THESIS

"THE STORIES THAT MEANT SOMETHING": YA FANTASY AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL ELA PERFORMANCE AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN TRAUMATIZED AND MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

"THE STORIES THAT MEANT SOMETHING": YA FANTASY AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL ELA PERFORMANCE AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN TRAUMATIZED AND MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between Trauma-Informed Pedagogy, culturally-responsive curriculum, and the ELA canon to best aid marginalized and traumatized students in motivation, classroom retention, and identity formation. I believe that critically analyzing, selecting, and implementing diverse texts in an ELA curriculum is a hefty and important topic of research that merits a separate, in-depth study amongst multiple districts, which is outside of the realm of this paper. Moreover, I also believe that, insofar as any one instructor has control over their curriculum and text selections, it is important to prevent just creating a "new" literary canon with a few "accepted" diverse texts. Rather, I would encourage instructors to evaluate their individual classes, respond to the interests of their students, and select texts on a more individualized basis. Genre fiction, and specifically fantasy fiction, is a currently untapped resource for ELA teachers to motivate students to become more confident and successful readers, and is a promising tool in the proverbial toolbox of Trauma-Informed Pedagogy. Indeed, fantasy fiction urges students to conceive of a world wherein they are empowered, where they might confront or escape from the often-traumatizing realities they live in, and "will be able to see that those futuristic and fantastical landscapes are actually closer than they first appeared to be" (Toliver, 2021, p. 30).

DEDICATION

This thesis is the product of years of dreaming, working, and wishing, and as such, has been formed by many hands other than my own. Thank you to my parents (all four of them), my younger sisters, and my adopted twin brother, and my partners for unwavering, enthusiastic support. Eternal gratitude must also be paid to my thesis advisor, Naitnaphit Limlamai, who was more than simply a thesis advisor, but a true mentor. I–and indeed this thesis–am a product of a community of love.

Most importantly, this thesis is dedicated to my students. I love you, I love you, I love you.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the racial makeup of the English Language Arts classroom is becoming more and more racially and ethnically diverse, with an increase of attendance in students that specifically identify as Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or multiracial (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Additionally, the gender and sexuality makeup of high school students has changed as well– with an 11% increase of students who identify as queer in 2023 (Lonas, 2023). Furthermore, as of 2022, 16% of American families are living in poverty (*COE - Characteristics of Children's Families*, 2021). Because of this shift in the makeup of ELA classrooms in the United States, it becomes increasingly apparent that to ensure the success of all students, the ways in which we instruct our students must be analyzed for continued efficacy.

Studies have shown that marginalized students– specifically students who identify as female, students of color, and queer students–are more likely to experience traumatic events by the time they reach high school age than their white, cisgender, heterosexual, male counterparts (Swedo et al., 2023 p. 44). This means that a broad number of our students enter the ELA classroom carrying trauma, which impacts their academic performance, as well as negatively affecting their academic identity and their sense of belonging in the classroom.

When a student does not feel they belong in the classroom– or indeed, in any place– they are naturally inclined to not return. Student retention is a constantly-discussed topic amongst many educators and educational researchers. Dropout rates are lowest for white and Asian students, but U.S. born students have a lower dropout rate overall than "foreign-born" or immigrant students (*Status Dropout Rates*, 2024), indicating a correlative trend: students of color are more likely to drop out *and* experience trauma by the time they're sixteen years old. How,

then, can ELA instructors adjust their texts, curriculum, and instruction with the goal of retaining students, particularly their more vulnerable populations?

When students are engaged and motivated readers, they are more likely to develop a sense of agency, resilience, and are also more likely to challenge themselves further (Ivey & Johnson, 2014, p. 270). But ELA classrooms have experienced a decades-long stagnation in their "teaching approaches and valued content and skills" that have resulted in a prioritization in "teacher-centered modes of instruction and a foregrounding of the study of 'great literature'" (Rubin & Land, 2017, p. 192). These choices privilege "great literature"-- the literary canon– as well as teacher-led lectures, and a minimum of student choice. While this mode of teaching and learning is currently under scrutiny, and more teachers are eschewing the traditional for more seminar-focused, student-driven modes of instruction, there still is a privileging of whiteness, heterosexuality, and cisgender ideology in the texts assigned to ELA students. As explored above, the student population is more varied and diverse than the "standard" books we are giving our students. This, I believe, is the crux to increasing motivation, interest, and retention amongst readers in ELA classrooms. Indeed, Beach et al., in their textbook *Identity-Focused ELA Teaching: A Curriculum Framework for Diverse Learners and Contexts"* lays it plain: "Focusing on identity in the ELA classroom allows students to see how various uses of texts, language, discourse, and narrative matter in material ways to their own lives and the lives of those around them. When ELA matters to students, their engagement and motivation increases" (Beach et al., 2015, p. 7). It becomes clear to me that connecting and responding to student identity in ELA text choice is crucial to aiding students towards success, especially marginalized and traumatized students.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between Trauma-Informed Pedagogy, culturally-responsive curriculum, and the ELA canon to best aid marginalized and traumatized students in motivation, classroom retention, and identity formation. In order to do so, I found it first important to gather, analyze, and compare the academic research already existing on these subjects. I chose to do so for a few reasons. Firstly, I am not a social sciences researcher by nature; my primary interest is in literature criticism and theory, and I am most accustomed to that style of theoretical research. However, I feel my background in literature analysis served me well in this research because it allowed me to formulate my research question and identify points of tension or absence in research through my experiences as a literary scholar and ELA instructor.

Secondly, I believe that critically analyzing, selecting, and implementing diverse texts in an ELA curriculum is a hefty and important topic of research that merits a separate, in-depth study amongst multiple districts, which is outside of the realm of this paper. Moreover, I also believe that, insofar as any one instructor has control over their curriculum and text selections, it is important to prevent just creating a "new" literary canon with a few "accepted" diverse texts. Rather, I would encourage instructors to evaluate their individual classes, respond to the interests of their students, and select texts on a more individualized basis.

Genre fiction, and specifically fantasy fiction, is a currently untapped resource for ELA teachers to motivate students to become more confident and successful readers, and is a promising tool in the proverbial toolbox of Trauma-Informed Pedagogy. Indeed, fantasy fiction urges students to conceive of a world wherein they are empowered, where they might confront or escape from the often-traumatizing realities they live in, and "will be able to see that those

futuristic and fantastical landscapes are actually closer than they first appeared to be" (Toliver, 2021, p. 30).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The high school English Language Arts (ELA) classroom is a space where students often reckon with stories of injustice, marginalization, and trauma, and must then deal with the impact these stories may have on their identities, whether formed through trauma, situation of birth, or neurotype (White, 2003; Cramer, 2018). Consequently, High school ELA instructors will find their classes populated with students living through highly traumatic experiences such as domestic violence, homelessness, food insecurity, and bullying (Cramer, 2018). Thus, ELA teachers find themselves in the midst of tension between the ethical responsibility to manage these uniquely sensitive, highly vulnerable student truths, while also motivating students to reach academic standards– whether through G.P.A., evaluation, or state-funded testing.

As the face of student trauma changes in response to modern challenges (RB-Banks & Myer, 2017), it has become necessary to investigate new forms of teaching, including Trauma Informed Practices (TIP). The point, observes Banks and Meyer, of TIP is "to build resiliency in students facing trauma" (2017, p. 66), since trauma in the brain can deeply impact performance in the classroom– from disassociation, lower performance in memory and retention, to the inability to constructively process frustration (Banks & Myer, 2017; Cramer, 2018). Ultimately, high school ELA teachers must seek out new Trauma Informed Practices to adapt to student needs. This can include critically analyzing the literature utilized in high school classrooms to evaluate if the materials commonly used–often our *literary canon*– are serving students of

marginalized identities, is inclusive of trauma informed pedagogy, and increasing reading retention, enthusiasm, and comprehension.

Terms and Definitions

As we progress through this analysis, it is important to establish working definitions of certain terms that will be prevalent throughout. This is important because it allows the data to be analyzed in a cohesive way. As per the rules of meta-analysis–the type of analysis I shall be utilizing in this paper– it is important to have a firm understanding of the information within the studies (Glass, 2006, p. 430). Thus, I will be compiling and analyzing different contextual definitions of key terms and creating working definitions for this work.

