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Julian Maduro

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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The Evolution of Assigned Reading: The Diversity in New Hampshire High School Reading and Student Reading Engagement

—Julian Maduro

Romeo and Juliet, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Lord of the Flies*. What do these texts have in common? These titles were the most commonly found texts on high school reading lists in the early 1990s, according to a study done by Arthur N. Applebee of the School of Education at the University of Albany. These titles are also widely recognizable from *current* reading lists despite the 30-year gap since Applebee’s study (Applebee, 1992; Applebee, 1991; Stotsky et al., 2010).

This may seem like an innocuous similarity, but I couldn’t help but be interested in the possibility of a stagnant canon limiting student access to modern and diverse voices. I was completing a dual major in English and justice studies, and I found myself drawn to issues concerning literature, equity, and diversity. In fact, this wasn’t the first time I had approached a topic such as this. In 2019, I investigated the importance of multicultural children’s books by conducting and transcribing 12 interviews with University of New Hampshire (UNH) students and then analyzing the interviews for common themes about childhood reading experiences. That research project, spurred on by the support and mentorship of Dr. Laura Smith of the UNH English department and the McNair Scholars Program (a program designed to give students of color, low-income, and first-generation students opportunities to conduct undergraduate research), sparked within me a deep interest in the relationship between diversity in texts and reading habits.



The author, Julian Maduro (Source: McNair Scholars Program)

In 2020, I built on that previous study to design a new project. With the continued support of McNair and my mentor, Dr. Smith, I began to investigate how diversity in texts impacts reading habits. This time, I focused on examining whether reading lists have evolved in the past 30 years and whether they have become more diverse in terms of author demographics, genres, and ages of publication. I also sought data on how the diversity of reading lists impacts student reading engagement. For this research project, I used the list in Applebee’s 1992 study, “Stability and Change in the High-School Canon,” as a standard for the American reading list of the 1990s. For current reading lists, I focused on data I retrieved from high school teachers across New Hampshire. However, before even beginning to collect this data, I combed through a multitude of articles on the effects of

diversity in literature and the impact of a possibly stagnant canon in order to understand the magnitude of the issue at hand.

Background

The possibility of a lack of progression in the canon, and thus in the reading lists from the 1990s to today, is alarming, not because of an issue with the quality of the texts but rather because of the startling narrowness of the list. Of the texts cited in Applebee's survey, 16% were written by women, and fewer than 7% were written by people of color (Applebee, 1992).

Vicky Greenbaum, an English teacher writing for the National Council of Teachers of English's *English Journal*, says, "The absence of fellow voices... makes some students feel silenced, invisible, and irrelevant, while others (white males) unconsciously acquire an unrealistic sense of themselves as centers of the world in which they live" (Greenbaum, 1994, pp. 38–39). Without diverse voices such as Alice Walker, Frank Chin, and Sandra Cisneros, all of whom have received accolades for their literary prowess, minority students are put at a disadvantage when trying to see themselves reflected in literature. This is an issue with which too many students, myself included, are familiar. Although I've always loved reading, I remember feeling isolated in high school because I couldn't find a character whose experiences echoed mine. I didn't have the opportunity to see myself in the texts put in front of me. Rudine Sims Bishop calls these texts "mirrors" because they allow students to see themselves reflected on the page (Bishop, 1990). She found that when children lack these mirrors, "they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (Bishop, 1990). Without these mirrors, students may lack a connection to the texts they read in class, and as a result, they may be "deprived of textual lineages, that is, texts that they will remember years into the future as being meaningful and central to their human development" (Tatum, 2014, p. 4).

A possible lack of diversity is not the only potentially alienating factor of current reading lists. We must also consider the lack of modernization. The majority of titles on Applebee's list were written before the year 1965. If reading lists have not evolved, they have not allowed for the integration of modern titles and stories. Since students are most interested in material that they find personally relevant (Hinton & Dickinson, 2005), an unchanging reading list inadvertently creates a dichotomy between "'books we read in English' and 'books we read for fun'" (Greenbaum, 1994, p. 37). This distinction may be contributing to a decline in reading amongst American students (Stotsky et al., 2010).

