behind their more affluent peers even before they begin school. Consequently, students begin formal education with vastly different foundations in language and literacy, which can perpetuate achievement gaps as curricula and instruction assume certain background knowledge

(Foster & Miller, 2007). Addressing disparities in early language exposure is critical for ensuring equitable learning opportunities and preventing the accumulation of academic deficits over time.

Background and Theoretical Framework

One method to close the achievement gap is morphological analysis. Morphemes are the smallest units of meaning in a word and make up the building blocks of the English language. Morphemes originate from various languages and are essential components of vocabulary development. A research-supported scope and sequence for teaching morphological awareness begins with Anglo-Saxon morphemes in the early grades, followed by Latin roots in upper elementary, and Greek roots in middle school, aligning with the increasing complexity of academic vocabulary found in grade-level texts (Nagy et al., 2006). Explicit instruction in morphological analysis can help students deconstruct complex words and derive meanings from roots, prefixes, and suffixes. This analytical approach to word study enhances students' vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and ability to access complex texts. By systematically building morphological knowledge from early grades, educators can provide all students—regardless of their first language exposure—with critical tools for linguistic comprehension (Goodwin, 2015). Morphological instruction aligns with the recognized role of vocabulary as a key factor impacting reading outcomes and academic achievement across subject areas. When combined with other language-focused interventions, the development of linguistic awareness and word analysis skills can serve as a powerful means of narrowing achievement gaps.

While the notion of a word gap highlights the disadvantages students from low SES backgrounds may face, research shows the impediments go beyond just vocabulary size. Students who lack exposure to more complex academic language can struggle with understanding the morphological structure of words (Crosson & Moore, 2017). The ability to analyze word formations and root meanings is crucial for comprehending the dense vocabulary demands of higher-level texts. Without a strong foundation in morphological awareness, students may find themselves overwhelmed by the volume of unfamiliar academic vocabulary they encounter in academic texts, leading to frustration and disengagement (Foster & Miller, 2007). This morphological knowledge gap can have far-reaching consequences, impacting students' ability to access and engage with grade-level content across various disciplines. Moreover, limited morphological skills can hinder students' capacity to express themselves effectively in writing, as they may struggle to generate and manipulate words that convey precise meanings (Carlisle, 2008).

Moreover, morphological awareness strengthens both reading comprehension and writing skills. The ability to manipulate morphemes enables students to generate precise, content-rich vocabulary and to navigate grammatical structures more confidently in their writing. This is especially important for English learners, who often face barriers in expressing complex ideas due to limited vocabulary or unfamiliarity with academic forms. Spence (2010) argues that meaningful writing opportunities, when coupled with explicit vocabulary instruction, allow English learners to internalize and produce academic language authentically. By incorporating morphology into both reading and writing instruction, educators can support more robust language development and greater student agency in communication.

Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of explicit morphological instruction in improving literacy outcomes, especially for students at risk of reading difficulties. Gray (2019) found direct teaching of common root words and affixes significantly boosted students' vocabulary knowledge and comprehension on standardized tests. Correspondingly, Ahmed Badawi (2019) reported notable gains in reading comprehension for English learners after receiving morphological awareness training. These findings underscore the value of equipping all students with strategic word analysis skills. With a theoretical foundation established, it is also essential to consider how

morphological instruction supports specific learner populations, particularly English language learners.

Morphological Analysis in English Language Acquisition

While morphological awareness can develop incidentally through immersion, many struggling readers benefit from deliberate, systematic morphological instruction (Ghasemi & Vaez-Dalili, 2019). By incorporating best practices like word sorting activities and etymological study, teachers can clarify the semantic and structural intricacies of English. As students internalize common roots, affixes, and word formation rules, they gain skills for deciphering unfamiliar words independently.

Morphological instruction aligns with multilingual instructional approaches that build on students' linguistic resources. Recognizing cognates and etymological connections between languages can scaffold comprehension while honoring learners' full linguistic repertoire. Colenbrander et al. (2021) found that "highlighting cognates and etymological relationships between languages can facilitate vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension" (p. 7). With appropriate scaffolding, morphological instruction empowers students by building on their linguistic strengths rather than penalizing their differences.

Addressing achievement gaps rooted in early language exposure requires explicit, sustained morphological instruction that equips all students with vocabulary and word analysis strategies. Morphological awareness provides disadvantaged students with tools to access complex texts and participate in academic discourse. Through a comprehensive and systematic approach to morphological instruction, educators can level the playing field and ensure that all students, regardless of their background, can succeed academically and realize their full potential.

Importance of Vocabulary in Reading Comprehension

Although decoding is the first component of reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge is equally essential for understanding meaning. The simple view of reading models this by stating that language comprehension and decoding together produce comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Teachers can use morphological analysis to build students' language comprehension skills. When students come across an unknown word, breaking it into its individual morphemes will help them identify the meaning of the word. This process enables students to comprehend the surrounding text and derive the word's meaning from context. Research has also shown that morphological awareness contributes significantly to reading comprehension. Fracasso et al. (2014) estimate that for every word a student learns, there is an average of one to three related words that a student can understand by utilizing morphological knowledge. Integrating morphological problem-solving into comprehension instruction resulted in greater reading comprehension gains than instruction without a morphological component (Goodwin, 2015).

Morphological Framework

Blevins et al. (2018) proposed two frameworks for constructing morphological analysis: the atomistic or constructive model and the abstractive or discriminative approach. Both frameworks represent different conceptions of morphological systems and how to analyze them. Each model recognizes that both parts and sub-word units contribute to word formation. The models provide a systematic understanding of word knowledge and word relationships. The frameworks address the importance of a speaker's knowledge of how they communicate and how they manipulate it.

The atomistic framework posits that morphemes—the smallest units of meaning—combine to form words. This approach, also known as the constructive approach, views words as constructions of smaller parts. This theory posits that morphemes are the essential building blocks

of words. Morphemes become stored in the mental dictionary or personal lexicons and allow the reader to use that knowledge when coming across an unknown word. Word meaning and form depend on the context of surrounding morphemes. For example, the word *unhappiness* could be broken into its individual units of meaning: *un* (not) *happy* (state of joy) *ness* (denoting a state of being, it changes adjectives into nouns). The manipulation of this word focuses on the individual components and the adjustments that can be made to create contextual meaning. Linguistics and generative language theory have utilized the atomistic approach. However, atomistic theory has difficulty accounting for non-compositional word formations and irregular semantic relationships between words.

One limitation of the atomistic framework lies in its difficulty accounting for non-compositional word formation—words whose meanings are not easily inferred from their individual morphemes. For instance, idiomatic or lexicalized words such as *understand,* or *butterfly* do not yield their full meanings when broken into *under* + *stand* or *butter* + *fly*. These examples highlight how word meaning is sometimes shaped more by historical usage or semantic shifts than by the sum of its parts. In these cases, the atomistic model may oversimplify how readers interpret language, particularly when they encounter irregular or context-dependent vocabulary. This gap underscores the importance of combining atomistic instruction with broader semantic and contextual analysis to support deeper comprehension and flexible word learning strategies.

In contrast, the abstract framework views words as whole units and focuses on the relationship between them. One key point of this theory is that words are the basic units of morphological analysis, as opposed to morphemes. Networks of contrasts and implications characterize the relationship of these words, revealing their meaning in the context of language. The abstract approach views affixes as abstractions of a word rather than individual components of meaning. For example, the word *unlockable* demonstrates how meaning can shift depending on contextual cues: it could mean able to be locked or not lockable. This theory views a person's knowledge of language as a set of preconstructed notions of the composition of words that create predictable patterns. Cultural and historical patterns of language are also considered. For example, the term *selfie* does not exist with the English standard lexicon, but it's common use by people has given it meaning. Together, the atomistic and abstractive frameworks offer complementary perspectives on how learners cognitively process word structure and meaning. These theoretical models provide a foundation for examining how explicit morphological instruction influences reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition in diverse educational contexts. The following section reviews current research that builds on these frameworks to assess the impact of morphological instruction on student outcomes.

Current Research

Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of explicit morphological instruction on vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Goodwin (2015) found that teaching fifth-grade students specific affixes improved their ability to infer the meanings of morphologically complex words. Additionally, embedding morphological problem-solving within comprehension instruction yielded greater vocabulary gains than vocabulary instruction alone. Correspondingly, Goodwin (2015) showed that embedding morphological problem-solving in comprehension instruction led to greater vocabulary gains for fifth through sixth grade students compared to comprehension instruction alone. Ghasemi and Vaez-Dalili (2019) also found that teaching intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners English derivational affixes through textual enhancement, metalinguistic explanation, and morpheme recognition tasks all significantly improved their reading comprehension, with metalinguistic explanation having the greatest effect.

Other studies highlighted the relationship between morphological awareness and reading skills more generally. Goodwin (2015) found morphological awareness predicted reading comprehension longitudinally for elementary students. Ahmed Badawi (2019) similarly showed morphological awareness contributed to reading comprehension, with morphological decoding and analysis supporting development. The study found a reciprocal relationship, with morphological awareness and reading mutually reinforcing each other.

Research also suggests that morphological knowledge may be particularly beneficial for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Ghasemi and Vaez-Dalili (2019) found morphological instruction was particularly helpful for Iranian students who were learning English. Using a three-method approach, scores in reading from the pre- to post-test significantly improved vocabulary knowledge. This aligns with other research showing morphological awareness can aid second language learners, likely because it allows them to make connections between words in their first and second languages. Ahmed Badawi (2019) implemented morpheme-based instruction with a group of first-year English learners in Egypt. Participants who received the morpheme-based instruction outperformed those who did not.