Identity Formation:

Classically, adolescence is defined as a crucial period of time where youth develop the self and their identity, including "commitments, personal goals, motivations, and psychosocial well-being" and is characterized by youth seeking "autonomy, especially from parents, along with increased commitments to social [identities] and greater needs for connection with peers" (Pfeifer and Berkman, 2018, p.2). In this definition of adolescence, the influences surrounding a child's social identity is placed in paramount importance, as the feeling of inclusion in a given group contributes greatly to the development of social identity and community (Benish-Wiseman et al, 2018). The inclusion of social dynamics to the proverbial soup of adolescent identity formation is important because it identifies certain outside influences that impact adolescent identity formation beyond parental influence, which is certainly the first external contributor to internal identity and behavior.

Furthermore, it reminds us that the bulk of socialization among adolescents takes place in school. However, the development of a social identity is a multifaceted process that includes

understanding the intersection between race, class, and sexuality and how this intersectionality impacts the success of marginalized students in forming healthy identities. For example, Nancy Haskell, in her paper "The Effects of Being Racially, Ethnically, and Socioeconomically Different from Peers", concludes that "overall, greater racial diversity tends to have positive effects on student academic outcomes and extracurricular involvement. Students of all types are more likely to be on college prep tracks in more racially diverse schools [...] And, minority students are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities when there is greater racial diversity" (2022, p.4). When students of color are valued and accepted by their school, the greater racial diversity, as Haskell claims, benefits all of the students and contributes to academic success.

Furthermore, it is important to note that all students undergo a period of time that prioritizes the development of identities, not only marginalized or traumatized students. However, when educators implement trauma-informed practices, all students benefit; this is because TIP emphasizes resilience and empathy, concepts that are valuable in identity formation no matter what the student's communities are (Young & Schepers, 2024, p. 100). White students benefit from being exposed to alternative world experiences and perspectives just as much as students of color benefit from their identities represented in a positive way. So too with identities regarding class, gender, and sexuality. The development of social empathy is important for a positive social identity, which enables students to engage with challenging material and alternative worldviews (Nam et al., 2023, p. 4).

Beyond this social identity, there is also the identity students form in relation to themself and their studies; in this instance, ELA specifically. It is this identity over which ELA instructors have the greatest influence, underscoring the importance of TIP in pedagogy . In fact, Neva

Cramer asserts that “teachers are the single greatest difference makers in student success. Implementing a trauma-informed pedagogy has the potential to change resistant student mindsets about school and learning” (2018, p. 78). It is this mindset about school and learning that relates directly to adolescent identity formation. That is, whether or not a student sees themself as a “good student” or not.

While an adolescent develops their social, peer-to-peer identities, they also are developing their academic identity, which is impacted by their feelings of safety and representation in the ELA curriculum. For example, when referring to racial representation and encouraging cultural identity in the classroom, “As ethnic identity formation is seen as an interactive process, others have the power to validate or invalidate a person’s ethnic identity […] Thus, identity formation is not always an individual choice, and ethnic identities can be seen as both self identified and as ascribed external definitions made by others” (Svensson et al., 2018, p. 188). This is a crucial understanding: even racial identities– which might seem obvious or immutable– are impacted during formation by how they are received by the group (social). Furthermore, the validation of racial identities in the classroom are dictated and influenced by the texts selected for instruction (Nam et al, 2023; Rubin & Land, 2017; Hunt, 2023).

Thus, an ELA instructor might conceptualize identity formation amongst adolescents as: the act of developing social and academic identities in conjunction with reaffirming or grappling with the intersectionality of race, class, and sexuality. Each of these proverbial “levels” of identity are not only impacted by each other, but by peer approval, diversity in setting, and diversity in text.

Trauma:

To support the research and analysis examined later in this work, it is imperative to establish a definition of the word *trauma* as it pertains to classroom learning. Trauma can be defined as "the body's natural response to threat, high stress, and danger [...] associated with traumatic experiences, events, or situations such as war, natural disasters, or sexual abuse"; furthermore, a traumatic events are defined typically as "events, situations, and/or conditions that cause acute, or ongoing physical, socio-emotional, and/or psychological strain, and can threaten an individual's safety and/or disrupt her or his normal everyday thoughts, feelings, and practices" (Alvarez et al., 2016, p. 27).

Certainly, there are various definitions of trauma given professional context. The American Psychological Association defines trauma, in part, as "any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning" (American Psychological Association, 2018). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines trauma as "as an event or circumstance resulting in: physical harm, emotional harm, and/or life-threatening harm" (SAMHSA, 2024). While the particulars and specifics for the word *trauma* can vary depending on the context and purposes of the organization or persons defining it, we can identify some commonalities between these conceptions of trauma and further extend these definitions to fit a pedagogical perspective.

We also know that trauma can develop into symptoms of diagnoses such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a disorder that originally was connected solely to combat that now has been expanded to those who have experienced adverse experiences from domestic

violence to parental abuse to rape (Caruth, 2003). Young and Schepers, in their paper examining trauma and students, re-asserts that "[persistent trauma] can manifest as a perpetual state of alertness, resulting in heightened vigilance and a constant undercurrent of low level fear. This ongoing emotional burden may limit students' capacity for curiosity and hinder the process of learning" (2024, p. 94). "[M]ore neurologically based definition" of trauma, supplied by Suleiman, "would be that a traumatic event [...] produces an excess of external stimuli and a corresponding excess of excitation in the brain [which] is not able to fully assimilate or "process" the event, and responds through various mechanisms such as psychological numbing, or shutting down of normal emotional responses" (2008, p. 276).

From the literature on trauma, a pattern emerges: *trauma is a response from the brain that originate from a specific event or recurring series of events that cause psychological, physical, and emotional stress; this trauma response can manifest as emotional dysfunction, disruptive behavior, dissociation, and the inability to engage meaningfully in instruction or social cooperation due to stress and/or fear*.

Pedagogically, this means that the traumatized student has to overcome significantly more obstacles than a non-traumatized student, and that these obstacles may be persistent, yet invisible to an outsider's perspective. Although certainly it is not the responsibility or expertise of the English teacher to suss out warning signs and origins of traumatized behavior manifesting in the classroom, an English teacher needs to be prepared to *respond* to this behavior appropriately and constructively.

Hence, the importance of Trauma-Informed Practices which "emphasize a responsive approach to student needs, prioritizing a student-centered perspective and incorporating culturally responsive and universal design principles" (Young & Schepers, 2024, p. 100). A

further discussion of TIP and its utilization in the ELA classroom in conjunction with Young Adult Fantasy will be explored later on.

YA Fantasy:

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines fantasy as “imaginative fiction featuring especially strange settings and grotesque characters” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2025). A perhaps more friendly definition comes from J.R.R. Tolkien, arguably one of the masters of the genre: “a “fairy-story” is one which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy” (Tolkien, 2014, p. 20). This quote, aside from the undeniable expertise from the source, is also interesting to examine because it includes the writer’s purpose in specifically choosing fantasy to *do* something. Whether the fantasy is meant to satirize, entertain, moralize, or escape, there is a purpose to fantasy, from Tolkien’s point of view, and therefore, an opportunity to analyze and react to that purpose.

Pedagogically, this quote opens a wide range of possibilities for how to engage with fantasy literature. This genre has the potential to be an untapped reservoir of Common Core appropriate content, but is often overlooked. In fact, “quite often, the texts that engage young readers—such as horror, fantasy, humor, comics, and magazines—” are not often included in the ELA curriculum (Stephens et al. 2024. pp. 61-62). This tension between fantasy and curriculum is an intense one, and is a tension borne of the elevation of the literary canon, which typically excludes genre fiction.

Given this– Tolkien’s assertion that fantasy is meant to *do* something, the genre’s connection to escapism, imagination, and the strange, and its exclusion from literary canon–a working definition of fantasy is beginning to emerge. However, the purpose of this paper is to

research *young adult* fantasy literature, and thus the intended audience must be taken into account.