To combat the separation between classroom texts and texts read for pleasure, some teachers have implemented a student-choice model, as in a reading workshop approach. Student-choice allows students to decide what they'll read for class, enabling them to choose from a list of approved texts. Researchers have found that "offering student choice, time, and good books led to increased student engagement, a deeper sense of identity, a developed sense of agency, and higher state test scores" (Morgan & Wagner, 2013, p. 660).

Reading lists that contain modern stories and diverse authors give students the opportunity to find relatable voices and are relevant to a wide variety of readers, and thus, may be able to engage more readers, allowing students to perform better in class and to reap the full benefits of the reading (Guthrie, 2004; Bridges, 2014). This does not mean that the texts on Applebee's list should be abandoned; it simply means that the list itself needs to be expanded so that it is no longer reinforcing a single story (Stallworth et al., 2006).

Methodology: Data Collection

To gather data on current reading lists in New Hampshire, I was assisted by Dr. Smith and other faculty from the UNH English and sociology departments in designing a 20-question Qualtrics survey to send to English teachers across New Hampshire's 10 counties. We created this survey by first compiling a list of dozens of questions we wanted answers to and then by streamlining the list so that the survey elicited answers related to two specific research questions: What is today's high school reading curricula, and how are students responding to it? Dr. Smith and I then used New Hampshire high school websites to find e-mail addresses for English teachers across the state. We sent a Qualtrics survey link and an explanation of the research project to every teacher with available contact info; in total, we sent 523 surveys. Of the 523 surveys delivered, we received 72 surveys back with full responses—nearly double what I anticipated. I requested that respondents choose one English-related class they taught and answer the survey questions based on that class for the entire survey.

It is important to note that because teachers completed this survey, all data collected in this study are based on teachers' perceptions of student reading habits and attitudes and are not necessarily reflective of students' actual reading habits.

Methodology: Analysis

For the purpose of this research study, I chose to home in on 4 of the 20 survey questions to evaluate the diversity of New Hampshire high school reading lists and student engagement:

Question 8: *What books did you assign for your class during this past academic year?*

Question 12: *Of the texts that you assigned, which do you believe that students enjoyed the most? What features of the texts do you think the students found enjoyable?*

Question 13: *Of the texts that you assigned, which do you believe that students disliked the most? What features of the texts contributed to students' dislike?*

Question 17: *What factors do you believe contributed to students skipping texts or reading them thoroughly?*

These questions yielded both qualitative and quantitative data. I organized the qualitative data by grouping similar responses to the same question into categories, or codes. To do this, I analyzed every survey question individually and reread the responses multiple times so that I could identify common themes throughout the teachers' answers. Example codes for the responses to question 12 included *writing style*, *time period*, and *length*. Examining these codes across several related questions, such as question 12 and question 13, allowed me to identify potential patterns.

Alongside this thematic analysis, I extrapolated three lists of texts from these questions. Only the book-length works that teachers reported were included. The three lists were (1) a complete list of texts teachers said they used, (2) a list of texts perceived to be often skipped/skimmed, and (3) a list of texts reported as being read thoroughly. Texts that were skipped/skimmed the most were assumed to have elicited the least amount of student engagement, and vice versa for the read thoroughly list.

I evaluated each of these lists for its level of diversity based on the race/ethnicity and gender of the author. I also examined the age and genre of the texts on each list. I split the texts into the following genres: Realistic Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Nonfiction, Autobiography/Memoir, and Epic Poetry.

After collecting information about author demographics, I analyzed the “skipped/skimmed” list, the “read thoroughly” list, and the overall list to reveal any statistically significant correlation regarding which text appeared on which list and the following variables: “gender of author,” “race/ethnicity of author,” “genre of text,” and “age of text.”

Results: Are New Hampshire Reading Lists Diverse?

When reviewing the survey responses, I quickly discerned that all of Applebee’s texts were featured on the current lists. However, New Hampshire high school reading lists contained a much wider variety of texts, in part because of the utilization of the student-choice model. Of the study’s respondents, 72% reported using student choice in some capacity. Several teachers explained that when students are able to choose which texts they read in class, they’re more likely to enjoy reading them.