Instructional Implementation

The studies included in this review have several important implications for effectively teaching morphological awareness to improve students' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension skills. First, educators should prioritize explicit instruction in morphological principles, using techniques such as metalinguistic explanation, to directly teach students about the structure and meaning of morphemes. This explicit approach appears to be more effective for enhancing reading comprehension compared to implicit methods. Teachers should focus on teaching individual morphemes, such as affixes and roots. Students should work with these roots by engaging in guided practice with the teacher. When teachers create multiple exposures for students to manipulate morphemes, students gain opportunities to observe word relationships and vocabulary patterns (Gray, 2019). Emphasis should initially be placed on Latin roots, followed by Greek roots as students advance. Etymological study of spelling patterns, particularly when categorized by root language, can support students in developing structured approaches to decoding and encoding unfamiliar words, enhancing vocabulary acquisition (Bowers & Kirby, 2009).

Teachers should also emphasize derivational morphology, which involves teaching affixes and roots that alter a base word's meaning and grammatical category. While inflectional morphemes—which change a word's grammatical form (e.g., tense, number)—are important, derivational morphemes are more complex and occur more frequently in the academic vocabulary students encounter in school texts. By focusing on derivational morphology, teachers can equip students with tools to analyze and understand a greater breadth of words.

In addition to explicit morpheme instruction, teachers should consistently expose students to rich, meaningful texts. Words should not be taught in isolation but instead encountered within reading and writing tasks, where students can see how vocabulary functions in context. This approach supports the development of both comprehension and written expression by reinforcing the linguistic connections students are learning through morphological study.

Before instruction, teachers should identify high-utility academic words within a text. Teachers should explicitly teach these words by deconstructing them into constituent morphemes and analyzing both structural and contextual meanings. Students benefit from exploring the full range of definitions a word can hold, particularly when guided to determine which definition best fits the context of a given passage. In contrast, words that are specific to content-area knowledge but are not morphologically complex can be briefly introduced for recognition without the same level of in-depth analysis.

When selecting vocabulary for instruction, educators should prioritize high-leverage affixes and root words that appear frequently across academic domains. This aligns with Beck et al.'s (2023) robust vocabulary framework, which encourages the teaching of Tier 2 words—high-utility academic terms that support comprehension in a wide variety of texts. Because many Tier 2 words contain Latin and Greek roots, they are ideal for morphological study. Instruction should also introduce students to morphological relatives of a base word (e.g., *construct, construction, reconstruct*), enabling them to develop word families and build linguistic flexibility.

Additionally, vocabulary instruction should include attention to nuance in word meaning. Teaching students to distinguish between *denotation*—a word's literal dictionary definition—and *connotation*—the emotional or cultural associations a word carries—helps them understand how meaning can shift depending on context. For example, while *home* typically denotes a place of residence, in the familiar saying "home is wherever you are," the word takes on an emotional meaning, emphasizing connection and belonging rather than location. Understanding this distinction strengthens students' interpretive skills and deepens their comprehension of morphologically related vocabulary across varied contexts.

By applying these principles, educators can design powerful morphological interventions to help students develop a robust vocabulary and tackle challenging texts with greater confidence and skill. Morphological instruction should be a key component of a comprehensive vocabulary development program, particularly for students who struggle with reading comprehension (Gray, 2019).

Classroom Implications

Utilizing morphological analysis in the classroom has many benefits for student learning. By explicitly teaching morphemes to developing readers, instructors are helping students develop vocabulary knowledge. Providing students with the structural elements of language enables them to access a wider range of vocabulary, rather than relying on whole-word instruction. The use of affixes allows students to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words and reduces reliance on contextual guessing strategies. Morphological analysis removes some of the gaps of economic status by equipping students with the knowledge of the English language (Ahmed Badawi, 2019). Words function as conceptual tools that contribute to knowledge construction—an essential foundation for deep comprehension.

Morphological analysis supports readers of all ages in applying problem-solving strategies during reading. For struggling readers this is essential to build the resilience required to tackle a variety of texts. Using knowledge of word parts helps developing readers maintain reading stamina and engage with unfamiliar words rather than skipping them. As students progress out of middle school and into upper-level education courses, they can use morphological analysis to identify multi-syllabic content specific words. Their knowledge of the structure of English will leave them better equipped to tackle the higher-level academic text requirements.

Classrooms that anchor vocabulary instruction in morphological analysis maximize their instructional impact. Educators who teach the structures of English invite students to work through frustration rather than being dependent on the teacher. Classroom teachers can spend more time on the deeper meaning of the text as opposed to identifying unknown words and base level comprehension (Gray, 2019). Deeper level comprehension allows students to achieve mastery of the state standards and fosters deeper student engagement.

To illustrate how this instruction can work in practice, consider the following vignettes, which draw on principles supported by Goodwin (2015) and Beck et al. (2023):

Vignette 1

In a sixth-grade ELA class, students are reading an informational article about climate change. Before reading the text, the teacher introduces five key vocabulary words—*predictable*, *unpredictable*, *prediction*, *predictive*, and *predictor*. Rather than teaching the definitions outright, the teacher guides a short morphology mini-lesson. Students deconstruct the words into root (*dict*), prefix (*pre-*), and suffixes (*-able*, *-ion*, *-ive*, *-or*). Students identify common meanings and work in small groups to generate new words using these affixes (e.g., *incredible*, *dictate*). During reading, students highlight each occurrence of a *predict*-based word and annotate how its meaning shifts depending on context. Finally, they compose a short paragraph using at least three of the *predict* word family variations to explain a prediction about climate trends. This activity supports vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and sentence-level writing in an integrated, student-friendly way.

Vignette 2

In a high school chemistry class, students begin a unit on molecular structure. The lesson begins with a morphology warm-up on common Greek roots frequently found in scientific terminology: *hydro* (water), *therm* (heat), *photo* (light), and *bio* (life). Students work in pairs to match root-based vocabulary to definitions—*hydrophilic*, *hydrophobic*, *photochemical*, *biotechnology*—and identify root meanings using color-coded word parts. The teacher then connects the vocabulary to that day's lab, which explores how different substances interact with water. Through morphological analysis of terms such as *hydrophilic* and *hydrophobic*, students develop deeper conceptual understanding and strengthen decoding strategies. To conclude, the teacher presents a reflection prompt: "How did knowledge of word parts help you understand today's lab concepts?" This reinforces the value of morphology as both a literacy and content learning tool.

Morphological analysis is time-intensive and requires explicit, carefully scaffolded instruction to be effective. Many teachers are constrained by 40–50-minute class periods. Pressures to meet state standards and demonstrate growth on standardized assessments often prevent teachers from allocating time for repeated morphological practice. Many educators may also find the task daunting as their training was not based around structured literacy. Oftentimes English teachers in secondary-based schools lack the foundational knowledge of reading instruction. Effective implementation requires targeted professional development and expanded teacher knowledge in morphological instruction.

To address the challenges of time and teacher preparedness, schools can adopt professional development models that are ongoing and collaborative. Research supports the use of job-embedded coaching and professional learning communities (PLCs) as effective means of supporting instructional shifts in literacy (Bean & Ippolito, 2016). These structures allow teachers to practice and reflect on morphological instruction in real time, receive feedback, and observe peer modeling. In terms of scaffolding strategies, morphology can be integrated into existing instructional routines (e.g., bell ringers, word walls, and vocabulary journals) rather than treated as an add-on. Teachers can also begin with a small set of high-leverage affixes and roots, gradually expanding instruction as their comfort grows. This incremental approach makes the work more manageable while still benefiting students. Additionally, schools can incorporate morphology into cross-curricular vocabulary, planning to reinforce root-based learning in both ELA and other content areas. When exposing students to new texts, key vocabulary words can be identified in the lesson planning process. Directing students' attention to the morphological structure of key vocabulary supports their ability to derive meaning from complex texts (Carlisle, 2008).

While morphological analysis provides many structures for the English language, it can inhibit students from developing other strategies to tackle unknown words. Not all English words follow preconstructed patterns and students may struggle with the skill set to identify them. A focus on etymological study alongside morphology can help circumvent this challenge.

Despite these potential limitations, the research suggests that the benefits of explicit, structured morphological instruction generally outweigh the challenges. A balanced approach that teaches both morphological structures and semantic context will allow students to engage with rich and diverse texts. A well-informed administration can also develop opportunities for teachers to grow their knowledge on foundational reading skills and language structure. These instructional opportunities set the stage for a broader consideration of how morphological instruction contributes to overall literacy achievement.

Conclusion

The reviewed research provides compelling evidence for the benefits of explicit morphological instruction in enhancing students' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. By teaching students to analyze the morphological structure of words, particularly derivational morphemes, educators can help them develop strategies for inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words encountered in academic texts. Studies suggest that morphemes are best taught within authentic reading contexts, enabling students to apply their knowledge to meaningful literacy tasks (Goodwin, 2015).

Additionally, the literature indicates that morphological instruction should prioritize high-utility affixes and roots, as this allows students to make connections between a taught word and its morphological relatives. Focusing on high-leverage morphemes maximizes instructional impact and fosters the development of robust, interconnected vocabulary.