Young Adult, according to YA literature academic and scholar Michael Cart, "is inherently amorphous, for its constituent terms "young adult" and "literature" are dynamic, changing as culture and society — which provide their context — change" (Cart, 2008). Furthermore, the publishing world acknowledges that even when a text is designated as "Young Adult", it is not necessarily *young* adults who flock to it (O'Sullivan, 2023). This might prove problematic in a literary analysis, but this open definition of Young Adult does not impact the appropriateness of a specific text for high school ELA readers, namely because this paper will not be analyzing any particular literature. Instead, we can fit the demographic of high school students (typically between the ages of 14 and 18) neatly into "young adult" for the purposes of this paper.

Therefore, a working definition of Young Adult Fantasy Literature emerges: *works of fiction that are written with specific intentions that are carried out through fantastical elements that are written for an intended audience of teenagers.* While this definition, like all in this section, is naturally incomplete, it encompasses the themes and ideas that will be explored in this research.

TRAUMA IMPACTS ON ELA LEARNING

Marginalized students are statistically more likely to also suffer trauma due to their minoritized identities and are therefore more likely to struggle in school (Dalmaijer et al., 2021). As mentioned prior, marginalized students are statistically more likely to experience adversarial situations specifically because of their identities. However, it is not helpful or accurate to assume

that to be marginalized is to *necessarily* be traumatised. It is important to acknowledge the context of a traumatized student, and act individually, rather than approach with assumptions that imply a deficit thinking (Yosso 2005).

Children that encounter what Colich et. al. call "early life adversity"--which includes "exposure to child abuse, sexual assault, neglect, and chronic poverty"-- can result in premature "accelerated biological aging" (2020). This is a phenomenon where certain physical milestones–puberty, for example– happen earlier in a child's lifetime as a direct response to the child's exposure to trauma. It is no wonder, then, that "Adolescents from ethnoracially minoritized backgrounds increasingly report high rates of attempted suicide, trauma exposure, and limited access to mental healthcare services" (Bravo et. al. 2024), due to the high connection between marginalized identity and trauma (Dalmaijer et al., 2021; Banks & Myer, 2017; Cramer 2018; Enriquez, 2011). Additionally, students who are experiencing trauma have difficulty developing what Banks & Meyers identify as *resilience*, or the ability to integrate the day-to-day academic and social challenges of the school system on top of their extracurricular life.

Students bring their truths to the classroom; this is an inevitability, as students are supposed to spend up to 8 hours a day, 5 days a week on site, and undergo immense social and psychological development amongst their peers and educators here. Particularly in urban schools, educators are confronted with the reality that their classrooms are not always a safe space for marginalized students– especially since professional development is not always adequate in preparing educators on how to aid students in navigating school in the face of trauma (Banks & Meyer, 2017). Although no teacher can control a student's environment, especially outside of the classroom, there is ample research showing that the attitude which a student comes to class deeply impacts their ability to engage with and retain lessons (Dalmijer et al., 2022).

This means that an ELA instructor should be motivated to create a space for students to develop a growth mindset, to learn how to self-regulate, and to develop self-worth and self-advocacy skills. Students with trauma, typically, do not possess this kind of regulation, or are unable to exercise it often, and so an ELA class, due to the nature of its varied, humanist content, can serve as a space for students to develop these skills alongside the more "typical" forms of literacy (White, 2003; Banks & Meyer, 2017).

IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE CLASSROOM:

In a perfect world, the English classroom can be a place for identity formation, representation, and caring. Brian White, in his article "Caring and the Teaching of English" writes, "Indeed, literacy educators all over the world share a belief in the power of texts and in the efficacy of literacy to promote caring, to curtail violence, to bring people together, and to transform communities" (White, 2003). A core factor in teacher burnout is the overabundance of teachers with emotional and financial stake in their students' lives and wellbeing in and out of the classroom being met with underfunding, high dropout rates, and closure of sites (Thompson, 2017, p. 324) The rise of TIP and other trauma-informed pedagogical studies indicates that English teachers are, for the most part, invested in creating space for their students to utilize narrative to explore their identities. So what is impeding their success?

For one thing, both student and teacher must contend with the identity formation of the "reluctant reader"-- and the negative impact of even identifying "types" of readers might have on a student's academic identity (Enriquez, 2011). Indeed, studies show that academic labeling has just as much a chance of "othering" a child than identifying them, and is often met with social consequences that outweigh any support a child might obtain from the label (McGillicuddy &

Machowska-Kosciak, 2021; Enriquez 2011). In this instance, educators must resist labeling a student *for them* and motivate the student to develop an academic identity for themselves.

YA LITERATURE AND ELA PERFORMANCE

In general, students are more likely to succeed in their ELA classrooms when engaging with literature if they feel represented, either through explicit identities or other commonalities they find in the characters and plot. Specifically, Young Adult literature (YAL) is particularly effective for not only engaging reluctant readers but also increasing social responsibility, comprehension, and retention (Greathouse et al., 2017). YAL, by design, is "responsive to the emotional and cultural challenges young people face in their everyday lives. Engagement with such texts invites dialogic relationships with the characters whose narratives have relevance for readers' lives" (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 257). This is significant because the traditional literary canon has found itself under scrutiny of late "due to the fact that the convention of traditional canon texts is predominantly composed of works by White, male, Western authors" (Hunt, 2023, p. 7), and such emphasis on white, male, and western does not always yield success for marginalized and underrepresented students.

Furthermore, there is evidence that teaching and engaging with YAL helps with instructor involvement as well. In certain case studies, service and pre-service teachers engaging with YAL with their students find themselves confronting their own preconceived notions of what student identities mean or entail (Falter & Eagle, 2023). Furthermore, by allowing students access to a revised canon with a diverse repertoire of experiences and perspectives, students will not only gain an enriched understanding of the world, but instructors will also gain a deeper understanding of the truths inherent within their students' experiences and how to collaborate

with their students to create a more trauma-informed classroom (Hunt, 2023; Cramer, 2017; Banks & Meyer, 2017).

Crucially, including YAL in the curriculum can yield positive outcomes to students who have been externally labeled as “struggling” or “reluctant” readers. Because YAL is designed to reflect a more current readership, as well as having a novelty factor (or “edginess” as Ivey and Johnston put it), it becomes an enticing choice for these readers. As a result, many students will renegotiate their relationship with reading, transitioning themselves from a school-imposed identity to a self-identification (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Allowing students to engage in reading on their terms, with more student choice and more choices extended beyond the canon can contribute to students self-identifying as a reader, and direct them to the possibility that their academic identity is not fixed, but fluid and malleable.

Despite the research indicating that YAL benefits students and instructors, we must acknowledge that the selections from literary canon are often chosen by department heads or district-level curriculum specialists (Stephens et al., 2023). Rubin and Land, in their article "“This is English class”: Evolving identities and a literacy teacher's shifts in practice across figured worlds”, claims that “contexts where teachers are expected to teach standardized daily lesson plans in preparation for exams narrow the possibilities for how teachers figure the world of teaching” (Rubin & Land, 2017, p.191), and yet the literary canon still continues to be the expected book list for a “standard” ELA class, with YAL and speculative fiction designated to elective classes. Savitz et. al. propose a few reasons for this resistance to changing the curriculum: the reluctance to bring up tense or unpleasant topics, the underrepresentation of instructors of color, and the lack of male instructors (Savitz et al., 2022).

If Young Adult Literature has a hard time combating the foothold the literary canon has in ELA classes, then YA Fantasy has an even more difficult journey to academic legitimacy. However, YA Fantasy has the potential to not only increase student readership and representation, but also motivate students to engage in forward thinking, encouraging them to conceive of different worlds of which they are the arbiters of their own destinies.