New Hampshire high school reading lists also appear to be more diverse than the reading list from Applebee’s study. Applebee found that approximately 7% of texts were written by authors of color and 16% were written by women (Applebee, 1992). In comparison, my survey found that 27% of authors found on current reading lists in New Hampshire are people of color and 34.3% are women. (See Figure 1.)

Unfortunately, these numbers still demonstrate a lack of diversity.

Specifically, there is a dearth of Hispanic and Asian authors. According to the U.S. Census, in 2019 18.5% of the U.S population was Hispanic, and 5.9% were Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In contrast, on New Hampshire reading lists, 3% of the texts were authored by Hispanic writers and 1.3% by Asian writers. Also, women authored just 34.3% of the texts despite making up 50.8% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Although the diversity present throughout all three lists is limited, there is still a statistically significant difference between the level of diversity in the list of books that students skipped/skimmed and the list of books that they read thoroughly. The skipped/skimmed list’s author pool contained significantly less racial diversity than that of the read thoroughly list, implying that student engagement may be positively affected by more diverse reading lists. One teacher supported this conclusion in their response by comparing one class with a diverse reading list with others they taught without that diversity of texts. They said, “[F]ewer students [were] completing the reading in those courses because they d[id] not see themselves reflected in the writing.”

Demographic breakdown of authors

Group	Overall Assigned Texts (N=370)		Skipped/ Skimmed Texts (SS) (N=56)		Read Thoroughly Texts (RT) (N=70)	
	n	Percent	n	Percent	n	Percent
Gender						
Woman	127	34.3	14	25	21	30
Man	243	65.7	42	75	49	70
Non-Binary	0	0	0	0	0	0
Race/Ethnicity						
Hispanic	11	3.0	3	5.3	0	0
Indigenous	6	1.6	0	0	1	1.4
Asian	5	1.3	0	0	1	1.4
Black	65	17.6	3	5.4	14	19.1
Middle Eastern	13	3.5	2	3.6	1	1.4
White	270	73.0	48	85.7	53	76.5

Figure 1

I discovered that another important factor in determining whether a student would skim was the age of the book. The average age of the texts on the list of overall assigned texts was 90.84 years (published in 1930) as opposed to 112.20 years (published in 1909) for the skipped/skimmed list and 97.12 years (published in 1924) for the read thoroughly list. (See Figure 2.) It is important to note that these lists contained texts published as early in time as the fifth century BC (*Oedipus Rex*).

Age of Texts

Group	Overall Assigned Texts (N=370)		Skipped/ Skimmed Texts (SS) (N=56)		Read Thoroughly Texts (RT) (N=70)	
	n	Percent	n	Percent	n	Percent
Years old						
0-4	39	10.5	0	0	9	12.9
5-14	65	17.6	1	1.8	10	14.3
15-24	35	9.5	8	14.3	7	1.0
25-49	38	10.3	6	10.7	4	5.7
50-74	74	20.0	13	23.2	12	17.1
75-99	43	11.6	13	23.2	12	17.1
100-199	30	8.1	8	14.3	4	5.7
200-399	2	0.54	1	1.8	0	0
400+	44	11.9	6	10.7	12	17.14

Figure 2

Thus, I excluded texts published over 2000 years ago when calculating the average age of the texts in an effort to prevent skewed data.

Despite the average age of the texts being over 90 years for all of the lists, the data from this study shows that texts were more likely to be read thoroughly if they were published 0–4 or 5–14 years ago. On the other hand, texts published 100–199 years ago were the most likely to be skimmed.

In regard to the genre of text, realistic fiction, as a whole, appeared more frequently on the skipped/skimmed list; however, I did not identify any statistically significant difference in genre between the lists. The text that teachers found to be most likely skipped/skimmed was *The Great Gatsby*, which seven teachers cited as being unlikely to engage students because of its “arcane” language. Meanwhile, autobiographies/memoirs were most likely to be read thoroughly. One teacher said that they “had several students this year express that they appreciated reading more nonfiction [...], as [the teacher] believe[s] they’ve been exposed primarily to fiction in their past English classes.”