While research supports the effectiveness of morphological instruction, both practitioners and scholars have identified implementation challenges, such as the time-intensive nature of the approach and the need for extensive teacher training (Carlisle, 2008; Moats & Tolman, 2019). While morphological strategies are powerful, they should be incorporated into a comprehensive vocabulary program that integrates additional evidence-based techniques. Despite these challenges, explicit, structured morphological instruction remains a critical tool for advancing students' language development, particularly in academic vocabulary. By equipping students with the skills to analyze and derive meaning from complex words, educators can help them become more strategic, independent word learners and improve their ability to comprehend challenging texts (Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

Further research is needed to refine our understanding of best practices in morphological instruction, particularly regarding the optimal sequencing and pacing of instruction, the most effective ways to integrate morphology with other language arts instruction, and the potential for differentiated approaches based on students' individual needs. Existing evidence strongly supports morphological instruction as a core component of a comprehensive vocabulary curriculum, especially for students in upper elementary and secondary grades.

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Author Biography

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STORYTELLING AND SAFE PLACES: AN INTERVIEW WITH PRINTZ HONOR-WINNING WRITER LISA FIPPS

Kevin B. Kienholz
Emporia State University

Abstract
Author Lisa Fipps appeared as the featured speaker at the Literature Festival held on the campus of Washburn University in fall 2022. During this interview, discussion ranged from the impact of winning a Printz Honor to the influence of her background in libraries and journalism to the challenges and benefits of writing for an audience of young readers. The interview focuses on the prominent role of safe places and storytelling in Fipps' debut verse novel *Starfish* (2021); following the interview, the article explores these same themes in her second verse novel *And Then, Boom!* (2024). In her books and in this interview, Fipps explores the reasons why young people need to count on having safe spaces in their lives to help them deal with a difficult and challenging world, and she explores the important role that storytelling can hold in the lives of her protagonists as well as her young readers.

Keywords: young adult literature, Lisa Fipps, safe spaces, storytelling

Author Lisa Fipps tackles the tough topics in her books—bullying, family disfunction, body shaming, and poverty, among others. Her novels recognize the harsh and sometimes unforgiving world that many of her young readers occupy, and she honors those experiences by writing about them with honesty and forthrightness. Her readers will attest to the fact that she doesn't pull punches; Fipps invites them into an unvarnished and often difficult world where her young protagonists face real challenges without easy solutions. When we sat down to visit in fall 2022, however, much of the discussion focused on the avenues that Fipps explores in her writing, avenues that can lead young readers out of darkness and despair and into a more hopeful, encouraging future. Fipps explores two such paths, storytelling and safe places, in both of her verse novels, *Starfish* (2021) and the recently released *And Then, Boom!* (2024).

We met up in Topeka, Kansas, at the end of a busy day at the Literature Festival, a celebration of books for young readers along with the authors who write them and the young people who read them, held annually on the campus of Washburn University. Having spent the better part of a day talking to a conference room full of young readers, answering their questions, and autographing their books, Fipps sat down with me to talk about a wide range of topics related to her work, to the field of young adult literature, and—given that her first novel had recently been recognized as a Printz Honor book—the impact of awards on her work as a writer.

During our conversation, we spent time considering the role that storytelling and safe places can play in the lives of her characters and her young readers. Fipps is an engaging and intentional conversationalist, someone who has clearly thought deeply about the struggles that her readers face and who has spent time considering the ways in which young people can best face and surmount these challenges, build on positive relationships with the support of friends and family, and move forward into the better times that will open up before them in the future. As the following conversation will reveal, the work that Fipps started in *Starfish* continues in her second verse novel, *And Then, Boom!*

The following interview has been lightly edited for concision and clarity:

Kienholz: Your debut novel was recognized as a Printz Honor book—that's an amazing accomplishment. How did that recognition from the Printz Committee impact your work as a writer?
Fipps: You know, I really don't think you can ever let an award affect your work, whether you get one or you don't get one. I think you do the work, and if you get an award you get an award. And if you don't, you don't. The work doesn't change because what you do as a writer is important to you for a reason, and it is your talent, it is your gift, it is who you are. And you're going to do that whether it sells one book or a thousand or a hundred thousand or a million, and so if you let what critics say or what award committees say dictate your work then that's, I think, a dangerous zone to be in as a Creative.

Kienholz: The novel *Starfish* opens up with what I termed a call to action: "So when the world tries to make you feel small, starfish." How do you characterize the argument you're making with this novel?
Fipps: There are over 7.7 billion of us on this planet, and it's fair to say that at least once in everybody's lifetime someone has made you feel small about something, whether it was how you looked or an idea or a belief or religion or your gender or whatever. I think that there's a universality to being made to feel small and the fact that you need to really realize you have a right to be seen, to be heard, to be noticed, and take up your space in the world. So, it *is* a call to action.

Kienholz: *Starfish* is written in verse, so I'm wondering if you have noticed that the novel's readers respond to a particular poem or two in an interesting or surprising way to you. So, in other words, is there a poem that sticks out in your mind that they [your readers] really react to in a way that maybe catches or caught you off guard?
Fipps: You know, it's very interesting to see what resonates with a reader. Some of the poems that I would think are the ones that should resonate the most, don't always. But then another one that seems just more *quiet*, if I had to describe it, is something that really hits someone. And I think that's the beauty of all words is you never know what's going to hit. It depends on the person. The reader is just as much a part of the book as the writer, and I think that's the cool part.

Kienholz: The power of telling one's story is an idea that many writers for young adults seem interested in exploring. In *Starfish,* this idea enters the novel when Ellie proclaims, "I plan to become a Storyteller and a poet to help people feel what it's like to live in someone else's skin." What's your sense of the importance of Storytelling in the lives of young readers, and why did you decide to include that issue in this novel?
Fipps: I think there are lots of reasons why it's important, one of which is just empathy building, in general. I think that we don't always do a good job as a society—and I'm not just talking about Americans, I'm talking worldwide—in getting people to understand that we are all different, but

different isn't bad. It's just *different*. And to understand where people are coming from—we have wars over people not understanding each other. If you think of all of the bad things in the world—mental health issues, abuse, violence, crime, addictions—everybody's struggling with different things that happen in the world, and yet we're all in the world together, so we need to be understanding. I think empathy is huge, and I think once you start listening to other people's stories (A) you find commonalities you never realize you had and (B) you find what I call transferable stories like, "You got made fun of because you're really tall. I got really made fun because I was really fat." So maybe your experience was different, but we both know how that feels and how that hurts. I think the other thing is it shows you that it's important to come from a place of understanding [rather] than a place of judgment.

Kienholz: In *Starfish*, it appears to me that Ellie has a number of safe spaces, and I'm thinking here of Dr. Woods' office, the library, or swimming pool, where she can, depending on the place, explore emotions, utilize her talents or simply relax enough to be herself. What is it about *safe spaces* such as these that you think is crucial for a young person?
Fipps: Especially because of the pandemic I think that the world just doesn't seem like a safe space anymore, in general. And I think ...even before that it didn't always seem like a safe space.... Just because you are four years old or 12 years old or whatever, doesn't mean you're spared from some pretty bad things. So, I think that it already felt like an unsafe world, especially if you have disfunction in your home or schools on drills all the time for shootings—that can't feel like a safe space. And then you have random shootings in neighborhoods. You have riots. You have all these different things that make the world feel unsafe. We all have to have a safe space somehow, even if it's an escape into your mental mind.... Some creatives, their safe space is to create and to go into writing or to music or to art, or somebody else's safe space is to go for a really long run. But there has to be a safe space mentally and/or physically for all of us in the world no matter what our age because you have to feel safe or your body is going to be in this hyper-vigilant state all the time and your mind is going to be there, as well.... If you really think about it, you guys have a safe space. I have safe spaces. We all do. We all do, where you just feel like *I'm OK here and I don't have to worry about anything here.*

Kienholz: I know you've got a background in both journalism and libraries. I was wondering how those parts of your work life influence your writing.
Fipps: Journalism affects my writing the most because I just learned a lot of skills being a journalist. I can write cold, is what I call it—writing cold. Writing blocks don't happen because they couldn't happen when you're a journalist. You're on deadline, so you just learn to work around them. I have an exceptional ear for dialogue. As soon as I hear something in conversation, I'm like, "There it is. That's it – right there." And just being really succinct because you only had so much space. So, you write tight when you're a journalist. You also learn to get to the heart of the story fast. As a journalist, they call it the nut graph. You just want to get right there. You have the lead to get their interest, and the nut graph is like, "Okay, this is what this is all about." And you just learn how to pre-digest it for the reader.... Editing as I write also helps me. A lot of writers don't do that, and it's not bad. It's just because of my journalism. So, I think it really helped my career in a lot of ways. And then what's interesting on the library side is just every day when you go into work and you see kids running into a library saying stuff like, "I can't believe my book is finally in. I can't wait to read that." And the *excitement* they have about reading ... when we have programs based on books or we have authors come in and they get excited about it, it's like they're engaging with the reading. They're not just reading it anymore and it takes it to a new level. And so, I think that just spawns and encourages me as a writer.

Kienholz: What do you find to be uniquely challenging and particularly rewarding about writing for young readers?
Fipps: First of all, you have to be really good as a writer because they do not tolerate mediocrity. You know ... as an adult if you go and spend $27.00 for a book or $15.00, you're like, "I don't really like it but I'm going to finish reading because I paid for the book." No, kids don't do that. They'll just toss it aside because it's often a library book anyway or they'll have a sibling who will pick it up and read it. But, no, they don't tolerate it. If it does not get and keep their interest, they're out, and so it's a challenge to not have any of those what I call *down moments* in a book or *mushy middles*, as we call them. It's like you're always pushing yourself to make sure they don't stop reading. You want cliffhangers. In poems you want enjambment. You want to keep them going and going. And then they're just still real and authentic. They haven't got to that place where they hide who they are yet. Just like some of the kids here today, they're telling me some of their stories afterward. We had the Q&As, and they would come up and they would tell me very personal things that were going on in their life and how it resonated with them, and adults don't do that. They might like your book, but you'll never hear from them [an adult]. A kid likes your book, they are emailing you. Sending you cards. They are just who they are, and they are so much more "real" than adults are. And so, the work is a little more difficult because you really have to get and keep their attention ... And knowing that it's going to stay with them—you know how really good books stayed with you? And they stay with you your whole life. Knowing that you can do that to a kid is pretty amazing.