Dr. Stephanie Toliver, in her article “On Mirrors, Windows, and Telescopes”, examines and critiques the established metaphor proposed by Dr. Bishop of “how books can transform the human experience and reflect it back to the reader (mirrors), how texts can offer views of real, imagined, strange, or familiar worlds (windows), and how literature can enable readers to walk through the printed text and become part of the world created by the author (sliding glass doors)” (Toliver, 2021, p. 21). Although this metaphor has served the educational and literary community well, Dr. Toliver found that the conversation around the function of books excluded Black girlhood and speculative storytelling, and thus she introduced the concept of books as telescope: “Through telescopes, children especially those whose access to futures and fantasies has been distorted by violence and oppression—will be able to see that those futuristic and fantastical landscapes are actually closer than they first appeared to be” (Toliver, 2021, p. 30). In this metaphor, the futuristic (science-fiction) and fantastical (fantasy) serve to motivate and empower marginalized students to envision a world where they are empowered, exempt from trauma, and valued specifically for their identities. Toliver even goes so far as to describe speculative fiction as “as refractors, blocking the violence of the present to shine light on magic-filled futures” (Toliver, 2021, p. 30).

Fantasy literature's relationship to the real is embedded in the genre itself, as the fictional power structures, magical systems, and the "unseen" supernatural world reflects who is unseen, undervalued, and hidden in the real world (Ekman, 2024). Ekman's further analysis of the fantastical identifies a transformation in and of itself: "one of the most intriguing features of fantastic literature [is] the ability to turn a metaphor into something actual: the metaphorical invisibility of the unseen street person turns into magical invisibility. And [...] these invisible people often do a great many impossible things" (Ekman, 2024, p. 75). This analysis goes hand-in-hand with Toliver's telescopes; fantasy literature identifies the gritty realities and traumas of the "real" world, but proposes a world where the disenfranchised might have access to power to do these impossible things.

Including diverse narratives allows students outside of a given identity to engage with–or develop– empathy in a safe place (Price, 2023). Young Adult literature, in fact, has earned its place in research as a robust genre for adolescents to develop empathy with other groups (Price, 2023). It is for this very reason that it is crucial for these students to read and engage with texts that not only represent their identities, but also identities that they may not have yet explored or understood (Nam et al., 2023). For example, graphic novels have become popular in ELA classrooms because they "have the immense ability to provide a context, to connect faces to names, to temper facts with stories, and to provide opportunities for deeper learning and engagement by students" (Boerman-Cornell & Kim, 2020).

Furthermore, increased representation in ELA literature texts can also lead to increased interest and empowerment to the underrepresented student. Currently, the literature in ELA classrooms do not match the demographics of their students, which can lead to a white-centric curriculum (Yosso, 2005). This lack of representation can cause deficit thinking, lack of interest,

and a lack of attitude resiliency in the classroom, ultimately impacting a student academically and in terms of their self-worth (Yosso, 2005). Therefore, the presence of diverse texts accessible to all levels of students will attract and retain minority students who will be then empowered to share their literacies (Wells et al., 2016). If ELA instructors can include materials that are treated with academic rigor and seriousness, but are also representative of marginalized identities, then these at-risk students will have an increased interest in engaging with the concepts being taught (Nam et al., 2021).

Fantasy YAL has a crucial role in TIP as well, with several case studies identifying YAL as a way of asking students to engage with perspectives, trauma narratives, and identity safely (Lawton & Cain, 2022; Ivey & Johnston,). Individually, fantasy YAL serves as a mode of escapism for a traumatized student (Lawton & Cain, 2022), specifically an escape to a telescoped world where they are "whisked away to rule a kingdom, attend a magical school, or find [their] real family" (Lawton & Cain, 2022, p. 2943). While, like all things, the overuse of escapism and fantasizing can be a maladaptive coping strategy, adolescents who engage in imaginative play, fantasizing, and immersive fantasy experiences (such as engaged reading) are engaging in emotional regulation, and are more disposed to cope better with anxiety, depression, and trauma responses (Bacon & Charlesford, 2018). When a child is able to disengage with environments that trigger their trauma, or activate their stress responses, it can allow their brains an opportunity to recover and recuperate (Bacon & Charlesford, 2018). Fantasy fiction, if we remember Tolkien's assertions, is meant to use the fantastical to allow the reader to interact with their lived experiences (Tolkien, 2004). In this way, readers of fantasy fiction have the opportunity to process difficult experiences through a safe, structured narrative that can still feel relatable to their trauma without it feeling "too real" (Lawton & Cain, 2022; Svensson et al, 2018;

Toliver's telescope analogy conceives of speculative fiction as a tool for young readers to extend their thought of who they are and the world they live in beyond what is "real" into what could be (Toliver, 2021). In order to do so, readers must be able to first identify who they are in the "real"-- a skill that does not exist in the vacuum of the reader's internal life, but is in fact impacted by how the student as a whole is responded to by their environment and communities, especially in the classroom (Svensson et. al, 2018; Haskell, 2022). Often, this means that students with marginalized identities will find themselves underrepresented or represented in a way that is outdated and inaccurate (Tatum, 2014; Nam et al, 2023; Haskell, 2022), which can contribute to lack of academic motivation, disinterest in reading, and sometimes social isolation (Haskell 2022). This ouroboros of tension between identity formation responding to -isms and trauma and representation in genre fiction meaning to aid a reader in envisioning a more empowering narrative for themself is a core conflict addressed both in TIP and in what Toliver proposes is a "purpose" of speculative fiction. That is to say, in order to engage with speculative fiction in an empowering way, students must be able to read about identities that align with their own; in the same way, students with marginalized identities benefit from diverse fiction because it allows them to feel empowered.

METHODS:

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to conduct a meta-analysis on studies found in academic journals to examine the connection between the inclusion of YA fantasy texts and ELA success and identity formation in high school students. The reason why I am combining these topics in this analysis is because I want to explore the intersectionality of trauma, identity, and the ELA classroom and the impact culturally-responsive, trauma-informed pedagogy has on positive

development in students. Particularly, I want to explore how book choice– specifically, including fantasy texts– may aid ELA teachers pedagogically *because* of the potential for representation of marginalized identities.

Positionality:

I am an English Language Arts educator, who identifies as Chicane, disabled, and non-binary/transgender. I have over a decade of educational experience in various communities in the U.S. Southwest, including in areas of food deserts, high poverty, and majority-minority populations, predominantly with middle, high, and collegiate students. Furthermore, I have spent years studying genre fiction and how fantasy literature can be a tool of positive representation for many demographics.

I choose to present the following identities here because they overlap with some of the identities that are often identified as marginalized in this analysis (Swedo, et al, 2024) Furthermore, the diversity of experience I possess in working with various communities in education informs my understanding of how varied and diverse the needs of ELA students are, and how difficult it is as an educator to meet them adequately. These identities and experiences drive my research because they allow me to remember the humanity of what might easily become flat subjects in a paper.

It is also important to note that while I have spent years doing research– for school, publications, and as a hobby– my research experience is predominantly in literary analysis. This paper, as discussed in the next section, asked me to engage in social sciences research, which was a steep learning curve. Thus, it is entirely possible that my understanding of, and execution of, this research analysis may have some unintended gaps or flaws. I hope that this paper, rather

than serving as a finite and completed product, will serve as a starting point for further, more expert, research.

Meta-analysis:

This research pertaining to fantasy literature, ELA, and student groups utilizes Greg Glass's meta-analysis, which Glass describes as "the analysis of analysis," or "the analysis of a large collection of analysis results from individual studies for the purpose of integrating the findings. It connotes a rigorous alternative to the casual, narrative discussions of research studies which typify [academic researchers'] attempts to make sense of the rapidly expanding research literature" (1976, p. 3). Furthermore, In a retrospective article entitled "Meta-Analysis: the Quantitative Synthesis of Research Findings", Glass himself re-asserted that despite the decades of scholarly work in and about meta-analysis, "meta-analyses must deal with all studies – with good or bad and indifferent studies – and that their results are only properly understood in the context of each other, not after having been censored by some a priori set of prejudices"(Glass, 2006, p. 6). Although this is a very old style of analysis– originated in the 70s and refined again in 1995– it continues to be crucial in identifying best practices in literacy research (Hansford & Schechter, 2023). Because meta-analysis has spent the last decades fully establishing itself in literacy studies, I feel that it is an appropriate mode through which I will analyze my studies.

Utilizing meta-analysis means that I am analyzing not only how each of my findings relate to itself in its topic but also how the topics relate to each other, and each of the articles within. This is in line with the basic idea of meta-analysis, as the nature of this type of analysis acknowledges that "Collecting all studies is impossible, and collecting only the best studies introduces an element of judgment that can be problematic" (Glass, 2006, p. 431). That is to say, tackling a multi-topical issue such as identity formation, trauma, representation, marginalization,

and YA fantasy analysis demands a mode of analysis through which the analyst must be allowed to hop fences, as it were, to explore how these diverse topics interact with each other.