Discussion

This study offers preliminary evidence that reading lists containing contemporary, diverse texts are more likely to engage students than reading lists containing older texts written by authors with homogenous backgrounds. This coincides with the notion that for students to read something thoroughly, they need to find some way to relate to the text. As someone with a bachelor’s degree in English, I’m not a stranger to older texts, nor am I someone who habitually dislikes them. However, I have noticed that I’m far more likely to pick up a book again and again if I’m able to see myself in the characters I find in the pages. Books like *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and even children’s books like *Wild*, *Wild Hair* by Nikki Grimes were the ones that really gripped me, and the ones I wanted to keep reading.

Diverse texts like these, especially in high school classrooms, make literature that much more accessible. Including a range of texts that are diverse in authors’ demographics, genres, and publication dates gives students a multitude of opportunities to relate to the material and to engage with their assigned reading. There are many resources that teachers

can use if they are interested in updating their assigned reading lists, such as the websites for Disrupt Texts, We Need Diverse Books, and the Young Adult Library Services Association, which provide book lists, advice, and recommendations for multicultural literature.

As both a researcher and a reader, I hope that this current study is one step in a progressive and inclusive direction, so that no other young girl has to leave English class unable to find a mirror in the one place where anything should be possible. If this research can inspire those in charge of reading curricula to continue searching for diverse texts, I truly believe that we can begin to build a future in which all young readers can find themselves staring back at them from their schoolbooks. The possibility of this future is why I pursued—and will continue to pursue—research projects such as this. By continuing to broaden the scope of what it means to be an “English class text,” we can make room for more students to find stories they relate to, and therefore, find stories they truly want to read.

I would like to thank Dr. Laura Smith, who has been an invaluable resource and mentor throughout my time in the McNair Scholars Program and especially throughout this research project. Her expertise and constant support are two of the major factors that contributed to the completion of this project. I would also like to thank the McNair Scholars Program, as well as Selina Choate and Tammy Gewehr, who were incredibly generous with their time and advice while I pursued this research endeavor. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Catherine Moran for always being available to assist with the collection and evaluation of quantitative data. I am beyond grateful to all who played a role in putting this project together—without you, none of this would have been possible.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Julian Maduro, from Greenland, New Hampshire, double majored in English and justice studies. She graduated from UNH in May 2021 with a bachelor of arts degree. During her time at UNH, Julian was an Honors Program student, part of the UNH COLA Navigators, and a McNair Scholar. In the McNair Scholars Program, Julian first performed research on the importance of multicultural children's literature. She then expanded on that research with the project discussed in her *Inquiry* article, focusing on the diversity of modern high school reading lists. In the process, she found that many teachers today struggle to engage students in reading, but with more modern and diverse texts provided, this could be facilitated. The hardest part of this project was sifting through and analyzing data from nearly 100 survey respondents. However, Julian enjoyed seeing the results of her qualitative analysis which revealed statistical differences between the lists of texts reviewed by teachers. As a UNH alum, Julian chose to publish her work in *Inquiry* because she feels that local readers will be most impacted by her results. She hopes to work within the field of prison reform and explained that her McNair research significantly aided in her understanding of this sliver of inequity that exists in society. Julian plans to pursue graduate school to earn a master's degree in social work and is determined to help transform this inequality.

Laura Smith is a senior lecturer in the English department at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). She started working at UNH in 2007 and specializes in English education, teaching courses including Teaching Young Adult Literature and First-Year Writing. This is Dr. Smith's first time mentoring an undergraduate researcher and *Inquiry* author. Dr. Smith credits Julian for her infallible dedication and innovation throughout the many steps of the research process, which was made even more complex due to working remotely during the pandemic. Dr. Smith said she gained new knowledge from Julian's research and most importantly, the findings provide a rich picture of high school reading in New Hampshire. Dr. Smith asserts that research is how one tells their story about their work, and *Inquiry's* use of the narrative element in its articles makes the research engaging, accessible, and applicable beyond the discipline of English and writing alone.