Kienholz: What are a few things that young readers need today from books—from their reading lives?
Fipps: I think they need it [reading options] in more formats. This generation, and I see it just increasing in future generations, don't *just* want to pick up a book. They want to pick up a book that has prose or a graphic novel or they want a mix.... They like that because it's speaking to different parts of them and it's using their creative side. It's using their intellectual or cerebral side. And I think that we're going to see more and more books in different formats rather than in standard prose. I think we're going to see a lot more tough topic books because kids need tough topics books because they are *living* tough topics. And I think we're going to see more diverse books – not only will the characters be more diverse, but I think the subject matter will keep becoming more diverse.

Just as in her debut novel *Starfish*, the main character in Fipps' *And Then, Boom!* navigates perilous situations and circumstances (namely, persistent hunger and periodic abandonment) through a combination of support from friends and family and through the utilization of safe spaces and storytelling. Joe, the protagonist in Fipps' second novel, is a 12-year-old who lives with his grandmother (*Grandmum* in this telling—she is from England) because his mother abandons him when she gets, as Joe describes, the Itch, a tendency to walk away when life gets difficult. When his grandmother suddenly passes away, his absentee mother returns to his life, albeit temporarily, bringing more chaos and confusion than stability and comfort. Though Joe's story ends on a note of optimism and hope and the promise of new beginnings, as does Ellie's story in *Starfish,* he ends up relying on friends and neighbors (who become like family) to help him get to that place of safety where he can move confidently into his life.

Along with those friends and neighbors, Joe relies on the availability of safe places to get him through the more challenging and dangerous spaces in his journey. As Fipps noted in the interview, safe spaces help prevent young people from living in a "hyper-vigilant" state, and these places of refuge and rest factor heavily in both of her novels. In *And Then, Boom!*, Fipps sets the stage for the inclusion of these safe spaces when she dedicates the novel "To every kid who…hungers for

a safe space away from stormy people popping in and out of your life." In the story itself, Fipps introduces a number of these safe spaces for Joe, including a garden, a cubby underneath some steps, and a clearing in a grove of trees. As Joe himself notes when his beloved dogs are scrambling for safety in the midst of a storm, "They're trying to find a safe spot, / just like I always do."

Safe spaces don't only exist organically in the world of Fipps' novels, but her characters also create them. During our conversation, Fipps alluded to the power of storytelling in the life of young readers in terms of its ability to engender and encourage empathy in readers, and she noted that creative people often create their own safe spaces through the acts such as storytelling. As noted in the interview, Fipps' character Ellie dreams of being a poet—a storyteller—to help others feel what it is like to be in another person's skin. Likewise, in *And Then, Boom!*, the main character creates his own safe space and makes meaning out of the chaos in his life through storytelling, In Joe's case, the storytelling takes the form of doodling—storytelling in picture form—in response to those chaotic moments he faces in the course of trying to live his life. Taken together, the two books serve as a call to action for readers who might need a safe space in their lives, even if they must create that space out of the stories that they tell themselves and others.

While storytelling and safe places collectively serve as connective tissue in Fipps' novels, readers will note a third, related, concept woven into both books, serving as another important link between the two stories: Through her fiction, Fipps sends the clear message to her young readers that, no matter how desperate situations may seem, they will never have to face their challenges without the support of others. In *Starfish*, Ellie finds the resilience she needs not only in herself, but also in those who surround her with support and a belief that it is enough for her to simply be herself—others such as her father, her friends, and her therapist. And in Joe's case, he learns that he can lean on the support of his teacher, his buddies, and a new foster family in order to navigate his darkest moments. Taken together, Fipps' two novels strike a delicate balance between heartache and hope, a combination that serves as a much-needed reminder for her readers that when they reach out for help to navigate life's troubled waters, they will never have to face the world alone.

Author Biography

Kevin Kienholz is a professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Emporia State University, where he works primarily with preservice middle and high school English teachers. He joined the faculty at ESU in 2000 after having taught English for seven years in his home state of Oklahoma. He can be reached at kkienhol@emporia.edu.

SOMETHING MORE

Jayden Mitchell
Oakley High School

In morning light that creeps like doubt,
I shoulder a bag of books and dreams,
Still half a student, half a guide,
Treading softly in between.

Each day, I juggle borrowed lines,
a mentor's glance, the ticking time,
and wonder if they see it too—
the cracks I patch with Elmer's glue.

I grade with red, but feel the gray
Of being wrong, or not knowing enough.
The clock ticks loud when minds drift far—
Learning's quiet. Teaching's tough.

I grade in coffee-splotched despair,
my planner filled with arrows, prayers,
"remember to breathe," scrawled in black,
beside vocab words and feedback.

They say this weight will shape me well,
That steel is forged through fire and test,
But some nights I just want to stop—
To fall asleep, to hope for rest.

At night I dream in rubrics, scores,
and pacing guides that eat my floors.
My friends go out. I rewrite plans.
The weight of futures in my hands.

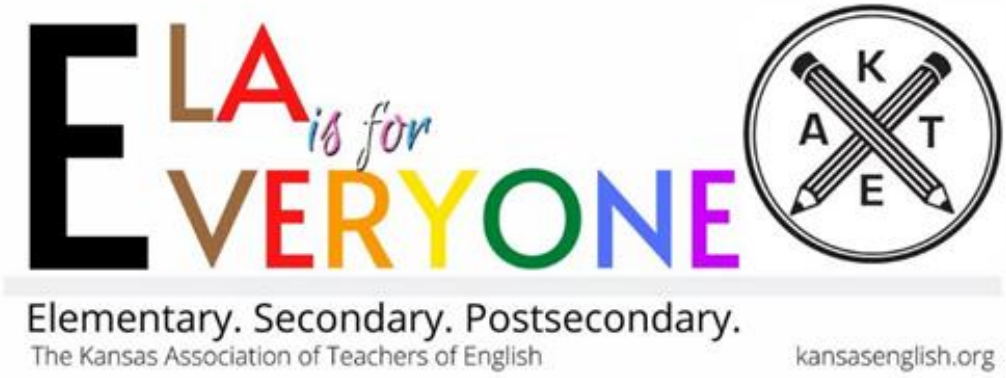
Yet in the mess, a moment glows—
a "thank you" note, a face that shows
they felt seen, or tried, or cared—
and in that flash, I'm unprepared.

For joy. For fire. For quiet grace.
For finding home in this loud place.
And though my bones feel made of glass,
I think—I *know*—I'll let this pass.

I'll rise again with sleepy eyes,
to greet the bell, to improvise,
to teach, to trip, to try once more—
a student still, but something more.

Author Biography

Jayden Mitchell graduated from Wichita State University in May 2025 with a major in Secondary English Education. She presented at the 2024 Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE) Conference and will begin her teaching career at Oakley High School in August. She can be reached at jaydenannmitchell@gmail.com.



JEM TOUCHES THE WALL

Deborah McNemee
USD 402

Why did Dill have to say it?
The dare.
And with Scout there.
The house–Boo's house--
It whispers while the moon,
Shy behind dark clouds,
Wants to see if I do it.
Wind breezes by, cools my sticky, nervous skin.
Wind carries whispers from the house
and laughter from the moon
and the warning from my sister.
"Don't do it, Jem. Don't do it."
"I gotta," I say.
My heart churns bold blood inside my veins.
Beating, beating, banging, in my brain.
Ba-bum.
Ba-bum.
Ba-bum.
Dill's smug face shines
In the blinking moonlight.
I go.
I feel nothing but wind.
I hear nothing but whispers–
I dare you.
Don't do it.
I gotta.
I run up the stairs,
onto the porch,
to the wall,
and back down.
Woosh. Woosh. Woosh.
Is it grass against my legs?
Is it whispers?
Is it wind?
Is it bold blood?

Or the bullet?

Author Biography:
Deborah Linn McNemee was nine years old when she wrote the first three chapters of a novel she hoped to publish someday. While that story never flourished, her modern feminist novel, *Just Daisy: A Gatsby Retelling* hit shelves in 2021. She strives to help teachers keep classic literature relevant for young readers with her educator blog, KeepingClassics.com. Her writing has been published in T*eachers and Writers Magazine* and *Kansas English* and on the Center for Mark Twain Studies website. She is a literature and composition teacher who currently holds the position of Gifted Facilitator for a Title 1 school district in Kansas where she quotes classic literature to her students on a daily basis. She can be reached at keepingclassics@gmail.com or on Instagram, @keepingclassics.

DAWN OVER A SMALL TOWN

Dave Malone

High school cross county track stars
blaze past the insurance woman
in front of a glass building.
She fumbles with keys and a divorce.
There's her long face in the window.
It shines like melting ice
and warms up the morning.