On the subject of choosing appropriate articles, Glass himself states, "I remain staunchly committed to the idea that meta analyses must deal with most studies–good, bad, and indifferent–and that their results are only properly understood in relation to each other, not after having been censored by some a priori set of prejudices" (p. 431). I appreciated that meta-analysis emphasizes understanding sources in relation to each other, as that also influenced how I would analyze the research. For example, after identifying and collecting the sources that fit into my search criteria, I not only coded them based on how they referred to my research question, but also how they related to each other in focus and purpose (see table 1 on p. 26). Thus, I was able to code my data in a way that explores the way the theoretical research relates to itself.

In terms of overall intent, I am focusing on the theoretical implications of including YA fantasy in an ELA curriculum; it is not my intent to expand or incorporate these findings with student or educator participants at this time. Instead, my intent is to utilize meta-analysis to create a framework by which educators may investigate their individual classrooms and pedagogies and, if there is a need for positive change, to implement strategies examined in this paper as they see fit. Secondly, I am also responding to the gap in academic research about the validity of fantasy fiction as a pedagogical and academic resource. This by necessity requires me to analyze the patterns of academic findings, to further investigate how fantasy is underutilized as a genre, and how that might relate to the broader topic of marginalized and traumatized students and readers.

The data sources I am collecting for this investigation are exclusively printed sources–including pedagogical textbooks, case studies, and academic journals–all published within the

last 10 years (2015-2025). All I ensured that the articles and books chosen for analysis were peer-reviewed, exigent, and hosted/published by established organizations such as the Colorado State University Library Database, ERIC.gov, and sometimes from recommendations from CSU faculty. I referred to peer-review sources because I want to explore the conversations between academics about YA fantasy and pedagogy. That is to say, I am analyzing what experts in education–particularly ELA education–are and are not saying about YA fantasy in the context of trauma, academic success, and identity formation.

Landmark, foundational articles published over ten years ago are included if they are well-cited in contemporary publications. For example, I am referencing Dorothy C. Holland's book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, published in 1998 and George Glass's 1976 article "Primary, Secondary, and Meta-Analysis of Research". I am doing so because Glass's work is the foundation of the kind of research I am conducting and Holland's work is cited multiple times when discussing identity formation in students even in modern articles.

The other modes through which I filtered the research I encountered were: focus on American high school and high school aged teenagers, written in English, and focusing on secondary English Language Arts. These additional filters were simply to account for the choices I made in the study that aligned with my positionality (American, English speaking) and purpose (focus on ELA and high school students).

Coding of Data:

Because my research question is *how does including YA fantasy in high school ELA classes influence identity development and academic success in marginalized students, who are statistically more likely to experience and exhibit trauma*, I proceeded to select following themes based off my parsing of my research question: *(1) High School ELA & YA Fantasy; (2) High*

School ELA & Trauma/Trauma-Informed Practices; (3) High School ELA & Identity Formation/Representation; and finally *(4)YA Fantasy & Representation.* There are, notably, two themes that have a combination of concepts (Trauma/Trauma-Informed Practices and Identity Formation/Representation). This is because the focus of one (i.e., "trauma") was specifically being analyzed within the context of the other (i.e., "trauma-informed practices).

When engaging in the act of collecting data, Glass himself had some advice: "Find a research article on the subject of your meta-analysis and scour its list of references for related studies; go to those studies and do likewise" (p. 431). Thus, I decided to choose a few keywords related to my research question to guide my initial "deep dive" into research databases.

In order to explore the research on each of the four themes I pulled from my research question, I input specific terms into the following search engines: ERIC, CSU Library, and Google Scholar. I chose these three because they were search engines I had close familiarity with, some that focused specifically on education literature (ERIC), as well as search engines that would yield a broad variety of results from which I could identify relevant articles either from the search results themselves or the works cited pages from each (CSU Library and Google Scholar). The latter technique is specifically recommended as a strategy tool in gathering and evaluating research through meta-analysis (Glass, 1976, p. 431). In addition, I also gained a few texts specifically from my close contact with Colorado State University professors as a student in the following classes: Young Adult Literature and Investigating Classroom Literacies. Furthermore, I also received a few recommendations directly from my thesis advisor.

I also identified a few key disqualifiers for elimination. I wanted to keep the materials cited to be within the last ten years of research. I wanted the texts to be in English, since the main topic is English Language Arts. Furthermore, within my searches related to pedagogy, I wanted

to only focus on American schools. My intent is to identify and explore issues, tensions, and conversations between American schools and the ELA canon, representation, and identities. Citing literature that deals with global versions of these themes would swiftly become bigger than the scope of this paper. Selecting the focus within the contexts of trauma, marginalization, and identity became a little more difficult. I wanted to keep my focus within American schools, but because my research is focusing in part on race and ethnic identities, it would not be completely appropriate to limit my scope to papers dealing with solely American children, as immigrant children should be able to retain their identities as non-American. Therefore, I did not select any papers where the research was conducted outside of the United States. Finally, I sought to only reference papers that were peer reviewed (i.e., I eliminated Master' theses and PhD dissertations).

The flowchart (figure 1) below delineates the ways in which my search terms responded to each other and evolved over the course of my research. For a list of specific articles per keyword search, see appendix a at the end of this paper (p. 42).

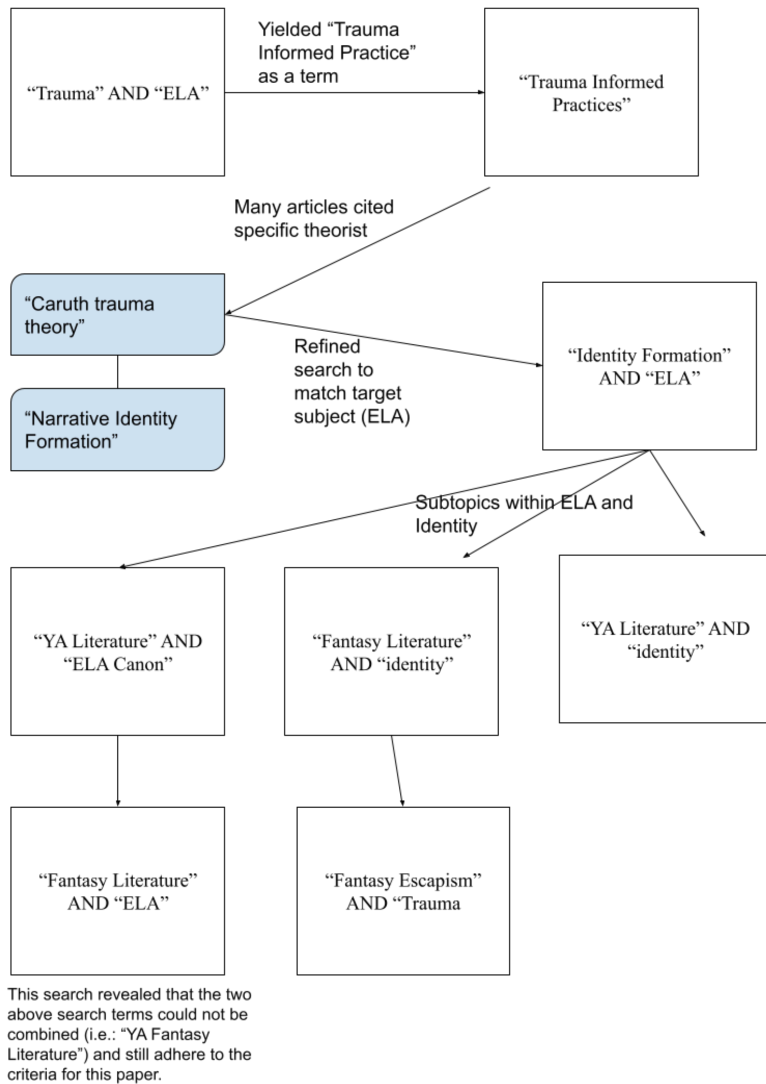

Figure 1: search terms and results

This flowchart tracks the progression of my research, and highlights a few unexpected pitfalls as I proceeded. The most salient, to me, is that the searches for “YA Literature” and “Fantasy Literature” had to remain separate otherwise I could not find material on this subject matter in middle and high school ELA classrooms. This is the crux of the tension in my investigations: while there is much discussion on how YA literature might be utilized for Trauma-Informed Practices and culturally-responsive identity formation, and there is *some* (but not much) material

dealing with fantasy literature, trauma, and identity, when I sought to specify *young adult fantasy literature* and ELA pedagogy, the results were either only tangentially related, or student papers. Furthermore, after filtering through key terms and elimination criteria, I did not need to make any further eliminations.