Author Biography
Dave Malone spent his early childhood in Riley, Kansas, and later graduated from Olathe North High School. He holds degrees from Ottawa University and Indiana State University. His most recent poetry collection is *Bypass* (Aldrich Press, 2023). His work has been featured on NPR and appeared in *Midwest Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, and *Red Rock Review*. Dave currently lives in West Plains, Missouri. You can find him online at https://www.davemalone.net or reach him at davemaloneauthor@gmail.com.

LAWN DEER

Dave Malone

Across the street, the neighbors
have installed a pair of does.
A yard sale bargain from the next block,
the slight deer are towheaded
from a decade of blazing sun,
and one leans crooked near the other.
I can't tell if it's the lay of the land
or ten years of neglect on Oak Street
that has left her hobbled, her black snout
angling away from her friend's shoulder
as if she's commenting about the shady weather
or perhaps not saying anything, thinking instead
about a lifetime not in her friend's shadow
and silent because she got her wish.

Author Biography
Dave Malone spent his early childhood in Riley, Kansas, and later graduated from Olathe North High School. He holds degrees from Ottawa University and Indiana State University. His most recent poetry collection is *Bypass* (Aldrich Press, 2023). His work has been featured on NPR and appeared in *Midwest Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, and *Red Rock Review*. Dave currently lives in West Plains, Missouri. You can find him online at https://www.davemalone.net or reach him at davemaloneauthor@gmail.com.

WEAPONIZING WRITTEN THOUGHT: TRUTH AND PERSONAL SACRIFICE IN *I MUST BETRAY YOU*

Amanda K. Stinemetz
Fort Hays State University

Abstract
The author reviews the young adult historical novel *I Must Betray You* (2023) by Ruta Sepetys, providing a summary, personal connection, and potential audiences and applications.

Keywords: young adult historical novel, *I Must Betray You,* Ruta Sepetys, communism, isolationism, endurance

In *I Must Betray You* (2023), Ruta Sepetys illustrates with historical accuracy the horror of communism in Romania. Specifically, Sepetys provides an in-depth view of the communist regime weeks before its violent fall in 1989. We experience this communist Romanian life through our protagonist, Cristian, a boy in his final year of high school whose life has existed exclusively under the communist regime. Through him, we see the extent to which the Romanian government not only dictates how people are to live, but it controls how they should think and feel (revealing the government is more likely totalitarianism than communism). Again, it is through Cristian that we see how people isolate from others as a form of self-preservation and survival; people are heavily driven to do so by suffocating paranoia and crippling fear that *the securitate*, the government's secret police, will land relentless blows of punishment to those who either outwardly disobey or to those who display even the slightest displeasure with communist operations. The most significant forms of betrayal to the mother country involve listening to the radio, using birth control, and expressing personal thought (even in written form) that differs from that of the collective. Interestingly, we learn of Cristian's gracefully subtle defiance as he writes secretly in a hidden notebook, a practice encouraged by his grandfather, Bunu.

This novel would appeal to high school readers because they directly parallel in age to Cristian, his sister Cici, his love interest Liliana, and the majority of their peers in the book. Moreover, as the year 2025 continues to unfold, the threat to freedom of speech is becoming more prevalent and prominent; this is evidenced by government-endorsed retaliation towards journalists that speak disfavorably about political directives. It is the new reality for American high school students that their words, if perceived as defiant by the administration, have the potential to warrant consequence. This is a critical issue that can be taught to the students; however, it is potentially problematic in that discussion and analysis of different governments (democracy and communism) in a classroom may invite emotional commentary that is uninformed and impatient. In short, some students might be more invested in arguing about political stances than having an open discussion about subtle threats to democracy and what is taken from the people under communism.

This novel can be incorporated into the classroom in a more structured, non-political way by focusing discussion on mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression, paranoia), family dynamics,

reproductive rights, sacrifice, and the power of expressive writing. It would also be ideal for a collaborative project with history, namely focusing on communism (or the fall of communism) in Europe.

Although there are countless aspects about this novel that I appreciate, what I enjoy most is the portrayal of human relationships, namely within Cristian's family unit. While reading the book, I often questioned what I would sacrifice in a similar situation to keep my family safe, secure, and healthy.

Author Biography

Dr. Amanda K. Stinemetz is an Assistant Professor of English at Fort Hays State University, where she serves as the Coordinator of Secondary ELA Teacher Education for the Department of English and Modern Languages. She has 15-plus years of experience in ESL instruction for university time-intensive Culture and Language Programs. Similarly, she has 13-plus years of teaching ENG 101/102 to traditional college freshmen and Dual Enrollment credit to high school seniors. Previously, when working at Fairmont State University (WV), Amanda was the DE Coordinator for English, providing DE English courses to the majority of high schools in the state (online, serving over 300 students per semester). Currently, while working at FHSU, Amanda helps manage the family farm in Northwest Kansas which operates a "pick your own" peony flower farm (12 acres of peonies) and offers a "watermelon patch" (15 acres of watermelon hills) to the public. She may be reached at akstinemetz@fhsu.edu.

DIVING INTO THE WORLD AND GOING BEYOND THE SCREEN: A REVIEW OF *THE EPIC STORY OF EVERY LIVING THING*

Laney Roller
McDonald County High School

Abstract
The author reviews the young adult novel *The Epic Story of Every Living Thing* (2022) by Deb Caletti, providing analysis and suggestions for teaching.

Keywords: clipper ships, Hawaii, scuba diving, social media, surrogate parenting

Deb Caletti's *The Epic Story of Every Living Thing* was published in 2022, which reflects the setting being post-pandemic. The book has two narratives that in the beginning do not relate to each other, but in the middle and the end there is a connection that will be carried on throughout one character's life. The novel is about a 17-year-old girl named Harper, who is all about social media and trying to look perfect for people (her followers) whom she has never met. But there is one thing in Harper's life that she considers to be a missing piece, which is knowing her biological father. Even though Harper has an unhealthy relationship with her phone and social media, through her outlets she discovers her half-sibling Dario. Dario introduces Harper to two more half-siblings, Wyatt, and Simone, and they track down their biological father, Beau Zane, who lives in Hawaii.

The siblings travel to Hawaii to meet Beau, a surfer dude who also owns a diving shop called Captain Neptune. Harper wanted to find her biological father because she felt something was missing in her life; she also wanted to find out who she really is. After returning from Hawaii, Harper is a changed person, for the better, all because of the support from Beau Zane, her half-sibs, and the elusive Mary Patten.

The second story is set in the 1850s and is about Mary Patten, the 19-year-old wife of a sea captain, who takes responsibility for their merchant ship *Neptune's Car* when her husband is struck by yellow fever.

These two-story lines intersect and intertwine because Harper's newfound Hawaiian family will be affected by the U. S. Navy detonating a bomb at the site of the remains of *Neptune's Car*. Harper's energy moves from virtual to actual as she joins her dad, her grandmother, her half-siblings and local activists to protest the Navy's actions. Helping to preserve the site helps Harper shift from viewing life through a screen to living life with people.

This book would be appropriate for high school juniors and seniors because of its content and language. The reason that it would appeal to high school students is because the protagonist is 17 years old, and the setting is post-pandemic, which everyone has lived through. I would include this in my course curriculum by having my class read the book then have them choose between the

following projects: (1) take a break from social media for a week, and write a paper about it, or (2) research a historical landmark, including its backstory and how it became a historical landmark. Both are writing projects, but they are allowing the students to use critical thinking about the book, and the obstacles that Harper and Mary Patten face.

There may be some challenges that arise when teaching this book: the language used and how Harper describes certain situations is sometimes a little advanced for high school students. Discussing with my students about the situations and language in the book before reading it would give me an idea if they were ready to read a book like this one or not.

What I liked best about this book is how much Harper grows as a person even at such a young age of 17. The first couple of chapters in the book were hard to read because Harper treats people in her life—especially her boyfriend—like they are not that important. It is obvious that they came last when compared to her followers. Once Harper goes to Hawaii, she starts to change; then, when she loses her phone, she experiences the epiphany of realizing what she was missing by having her phone in front of her face the whole time. I also liked how the author connected Harper and Mary Patten and created a bond that will stick with Harper for the rest of her life.

Author Biography

Laney Roller is from Exeter, Missouri, and graduated from Pittsburg State University in 2025. After graduating, Laney will teach 9th grade English at McDonald County High School in Missouri. Laney's favorite novel is *WE* by Yevgeny Zamyatin and favorite book series is *Divergent* by Veronica Roth. Laney loves traveling to settings where books are based, including a recent adventure in Forks, Washington, where *Twilight* was filmed. Laney can be reached at lroller@gus.pittstate.edu.

SHOW ME A SIGN: YOUNG ADULT BOOK REVIEW

Halle Harbers
Cherryvale Middle School

Abstract
The author reviews the middle grade novel *Show Me a Sign* (2020) by Anne Clare LeZotte, providing a summary, character analysis and arguing for its accessibility to middle school readers.

Keywords: middle grades, deaf communities, Martha's Vineyard, sign language, social attitudes toward disabilities

Anne Clare LeZotte wrote *Show Me a Sign* (2020) to share a story of a young, strong, deaf heroine. This story—based upon an actual community of deaf citizens who created their own sign language—takes place on the island of Martha's Vineyard and also within the town of Boston during the early 1800's.

The protagonist of this story, Mary Lambert, is clever and ambitious, and she is on a quest for truth. She suffers internal conflict as she mourns and blames herself for aiding in the accidental death of her only brother. She experiences conflict with her parents while the family attempts to cope with their grief; she experiences conflict with her best friend, Nancy, who possesses an opposing view of racial justice and equality; and finally, she faces major conflict with the antagonist of the story, Andrew, and his wicked accomplices.

Bostonian Andrew, a mad scientist in academic clothing, kidnaps Mary in retrieving a "live specimen" from her homeland as well as stealing the "map of memories" created by Mary's late brother. Mary is a strong-headed character who will stop at nothing to retrieve the last tangible memory of her brother but suffers horrible abuse by the people in Boston who are not familiar with the deaf and treat them as animals, rather than human. Mary must suffer starvation, neglect, experimentation, and abuse in order to complete her journey, escape from her evil foe's grip, and return to her homeland to share her experience to enlighten the others. Mary ultimately concludes that both her brother and her conscience are peacefully at rest and that the past will always remain as it is; however, the future holds opportunities for her to make a difference and help others.

Mary Lambert is near the age of many middle schoolers; for this reason, I believe this book would appeal to such an age group. Mary overcomes many hardships and completes a quest, adding to its appeal to middle schoolers.

This book is beautifully crafted and features several themes: the acceptance of disabilities, racism and social injustice, family tragedy, internal conflict, and self-realization in the coming-of-age. The only challenge that may arise from teaching this book could be its elements of racism and social injustice. However, as a new teacher, I would argue that the protagonist opposes hateful and ignorant characters while personifying strong beliefs about what is right and wrong, even when it goes against the beliefs and practices of others.

I love how the author is able to incorporate so many elements into this entertaining and educating literature. I love that middle schoolers can learn so many things through reading this story

of a memorable young heroine; and, I hope that they will do so as they gain some insight into the deaf and hearing-impaired community that may pique an interest in learning sign language.

Author Biography

Halle Harbers originated from Cherryvale, KS, and graduated from Pittsburg State University in May 2025. Post-graduation, Halle will teach 6th and 7th grade English in Cherryvale. Halle's favorite young adult author to date is Elizabeth Acevedo and favorite literature to teach is *Romeo and Juliet*. Halle lives with husband and sweet baby daughter named Thea, and can be reached at hharbers@gus.pittstate.edu.

CREATING REMEMBRANCE IN ALICE HOFFMAN'S *WHEN WE FLEW AWAY: A NOVEL OF ANNE FRANK BEFORE THE DIARY*

John Franklin
Pittsburg State University

Abstract
The reviewer addresses the middle grade novel *When We Flew Away* (2024) by Alice Hoffman, including explication and justification for including the book in a middle school English Language Arts curriculum.

Keywords: Amsterdam, Anne Frank, Anne Frank House, concentration camps, deportation of Jews, diary, Holocaust, Otto Frank, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Published sixty years after the author first read Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, and written with the cooperation of The Anne Frank House, *When We Flew Away* (2024) by Alice Hoffman lovingly, authentically and respectfully imagines Anne's life for the two years before she and her family fled their apartment at number 37 Merwedeplein to hide away in the Annex. The history is spot-on accurate; the dialogue is realistic; the events, setting and relationships smack of verisimilitude. The writing is poignant and powerful, laying the groundwork for Anne's life in concealment. Themes of ambition (to be a writer); family (of conflict with her sister Margot and her mother Edith as well as her father Otto's efforts to escape the Nazis, with a bonus being life with Oma: her maternal grandmother); friends; and love (both ideal and romantic) are presented so skillfully that re-reading Anne's diary will no doubt reveal further insight, illumination and pleasure for any age reader.

The novel will speak to the same audience to whom *The Diary* appeals: those of us interested in the atrocity-and-prevention of genocide, particularly World War II's Holocaust; and, those interested in Anne as a personification of that genocide. Middle schoolers will recognize themselves in Anne's friends and their activities: group outings for ice cream and ice skating, birthday parties, school.

This novel would fit easily into a curriculum focused upon the Holocaust, alongside time-honored titles such as Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, Elie Wiesel's *Night* and, of course, Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl.*

Challenges to teaching this book could be met with information from sites both actual and virtual such as The Anne Frank House (https://www.annefrank.org/en/) in Amsterdam and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (https://www.ushmm.org/) in Washington, DC. Each is well worth a visit. Each is powerfully affective.

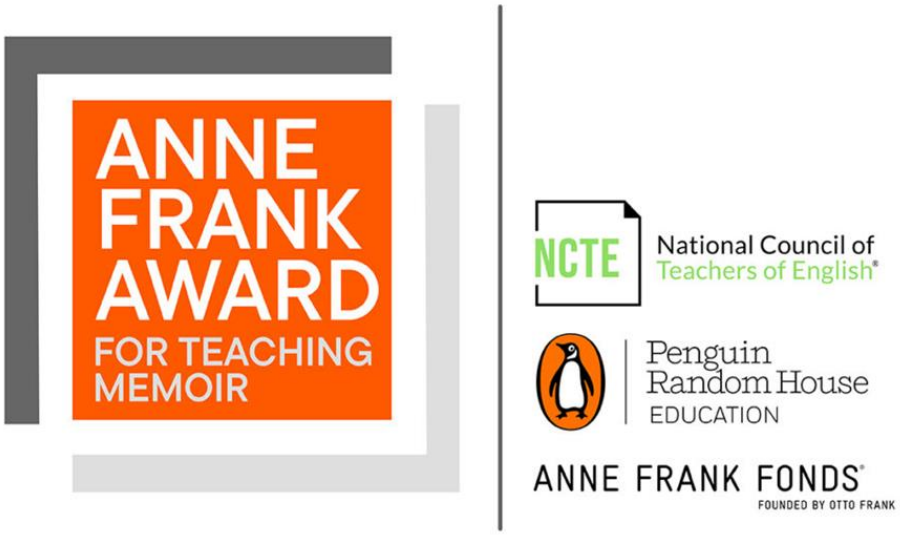
The best part of the book is in the author's Afterword, which I believe should be read first.

In her essay the author explains the effect that reading *The Diary* had upon her as she realized "that a young Jewish girl [like Anne; like me] could be a writer." Later, she proclaims: "*Remember us*, the diary tells us, in every single line, which is why it should be required reading for every child in America and throughout the world."

And, *When We Flew Away* should be right there beside it.

Author Biography

John Franklin (BA Rice, MA Miami of Ohio, PhD Florida; certified to teach English and economics) began his career at Jones High School in Houston. During that time, he combined his love for literature with a love of travel, spending 12-week summers biking or backpacking to visit the settings of the drama, fiction and poetry he loved to teach: Scotland for *Macbeth*; London for Dickens; Canterbury for Chaucer; and, the Lake District for Wordsworth. One Fourth of July he ventured further abroad, discovering himself atop the Acropolis in Athens, thinking, "Here I am at the birthplace of democracy on the birthday of the greatest democracy that has ever existed." He has spent his life since then appreciating and sharing his good fortune. John Franklin (pronoun he) is a Professor of English and Director of English Education at Pittsburg State University in Southeast Kansas where he teaches Literature for Middle and Secondary Schools. He may be reached at jfranklin@pittstate.edu.



NCTE, Penguin Random House, and the Anne Frank Fonds are partnering to provide the Anne Frank Award for Teaching Memoir. English language arts educators from middle to postsecondary levels have the opportunity to apply for funding to advance the teaching of memoir and support student writing in their classrooms. Ten English teachers will receive a $1,000 grant to teach memoir across language arts education—especially texts focused on children's voices and experiences during times of war, such as *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Application deadline is August 1, 2025. Learn more and apply at https://ncte.org/awards/educator-awards/anne-frank-award-for-teaching-memoir/

RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY IN JACQUELINE WOODSON'S *BEFORE THE EVER AFTER*

Katherine Mason Cramer
Wichita State University

Abstract
The author reviews the middle grades novel in verse *Before the Ever After* (2020) by Jacqueline Woodson, providing a brief summary, essential questions, and teaching ideas.

Keywords: middle grades, novel in verse, Jacqueline Woodson, *Before the Ever After*, tackle football, concussions, chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE)

Winner of the 2021 Coretta Scott King Author Award, Jacqueline Woodson depicts the long-term ramifications of repeated head injuries for tackle football players in *Before the Ever After* (2020). In this middle-grades novel in verse, 12-year-old ZJ is a budding musician whose father used to be a beloved professional football player. Now, his father suffers from memory loss, migraines, and moodiness due to the repeated concussions he endured from tackles on the field. In this poignant novel, Woodson depicts the loss and pain of seeing a parent's mental and physical health decline with little support from medical professionals.

Woodson illustrates the fear and confusion experienced by ZJ, his father Zachariah, and his mom in this poem aptly entitled "Repetition":

> Repetition
>
> Even in songs, the lines keep repeating
> and it's okay. The chorus comes back around
> like it's making sure you understand
> how important it is to the song's story.
>
> So how come when my dad repeats himself
> it's such a big deal? How come people
> have to look at him all weird? How come
> my mom has to say to him
>
> *Zachariah, you okay? You want to lie down awhile?*
>
> How come he has to look so confused and mad about it?

And yell *I'm not crazy!*?

How come it feels so scary?

How come it feels so scary? (Woodson, 2020, p. 50)

In her author's note, Woodson describes the research of Dr. Bennet Omalu, who first confirmed in 2002 that the same brain disease that affected boxers was also harming football players; it wasn't until 2016, however, that the link between chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and football was finally acknowledged in the broader medical community.