Table 1 demonstrates the ways in which I organized and evaluated the articles I found against the four themes that I extracted from my research question. I was able to sort the results I gathered into two intersecting categories: the focus category (column 1) and the main themes (row 1). My intent in doing so was to analyze how the sources not only answered the components of the research questions–themes– but also how they might be similar or different in their intent and purpose. Because, as Glass reflects in his article "Meta-Analysis at Middle Age", the analysis of how two pieces of research are different yields just as crucial information as exploring sameness (Glass, 2015, pp. 224).

As stated before, I chose the main themes based on the components of my research questions, but the focus category terms were chosen after I gathered all of my relevant sources that met the research criteria. After this filtering, I looked at the keywords included after the papers' abstracts and identified common keywords (i.e., *pedagogy, trauma, identity formation).* By sorting these common keywords, I was able to codify the specific terms that would comprise column 1. The resulting table is below:

Table 1: Sorting the Research. The four themes on the x-axis are derived from my parsing of the research section. The six focal points on the y-axis are derived from themes that arose in the articles.

	Trauma-Informed Practices	***Identity Formation in ELA***	***YA Fantasy in ELA Classrooms***	***YA Fantasy and Representation of Marginalized Identities***

Focus: Data Analysis (percentages, statistics)	"Direct or Indirect Links Between Children's Socio-economic Status and Education" "Biological Aging in Childhood" "Poverty Measures in Cognitive Development"		"Research on Student Engagement"	"Fantasy Proneness and Emotional Distress"
Focus: Development & Trauma (trauma's impact on social and psychological development)	"Direct or Indirect Links Between Children's Socio-economic Status and Education" "Using Trauma Informed Pedagogy to Make Literacy and Learning Relevant" "Caring and Teaching of English" "Biological Aging in Childhood" "Poverty Measures in Cognitive Development"	"Children's Right to Belong"	"Exclusion: Melancholia in Struggling Readers"	"Fantasy Proneness and Emotional Distress" "Fictional Escapism and Identity Formation" "YAL and Empathy"

	"Trauma Related Care"			
Focus: Identity (formation of identity in adolescence)		"Children's Right to Belong" "Evolving Identities and a Literacy Teacher's Shift" "Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds" "Identity-Focused ELA Teaching" “Identity-Focused ELA Teaching: A Curriculum Framework for Diverse Learners and Contexts”	"Adolescents and Injustice While Reading" "Resisting Reader Identity" "YA Book Clubs and Teacher Professional Development"	"Mirrors, Windows, and Telescopes"
Focus: Race, Gender, Class & Sexuality (demographic information as it pertains to how those with marginalized identities experience life)	"Direct or Indirect Links Between Children's Socio-economic Status and Education" "Childhood Trauma in Today's Urban Classroom" "Using Trauma Informed Pedagogy to Make Literacy and Learning Relevant"	"Race Matters Whether or Not We Talk About It" "Children's Right to Belong" "Using Graphic Novels" "Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds" "Working from Within: Chicano and Chicana Activism"	"Teaching Culturally Sustainable YAL" "Adolescents and Injustice While Reading" "Inclusive and Diverse Texts in ELA"	"Urban Fantasy" "Mirrors, Windows, and Telescopes" "Fictional Escapism and Identity Formation" "Emphatic Analysis with Gender Labels" "YAL for Racial Identity"

	"Poverty Measures in Cognitive Development"			
Focus: Lit & Genre Analysis (particular YA texts and how to utilize them in classrooms)		"Race Matters Whether or Not We Talk About It" "Re-Imagining the English Canon" "Using Graphic Novels"	"Teaching Culturally Sustainable YAL" "Adolescents and Injustice While Reading" "Inclusive and Diverse Texts in ELA" "Engagement with YAL"	"Real and Fantasy in Translation" "Urban Fantasy" "Fictional Escapism and Identity Formation" "Emphatic Analysis with Gender Labels"
Focus: Pedagogy (texts that advise teachers on how to engage with ELA students)	"Childhood Trauma in Today's Urban Classroom" "Using Trauma Informed Pedagogy to Make Literacy and Learning Relevant" "Caring and Teaching of English"	"Evolving Identities and a Literacy Teacher's Shift" “Identity-Focused ELA Teaching: A Curriculum Framework for Diverse Learners and Contexts”	"Teaching Culturally Sustainable YAL" "Drawing on Student Worlds in ELA" "Inclusive and Diverse Texts in ELA" "Resisting Reader Identity" "Engagement with YAL" "YA Book Clubs and Teacher Professional Development"	"Emphatic Analysis with Gender Labels" "YAL for Racial Identity" "Reading for Youth Activists" "YAL and Empathy"

In the end, I gathered 30 main sources, which includes 1 book, two separate chapters of another, and 27 articles. I allowed for articles to "repeat"-- that is, occupy different cells in the chart as a whole– to reflect the way some articles contributed to my research in multiple ways.

ANALYSIS:

Employing meta-analysis meant that I was tasked with the job of finding out how my findings related to each other, as well as how well they contributed to the exploration of my research question. This meant that the search terms, the themes, and the focus points needed to either connect and relate to each other or that any disconnect had to be explored (see flowchart 1). During this examination of sources, I was able to confirm a suspicion I had long held: that genre fiction– fantasy, especially– has been an underused and underestimated tool in the toolbox of the trauma-informed and culturally responsive teacher.

When exploring alternative options for a more diverse text list, most examples of "global" literature classes are Honors (HP), Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or another specialized program. For example, a high school in Sacramento, California has a global program known as the Humanities and International Studies Program (HISP). Their sophomore year book list includes authors such as Chinua Achebe, Amy Tan, Salman Rushdie, and Isabel Allende. While this example certainly fulfills the goal of a more diverse and culturally knowledgeable text base, it is an academically exclusive program. Like HP, AP, and IB programs, the HISP program requires students to meet certain academic standards in middle school, has an entrance exam, and an entrance essay. With its small class sizes, all these programs have a relatively low acceptance rate and an equally low rate of applicants in proportion to the student body size.

This exclusivity factor creates a rhetorical “pay wall” for entry that immediately segregates students who “deserve” access and those who do not. Furthermore, Shirley Logan (2008), in her work Liberating Language: Sites of rhetorical education in Nineteenth-century Black America, notes that when literacy associations (in this case, an advanced classroom) are membership-exclusive, many are deterred from "making efforts to gain admission to them [...] consequently, their numbers will necessarily be few" (p. 71). That is to say, students who may provide literacies that do not necessarily align with the prescriptive academic standards will not only be demotivated to access these diverse texts, they will also have a more difficult time actually obtaining this access, even if they were to apply.

Therefore, as we examine the research data, it is important to keep this context in mind: that there is a discrepancy between the racial, gender, and class makeup of most of our ELA classrooms and the selection of “canon” that is being privileged. This discrepancy contributes, in part, to negative identity development, a lack of motivation, and disinterest in school. If, as I believe this paper demonstrates, including YA fantasy literature in the curriculum can aid in alleviating this tension, then it should not be delegated to optional or advanced classes, but must instead be integrated into “normal” core curriculum as well.