Woodson's *Before the Ever After* will appeal to readers in grades 6-10; fans of poetry, football, and/or the author herself; and readers who are interested in the long-term consequences of head injuries in tackle football and other sports. It explores such essential questions as …

1. Should tackle football be played in middle and high school sports programs?
2. Do schools (and society) put too much emphasis on sports?
3. What are the benefits and risks of contact sports? What are the benefits and risks of *non*-contact sports?
4. What other activities provide similar challenges and opportunities for success as sports?
5. How do you cope when life does not turn out the way you hoped/planned? What support systems do you already have in place? What support systems would you like to establish?

Students could explore these questions throughout their reading of the novel—before, during, and after—noting how the text informs, interrogates, and/or strengthens their stance.

In addition, students might engage in learning activities, like the ones below, to complement their reading of the novel:

1. **Small Joys Writing:** Just like ZJ writes uplifting song lyrics, compose vignettes, poems, or song lyrics that depict joyful memories/experiences that nourish and sustain you.
2. **School Sports Inquiry:** Research the risks and benefits of (non-)contact school sports, share the findings with appropriate audience(s), and consider further action in your personal and/or academic life.
3. **Advocacy Self-Reflection:** Reflect on and write about how you advocate for yourself and others (e.g., ZJ refuses to play tackle football with friends even when someone tells him "touch ain't even really football" p. 46).

In spite of the fear and uncertainty ZJ faces in *Before the Ever After*, he remains resilient. He takes comfort in the support of his friends and solace in his mother's determined efforts to seek out answers and medical care for his dad Zachariah. This book, which offers a variety of opportunities for further inquiry, is an excellent addition to school, classroom, and personal libraries.

Readers who enjoy Woodson's novel and who are interested in sports literature or the effects of CTE should also consider reading Gordon Korman's young adult novel *Pop* (2000), which was ahead of its time in exposing the effect of repeated concussions in the National Football League while exploring the relationship between a retired linebacker and a high school football player.

Reference

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Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is starting her 16th year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools.

She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.

Disciplinary Teacher Organizations Urge Federal Coordination of Public Education

ONLINE DISCUSSION TOOLS FOR SOCRATIC SEMINAR

Andrew Bellamy
Junction City High School

Abstract
The author describes an educational technology tool called Kialo (https://www.kialo-edu.com) that may increase participation in classroom discussions.

Keywords: educational technology, Socratic method, Socratic seminar, online discussion, Kialo

My classroom has always centered on student discussion and making student voices heard. This is great—until I meet a student too nervous to speak. I've had several who are intelligent and hardworking but terrified to answer a question or participate in a small group.

This comes to a head during one of my favorite activities: the Socratic seminar. If you don't know, Socratic seminars "are named for their embodiment of Socrates' belief in the power of asking questions [and] prize inquiry over information and discussion over debate" (Filkins, n.d.). I use this method in a Fishbowl Discussion format in which students are placed in an inner and outer circle (Learning for Justice, n.d.). Half are inside, actively discussing. The others in the outer circle stay quiet; their role is to take notes. The discussion encourages critical thinking and dialogue, but its structure can unintentionally exclude students who struggle with verbal participation. The first time I did this, I was impressed—nearly all my students participated! However, I worried about the few who said nothing, even though they had read the text and understood it well. When conferencing with them, one said, "I had so much to say, but I hate talking in front of all those people. I just wish it could be like a big group chat where we talk about it."

I realized I needed a tool to help these students access discussions. I scoured the web for a site that could do this. After creating accounts on about six different platforms (mostly discussion boards), I found what I was looking for.

Kialo (https://www.kialo-edu.com) is a live discussion tool, so you can offer students a collaborative graphic organizer or keep it simple in a real-time chatroom. Kialo gives teachers the ability to moderate or remove users as needed. Additionally, it's entirely free, and students don't need to create accounts. Be careful with that last point, though—without pre-approved accounts, anyone can join. Personally, I had my students create accounts so I could verify participation. Here's how I use this site: During the discussion, students on the inside circle talk as normal. Students on the outside get to discuss virtually in Kialo, reacting in real time to the verbal discussion. I usually grade both aspects, so success requires active participation in both modalities.

In all six of my classes, they instantly loved this tool. It kept students in the outer circle engaged and gave quiet or anxious students a voice in the discussion. Whenever I mention a Socratic seminar, several hands excitedly shoot up to ask if they'll get to use Kialo.

Truthfully, a tool like this is a scaffold, not a solution. But for many students, the positive recognition they received online gave them confidence to start sharing in real discussions. When we

give students multiple avenues to engage, they're more willing to trust their classmates, take risks, and grow as learners.

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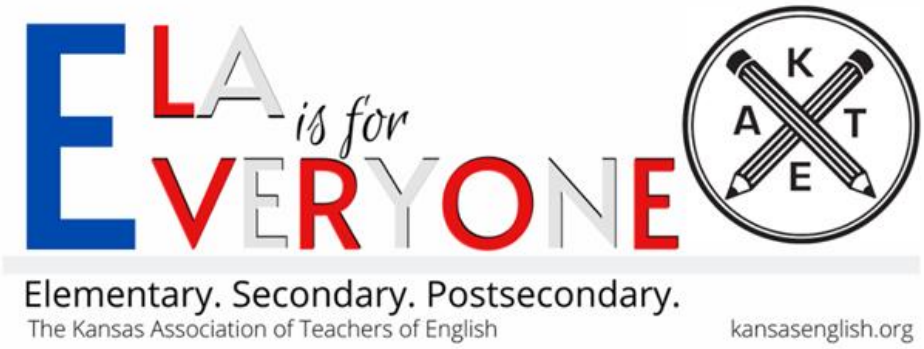
Author Biography

Andrew Bellamy teaches 10th grade English II and Pre-AP English II at Junction City High School. He earned his B.A. in Secondary Education with an emphasis in English in 2024. He loves teaching so far and is excited to continue. He can be reached with any questions at andrewbellamy@usd475.org.



POETRY WORKSHOP IDEAS

Thomas Reynolds
Johnson County Community College

Abstract
Poetry is meant to be shared, to provide an emotional experience for readers. It is difficult to define and explain. In a workshop, one might begin with some basic generalizations about openness, how readers participate in its creation, how to some degree it involves magic, both for poet and reader. During a first workshop experience, the group might begin with a few general questions to begin to dig below the surface.

Keywords: poetry, emotion, energy

Sharing your work with others can be daunting yet also rewarding. Ultimately as poets, we are writing not just for ourselves—to come to terms with things in our lives, as catharsis, to figure out what we think and how we feel—but also to serve our audience. We want to do something for readers, to give insight, most of all create an emotional experience for them, not just to tell them about ours.

In a workshop, one of the first things we ask ourselves is what *is* poetry? What are common traits that all different types of poems might possess? They don't have to rhyme, they don't have to be brief, etc. How do we know a poem when we read or hear one? What does a poem uniquely do as opposed to works in other genres? These are very difficult questions to address, and I'm not sure that we ever satisfactorily answer them, yet they lead to worthwhile conversations.

I mention some broad generalizations. Poems are often *open* with a great deal of white space on the page. Usually, they don't (like many prose pieces) fill up the page with words. The white space might symbolize what the reader has to bring to the poem. The poem isn't truly finished until a reader brings to it whatever they have to offer. Because each of us finishes the poem separately, the poem isn't the same—it's at least slightly different for each of us, so we don't look for consensus but celebrate diversity.

Poems attempt to generate an emotional response in readers. They don't want us to remain passive. They want to do something to us emotionally. Poetry uses concentrated language—densely packed, distilled, excess words (hopefully, ideally) evaporated.

Poetry is a bit of magic trick—for both poet and reader—one you may have seen in some iteration. A magician comes on stage and sets a small suitcase on a table and opens it up and begins removing items from it—at first small items, ones that logically could be removed from it, but then gradually, larger and larger items, a trombone, maybe a person. As writers, we want to be able to be better magicians—packing more into a poem. The more experience readers gain, the better magicians they can be—unpacking more subtle nuances, larger themes/ideas.

At our first workshop experience, we might ask of student poems a few of the following questions:

1. What might be the most energetic, powerful, significant words/phrases in the poem? Is there a word or phrase that stands out/resonates with you, and if so, which one and why?

2. Does the poem as a whole resonate with you, and if so, how? Are there ripples or echoes that extend into your own experience? Does it leave questions for us to answer? Did it evoke an emotional reaction in you, and if so, what was it? How did it accomplish that? How might it do a better job?
3. Is the title interesting? Does it provide context/perspective? If there's no title, can you suggest one?
4. Look at the first line. Is it the best way to begin the poem? Does it grab the reader?
5. Look at the conclusion. Does it end the poem in a satisfying way? Does the reader need additional information?
6. Are there passages that could be made more vivid through the use of an image, figurative language, a sensory impression?

Author Biography

Thomas Reynolds is a Professor of English at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas, and has published poems in various print and online journals, including *New Delta Review, Alabama Literary Review, Aethlon–The Journal of Sport Literature, Sport Literate, Spitball: The Literary Baseball Magazine, Flint Hills Review*, and *Prairie Poetry*. Woodley Memorial Press published his poetry collections *Ghost Town Almanac* (2008) and *Home Field* (2019). He can be reached at treynold@jccc.edu.

THE SUPPORT SERVICES LISTICLE

Beth Gulley
Johnson County Community College

Abstract
The author describes a "listicle" writing activity in which students write about campus support services in a "five things you should know" format in order to share with their classmates. This fosters a sense of audience as well as a connection to the campus.

Keywords: listicle, community building, introduction to research

The listicle, a portmanteau of *list* and *article*, is a fun assignment for writing students to complete early in the school year. For one of the first assignments, I ask students to research someplace on campus that supports students. The final result of their research is a listicle that they share with the rest of the class. I assign this to foster a sense of community while teaching academic communication skills to freshman students at the community college.