Trauma-Informed Practices

Because the purpose of this paper is to provide teachers, teacher-educators, and administration with relevant information and data on the impact a change in curriculum might have on our diverse classrooms, the y-axis row of “pedagogy” on table 1 consistently contained at least three different sources. Here, the data pertaining to pedagogy, vulnerable demographics, and trauma were the rows that were most populated; indicating a strong overlap between these focus groups and the theme of trauma-informed practices. This is hardly surprising; the main

focus of trauma-informed practices is meant to “build resiliency in students facing trauma” (RB-Banks & Meyer, 2017, pp. 66), which is more likely to impact vulnerable populations in the classroom (Alvarez et al, 2016).

This research shows that trauma-informed practices respond directly to the needs of vulnerable populations and the recency and regularity of trauma carried into the ELA classroom. Even though not every minority student will experience trauma, and not every student who experiences trauma is in a minority population, the prevalence of ACEs and trauma in our classroom is impacting student involvement, participation, and retention rate (Swedo et. al, 2023). Students who experience trauma do not necessarily possess a literacy in resilience, emotional regulation, and self-advocacy (Alvarez et al., 2016; RB-Banks & Meyer, 2017), and therefore create a need for a responsive pedagogy so that these students can succeed. This section reiterates the need for these trauma-informed practices, given the prevalence of students who are experiencing trauma in our classrooms.

Identity Formation:

In this category, there was a robust intersection between identity formation and vulnerable demographics. This is hardly surprising, given that identity formation relates to the cultural, ethnic, gender, and class groups a student might feel community with, and how these communities shape the way this student interacts with the world. What is interesting in this section is that although there is a strong connection explored above between trauma and vulnerable communities, and that connection impacts ELA success, the viable articles pertaining to identity formation and pedagogy are much smaller than I previously expected prior to research.

This implies to me a hesitation to engage with students in their personal and academic identities. Perhaps because it feels too personal, or not within the purview of an ELA instructor, or something a white teacher might not feel comfortable exploring with a student. However, there is an undeniable role teachers play in identity formation: “academic labelling contributes to how children understand themselves (and others) shaping expectations associated with who they ‘are’, who they ‘should be’, and how they should be treated” (McGillicuddy & Machowska-Kosciak, 2021, p. 4). Therefore, this section highlights a tension between teacher impact, student identity development, and resources for either, which are still lacking or in development.

YA Fantasy Literature in the ELA Classroom:

The difficulty I experienced when researching this aspect of the research question is explored with Flowchart 1 and its analysis, however, it is the most unexpected and largest source of tension I encountered in my research. Although at first glance, this section seems quite robust, it is important to note that none of these sources specifically featured YA *Fantasy* literature in their discussions of YA literature, book clubs, injustices, and reinventing reader identities. Rather, the focus was on YA literature as a broad concept, and would occasionally mention fantasy as an option, or use an example of students responding to works and include a singular student who responded to fantasy (Lawton & Cain, 2022, p. 2943). This separation/exclusion of fantasy (and genre fiction in general) from specific analysis indicates a tension still held between the traditional views of what English class “ought to be” and what it *could* be.

As I analyzed this data, I had to judge for myself how these concepts might extend specifically to YA Fantasy fiction. Therefore, moments where students expressed a benefit of fantasy fiction were cross referenced next to themes and focus points of other sections. For

example, in a duoethnographic study, a student testimony read:"YAL fantasy started me on a path of learning that I could leave the world I knew and create my own path and become my own person. The stories gave me permission to love my family dearly while understanding I, like the characters on their journeys, might need to experience the world outside of my family to discover who I was becoming" (Lawton & Cain, 2022, p. 2943). These quotes were rare, given the lack of direct analysis of YA fantasy literature, but they revealed much. For example, in this testimony, the student identified YA fantasy literature as a tool for identity development ("to discover who I was becoming"), self-determination ("create my own path"), and confidence ("I…need to experience the world outside of my family"). These quotes allowed me to make critical connections during analysis that even though the articles may not explicitly or singularly focus on YA fantasy, the benefits of YA lit to ELA pedagogy can be attributed to YA fantasy as well.

YA Fantasy Literature and Representation:

This last category pulled YA fantasy literature from the classroom and explored its efficacy of providing diverse representation in its content. Interestingly, although I did not necessarily prioritize teaching in this search, I ended up collecting a robust pedagogy section in this theme anyways. The pedagogical benefits of YA fantasy literature has been discussed above, and is still reflected here, despite the larger number of relevant texts. Most featured YA fantasy incidentally, but did connect the presence of YA literature to a rise in motivation and academic success in marginalized students.

However, there were more sources that specifically discussed fantasy (but not necessarily YAL) and representation, such as *Urban Fantasy: Exploring Modernity through Magic* (2024), which connected race and class with the magic "other". And, of course, Stephanie Toliver's article "On Mirrors, Windows, and Telescopes" (2021), that discussed how specifically fantasy

can be a mode through which vulnerable students– specifically Black girls– may visualize a more empowering, just world. Thus, although I did have to again do some further analysis to connect these to my specific research question, the lack of direct material on YA fantasy literature *and* pedagogy highlights the tension between genre fiction and what the American public school system privileges in terms of texts.

DISCUSSION:

Much of my findings were unexpected– particularly the point of tension between YA fantasy literature and ELA curriculum. Although I suspected that genre fiction was not necessarily prioritized in academia due to preconceived notions about genre fiction and "suitability" for academic studies, my experiences as an educator led me to believe that most teachers had discovered that students like reading speculative fiction. Furthermore, I had also assumed that this "discovery" (in the lightest sense of the word) would merit immediate analysis and attention. However, this was not necessarily the case; often, I would find analysis on the benefits of YA literature in general for book clubs, for specialized ELA classes, or in articles discussing the importance of student choice, but rarely would fantasy literature be specified. In addition, although there were books discussing fantasy literature and representation– racial, gender, and class-based– this would be fantasy literature's role in society in general. This kind of analysis may include young people, but does not always guarantee that focus.

My research took place from late 2023 to early 2025, which is an important context for this paper because of the impact the most recent 2025 election has had on maintaining research archives and official statistics. I feel it is important to note that by February 2025, some of the statistics from the CDC regarding queer youth had been removed from their website. I want to

acknowledge this because it calls into question my previous experience with gaps in academic research regarding fantasy literature and representation– I can no longer prove beyond reasonable doubt that this absence of scholarly research is because of a lack of interest or a presumption of value. This will retroactively impact the conclusions drawn in this research paper, regardless of my personal conclusions.

However, my findings were not always at odds with my research inquiry or assumptions. There was an unmistakable connection between student academic success and trauma-informed practices, reasserting the benefits for all students if pedagogy adapted to teaching students resilience, self-identification, and empowerment. Furthermore, when discussing effective trauma-informed pedagogy, it was clear that when students see themselves in their texts, they are more interested, more motivated to read, and more likely to reframe their "struggling" reader identity into a more positive self-identity. This ultimately results in students who read more, are more likely to challenge themselves while reading, and perform better in reading comprehension and retention. Although TIP is meant, obviously, to support traumatized students specifically, the basic ethos of TIP– resiliency, student-centered teaching, and student choice– benefits and empowers students regardless of if they've experienced trauma or not (Young & Schepers, 2024; RB-Banks & Meyer 2017; Dalmajer et. al, 2024). Furthermore, including diverse perspectives in text offerings creates opportunities for students who do not have experience with minority stories will develop more well-rounded views on their own experiences, encouraging critical thinking, community, and empathy (Nam et al, 2023).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION:

In the end, it is clear that there is still much research to be done about the role YA fantasy literature can play in trauma-informed practices, student success and retention, and positive student identity. However, this much is clear: the speculative genres are underutilized in the world of ELA teaching, and this comes at the cost of student outcomes. While it is clear that the literary canon is still prioritized and privileged, certain classes, teachers, and districts are beginning to reckon with the role literary canon plays in perpetuating racism, sexism, and classism. In doing so, ELA teachers are beginning to see the benefits of introducing YA literature in their classrooms.

There is an undeniable impulse to craft a prospective book list, to set some guidelines for, perhaps, a "YA fantasy literature" class, or other recommendations, but I have opted to not include this for a number of reasons. Firstly, I am not an expert in curriculum content, and I feel this topic deserves more expertise than I am able to provide. Secondly, I want to avoid falling into a common pitfall of designating one or two texts as "*the* fantasy option", which is just codifying one type of story over another– a new literary canon. I feel that this runs counter to what the research recommends in terms of allowing more student choice. Thirdly and finally, I believe that curriculum benefits students most when it reflects the shared experiences–or shared inexperiences– of their students. In the same way that it might be beneficial for a majority-white classroom to read selections of a broad range of ethnically diverse literature, it is beneficial to provide a predominantly-Black class with empowering Black literature (Tatum, 2014).

My largest mea culpa is that my research sensibilities favor reading theoretical texts, and thus I did not attempt to apply these findings to a classroom, or group of students. This was a

limitation of time and of ability– I would not have been able to devote the time I would want to extend to a classroom of students or volunteers. Furthermore, this research would benefit from a larger exploration into the decision making processes of districts and state/federal impacts on text selection and curriculum. This tension between YA fantasy literature and ELA pedagogy–like anything in education– does not exist in a vacuum, and this research does not currently explore the political and social implications of this tension.

While this paper puts a large onus on educators to seek out training, texts, and diverse materials, I also acknowledge that a teacher's classroom is not solely their own; educators often are provided required texts, and even pre-written curriculum on which they technically have very little impact to change. Thus, while ELA instructors are an integral part of this paper's intended audience, it is also crucial that administration understands the concepts discussed and explored within.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: The relationship between search terms, sources, and full article titles

Entry Info	Search Terms Used	Found From Database	Type of Content	Notes
Alvarez et al, *But I Don't See Color*, "Race, Trauma, and Education: What Educators Need to Know"	"Trauma" AND "Education"	CSU Library	Chapter of book	Another chapter from this book is referenced based on this chapter.
"But I don't See Color" (chapter: "4. USING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE TO TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT RACE" by Gumiko Monobe	"Trauma" AND "Education"	From Another Article	chapter of book	This chapter is found in the same book as entry #1
RB-Banks, Yvonne; Meyer, Joseph. "Childhood Trauma in Today's Urban Classroom" 2017	"Trauma" AND "Education"	ERIC	Article	Introduced the term "Trauma-Informed Practices", used as a search term later
Dalmajer et al "Direct and Indirect Links Between Children's Socio-economic Status and Education: Pathways via Mental Health, Attitude, and Cognition" 2021	"Trauma" AND "Education"	Google Scholar	Article	*Notes*
Young, Katherine; Schepers, Ofelia Castro. "Integration Trauma Informed Practices" 2024	"Trauma-Informed Practices"	ERIC	Article	Utilized search term from above
Hannegan-Martinez, Sharim. "From Punk Love to Compa Love: A Pedagogical Paradigm to Intervene on Trauma". 2019	"Trauma-Informed Practices"	ERIC	Article	*Notes*
Cramer, Neva. "Using Trauma-Informed Pedagogy to Make Literacy and Learning Relevant and Engaging for Students of Poverty". 2018	"Trauma-Informed Practices"	Google Scholar	Article	*Notes*
Caruth, Cathy. *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings;* "Trauma and Experience". 2003	"Caruth Trauma Theory"	Google Scholar	Chapter of book	Specific search term based on citation in "Punk Love"
Svensson et al., "A narrative approach to the role of others in ethnic identity formation". 2018	"Narrative Identity Formation"	Google Scholar	Article	The search term "narrative identity formation" emerged from my reading of Caruth
Beach, Richard. "Drawing on Students' Worlds in ELA Classrooms: Toward Critical Engagement and Deep Learning" 2022	"Narrative Identity Formation"	Google Scholar	Article	*Notes*

Entry Info	Search Terms Used	Found From Database	Type of Content	Notes
Haskell, Nancy. "The Effects of Being Racially, Ethnically, and Socioeconomically Different from Peers". 2022	"Identity Formation" AND "ELA"	Google Scholar	Article	*Notes*
Land, Charlotte L; Rubin, Jessica Cira. "This is English class": Evolving identities and a literacy teacher's shifts in practice across figured worlds". 2017	"Identity Formation" AND "ELA"	Google Scholar	Article	This article would cite Holland, which I followed up on and also cited her book *Identity and Agency*
Crocetti, Elisabetta. "Identity Formation in Adolescence: The Dynamic of Forming and Consolidating Identity Commitments" 2017	"Identity Formation" AND "ELA"	Wiley	Article	*Notes*
Beach, Richard et al., *Identity-focused ELA Teaching: A Curriculum Framework for Diverse Learners and Contexts*	"Identity Formation" AND "ELA"	CSU Library	Book	This book would prompt me to think about identity-focused ELA and specifically YA and Fantasy Literature
Hunt, Tracy E. "Reimagining the English Language Arts canon: A case for inclusive and empowering instruction ". 2023	"Identity Formation" AND "ELA"	Wiley	Article	*Notes*
Holland, Dorothy. "Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds" 1998	"Holland" AND "Identity"	From Another Article	Book	This was cited in another article, and I followed the DOI link
Greathouse et al., "Supporting Students' Right to Read in the Secondary Classroom: Authors of Young Adult Literature Share Advice to Pre-service Teachers". 2017	"YA Literature" AND "Identity"	ERIC	Article	The [Genre + identity] searches are a direct result of reading *Identity-Focused ELA*
Stephens et al., "Reflection and Projection: Inclusive and Diverse Texts in the English Language". 2024	"YA Literature" AND "Identity"	ERIC	Article	*Notes*
Chandler, Caleb; Wegrzyn, Kaitlin. "'They Always Make it Right, We Can Do That For Everybody': Young Adolescents Considering (in)justice When Reading". 2022	"YA Literature" AND "ELA Canon"	ERIC	Article	*Notes*

Entry Info	Search Terms Used	Found From Database	Type of Content	Notes
Dyches et. al., "Multimodality and Critical Race Theory as Tools of Canonical Subversion". 2024	"YA Literature" AND "ELA Canon"	Google Scholar	Article	*Notes*
Engagement With Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes | Gay Ivey & Peter H Johnston	"YA Literature" AND "ELA Canon"	Wiley	Article	*Notes*
Falter, Michelle; Eagle, Jessica. "'It Brought Me Back': Using Young Adult Book Clubs to Develop Preservice Teachers' Sympathetic Knowledge of Adolescents/ce". 2023	"YA Literature" AND "ELA Canon"	ERIC	Article	*Notes*
Ekman, Stefan. "Urban Fantasy: Exploring Modernity Through Magic" 2024	"Fantasy Literature" AND "identity"	CSU Library	Book	*Notes*
Fictional Escapism and Identity Formation: A Duoethnographic Exploration of Stories and Adolescent Development | Cammie Jo Lawton and Leia K. Cain	"Fantasy Literature" AND "ELA"	CSU Library	Article	This article prompted me to take another track in searching for fantasy connections to trauma, identity, and ELA by way of escapism
Bacon, Alison M., Charlesford, Jaysan J., "Investigating the association between fantasy proneness and emotional distress: the mediating role of cognitive coping strategies". 17 April 2021	"Fantasy Escapism" AND "Trauma"	Google Scholar	Article	*Notes*
Children's Right to Belong?—The Psychosocial Impact of Pedagogy and Peer Interaction on Minority Ethnic Children's Negotiation of Academic and Social Identities in School | Deirdre McGillicuddy, and Malgosia Machowska-Kosciak	"Fantasy Escapism" AND "Trauma"	Google Scholar	Article	*Notes*
Nam et al., "Race Matters Whether or Not We Talk About It: A Critical Content Analysis of LGBTQ+ Characters of Color in Three Contemporary Graphic Novels" 2023	Class Book List	Class/Recommendation	Article	*Notes*

Entry Info	Search Terms Used	Found From Database	Type of Content	Notes
Ginsberg, Ricki; Glenn, Wendy J. "Resisting Readers Identity (Re) construction Across English and Young Adult Literature Course Contexts". 2016	Class Book List	Class/Recommendation	Article	*Notes*
Boerman-Cornell, William; Kim, Jung, "Using Graphic Novels in the English Language Arts Classrooms" 2020	Class Book List	Class/Recommendation	Article	*Notes*
Tolliver, Stephanie. "On Mirrors, Windows, and Telescopes"	Class Book List	Class/Recommendation	Article	If any specific work embodied the direction my research took, it is this one.