On the day I give the assignment, I have students select a place on campus where the goal is to support student learning (e.g., the career center, the student basic needs center, or the math resource center). Then students search the college website, find important facts about the support provided, and identify the contact information for someone who works there. They compose an email asking the contact person if they would be willing to answer some questions. Then the students visit their location and take pictures of it.

After the research about the location, students distill what they learned into a five-item listicle. While creating the listicle, they practice incorporating quotations from their interview and the college website. They document their sources in MLA. They also have to select which information would be most interesting and useable by their audience—their classmates.

When they turn in their paper, students share what they learned with their classmates. This gives the whole class new inside information about 20 places on campus. For example, we once learned that Veteran's Services sometimes offers free haircuts. One student noted that the campus police will help jumpstart stalled cars. Another time we learned that the math center rents calculators.

This assignment encourages students to connect with people on campus whose job is to support their learning. It also promotes skills like sending a professional email and sharing information in a way that is timely and engaging to an audience beyond just their teacher.

Author Biography
Beth Gulley is a Professor of English at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. She holds a PhD from the University of Kansas. Her recent academic publications include "MLA 8: We Are Here, But Should We Have Come?" in *Literacy and NCTE,* and as a coauthor for "A Means Of Living, Seeing, And Teaching Through Haiku" in *Kansas English.* She is also the author

of nine poetry collections. Beth serves on the boards of the Riverfront Reading Committee, the Writers Place, and the Kansas Association of Teachers of English. She can be reached at bgulley@jccc.edu.

READING RESPONSE FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT-LED DISCUSSION IN AN ENGLISH METHODS COURSE

Katherine Mason Cramer
Wichita State University

Abstract
The author describes the impetus and context for a change to her in-class reading response learning activities and shares a reading response framework that prepared students to lead class discussions.

Keywords: reading response framework, student-led discussion, teacher education course

Over the past few years, I have made significant revisions to most of the courses in Wichita State University's middle/secondary English education program, which I have overseen since 2010. From designing an applied learning experience for my young adult literature course in collaboration with program graduates who are also local English language arts teachers to proposing and building a brand new course on teaching grammar in context, the past 30 months have been filled with exciting changes to my program! For this Teaching Tip, I want to share about a small change I made to my newly revised CI 435E English Methods II course in fall 2024. But first, some context:

CI 435E is a 3-credit course my students take during fall semester of their senior year directly before their full-time teaching internship (a.k.a. "student teaching") in the spring. Prior to this course, students have completed three English methods courses with me—one on curriculum design (with a focus on backward design), one on grammar instruction, and one on literature for adolescents. They've taken numerous general methods and education courses in my department (School of Education), and they also complete a course on theories and methods of composition, as well as various literature and linguistics courses with my colleagues in the English Department. So, they have a good deal of content and pedagogical knowledge prior to their senior year.

In fall 2024, I updated the CI 435E textbook to Tricia Ebarvia's 2023 *Get Free: Antibias Literacy Instruction for Stronger Readers, Writers, and Thinkers* and revamped the course assessments. I also decided to redesign the structure for our weekly class meetings, which are approximately three hours with two 10-minute breaks.

Instead of my leading the discussion and learning activities as I do in most of my English methods courses, I wanted this course to rely on student-led discussion during the reading response portion of each class meeting (usually about 40-60 minutes each week). And I wanted students to arrive to class already prepared with their discussion points (rather than allotting think time/write time, as I do in most of my class meetings). So, I designed the framework below and shared it with students on the first day of

class; I also printed it on bright yellow cardstock in "bookmark" form, so they could keep it with their textbook and other required readings for the class.

When students arrived for class each week, I quickly (five minutes) reviewed their preparation and made note of completion (or not) in my class meeting notes while they reviewed the text and gathered their thoughts. (Caveat: this in-class review would be more time-consuming in a larger class, and I can envision revising the reading response to be submitted via our Learning Management System prior to class for my review.) We then sat in a circle, and I invited a volunteer to start the discussion.

I was delighted to discover that my students were not only eager to share their insights and questions about the reading, but they were enthusiastic about *leading* our discussion while I participated alongside them. Instead of my preparing slides and discussion prompts for the readings each week, I engaged as a fellow discussant, took notes on their contributions, and offered up my own. The student-led discussion allowed me to see what my students found most meaningful to their practice, rather than my determining that for them in advance.

This reading response framework invited students, who've already taken several courses with me, to share more ownership in the direction and success of our weekly class meetings, and it's something I will continue to use and develop in future iterations of this course.

CI 435E Reading Response Requirements

***3 Take-Aways**: Ideas that resonated with you or surprised you,

***2 Applications** to your Unit Plan, internship, and/or future teaching, AND

***1 Question or Action** you want to ask or take

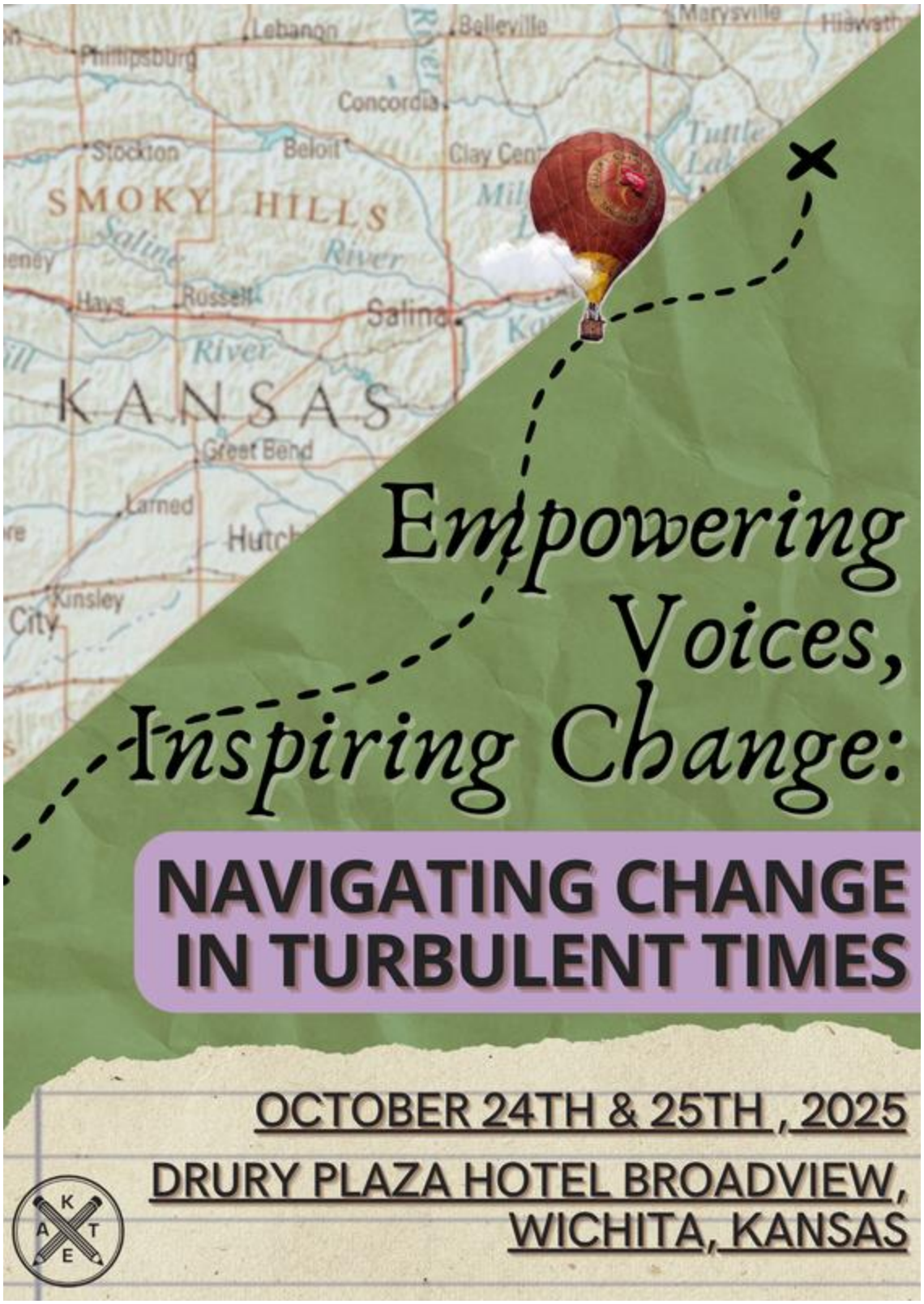
Document **page numbers** from the text so you (and we) can easily reference them.

Procedures:

1. Bring your written or typed response to class (hard copy or digital), and submit it for a brief review at the start of class.
2. Use your reading response to engage in student-led discussion during class.
3. Take notes during the discussion.
4. Save your reading response and in-class notes in your binder or notebook; use them to inform your Blog Posts and your Unit Plan Rationale (and curriculum design).

Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is starting her 16th year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools. She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.


Empowering Voices, Inspiring Change:
NAVIGATING CHANGE IN TURBULENT TIMES
OCTOBER 24TH & 25TH , 2025
DRURY PLAZA HOTEL BROADVIEW, WICHITA, KANSAS
KANSAS
SMOKY HILLS
Phillipsburg
Lebanon
Belleville
Concordia
Stockton
Beloit
Hays
Russell
Salina
Great Bend
Larned
Kinsley
City