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## The Factors that Influence the Selection of Literature in a High School English Language Arts (ELA) Curriculum

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The Factors that Influence the Selection of Literature in a High School English Language Arts  
(ELA) Curriculum

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A Thesis Submitted to Fulfill the Requirements of the Honors Program at Assumption College

Fall 2018

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### Abstract

Every year the final week of September is a week dedicated to the works of literature that have been banned and challenged. Appropriately called Banned Books Week, librarians and educators around the world attempt to educate students as well as other citizens about the causes of banned and challenged books. Another way in which to research this concept of selection is to look at the factors that influence high school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' specific selection choices for texts to include in their curriculum. The purpose of this research and study was to examine what factors influence the choices made by high school ELA teachers as they select literature for their classes. Public, private, and charter high school English teachers from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island were surveyed. After reviewing survey responses, I asked nine teachers to be interviewed in more depth, using a semi-structured interview format. Results from both surveys and interviews suggest that these teachers think that they have autonomy to select literary texts. Literary merit, fostering lifelong readers, and including more multicultural texts emerged as the three factors that most influenced these teachers. The thoughts and feelings of students had the largest influence on literature selection while the thoughts and feelings of parents, community, and administration had surprisingly little influence on literature selection.

## Introduction

Literature selection is a crucial component of all high school English Language Arts (ELA) curricula. To build a strong, academically challenging curriculum, English teachers must carefully choose the works of literature which they believe most merit a place to be taught in their classroom. As a future English teacher, I thought it would be most beneficial for me to research the factors that influence the selection of texts for high school English students.

My study examines how literature is selected in a high school English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum. My study examined the factors that influence these decisions and how these decisions may differ between school systems and states within New England. It is a worthwhile project to understand how and why texts rise and fall in the ELA curriculum and to discover if external factors, like parental input or community pressures, actually do influence the ELA curriculum.

Originally, my thesis was going to focus on banned and challenged books. However, after reading and doing research I decided I was more interested in focusing on how literature is chosen to be included, as well as excluded, in curriculum. One article that shed light on what I studied is Watkins and Ostenson's (2015) survey of English teachers about their reasons for literature selection. In their study they found that "teachers are ultimately concerned with finding texts that are a good match for curricular goals and the students with whom they work" (Watkins and Ostenson, 2015, p. 272). Based upon their work, I included surveys and added semi-structured interviews to my design. I was able to fill a small gap of this study by including several interviews with teachers, which was as one of their implications for further researchers since they solely used surveys as their method to collect data.

I am interested in this topic because as a future high school English teacher, it is important for me to be aware of how curriculum is created and the role I have in selecting literature. By doing this research, I now have a better understanding of how curriculum is developed, how high school literature is selected, and why certain books might be avoided by teachers.

### **Literature Review**

In my literature review, I examined the factors that influence the selection of literature in a high school English language arts (ELA) curriculum. I will first investigate the reasons for why the selection of certain texts are typically challenged. I will then use this information to focus my research on what factors influence the selection of texts for high school ELA teachers.

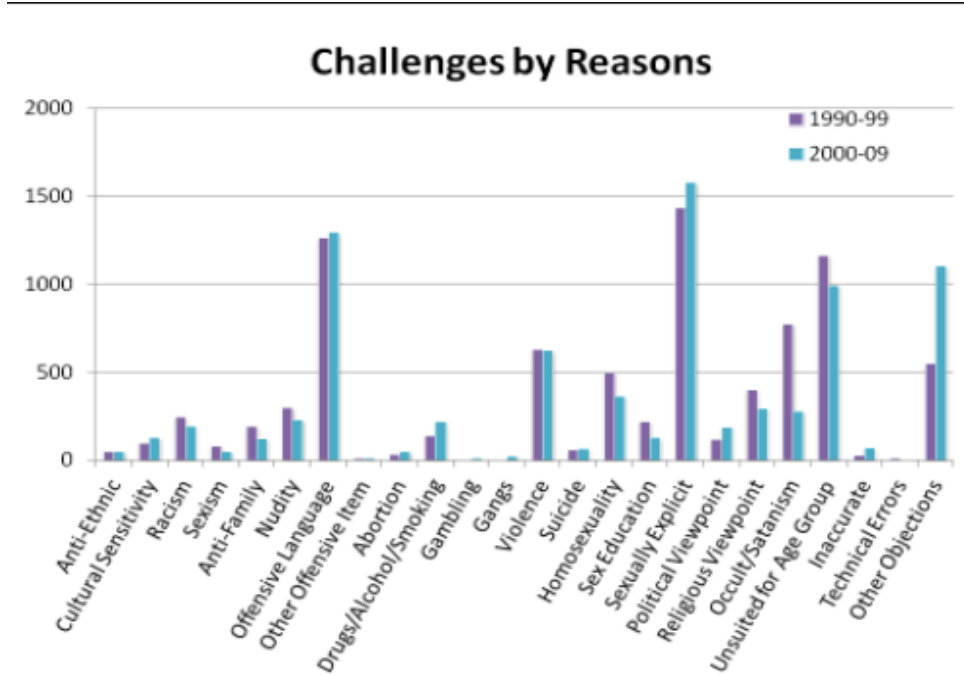
### **Challenges to Literary Text Selections**

Literature has been selected and excluded from high school English curriculum for a variety of reasons over the years. As teachers build their curriculum, they must make important decisions in regards to what texts will be included and used to educate their students. When constructing these curricula, teachers must follow professional guidelines put in place by their school as well as larger organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Texts can also be excluded from the curriculum if they have been challenged by other groups such as parents, the community, students, or the administration. The NCTE clarifies the differences between censorship and professional guidelines when it comes to literature selection in their “Statement on Censorship and Professional Guidelines.” While both censorship and professional guidelines can seem similar “because both involve selection from myriad

alternatives,” the difference is that “the goal of censorship is to remove, eliminate or bar particular materials and methods” while the “goal of professional guidelines is to provide criteria for selection of materials and methods” (National Council of Teachers of English, 1982, p. 1). While a text could be challenged and censored for its use of profanity, professional guidelines encourage teachers to “See the Relationships of Parts to Each Other and to a Work as a Whole” by analyzing the role the profanity plays within the text in relation to a portrayal of a character or a character’s development over the course of the novel (National Council of Teachers of English, 1982, p. 2).

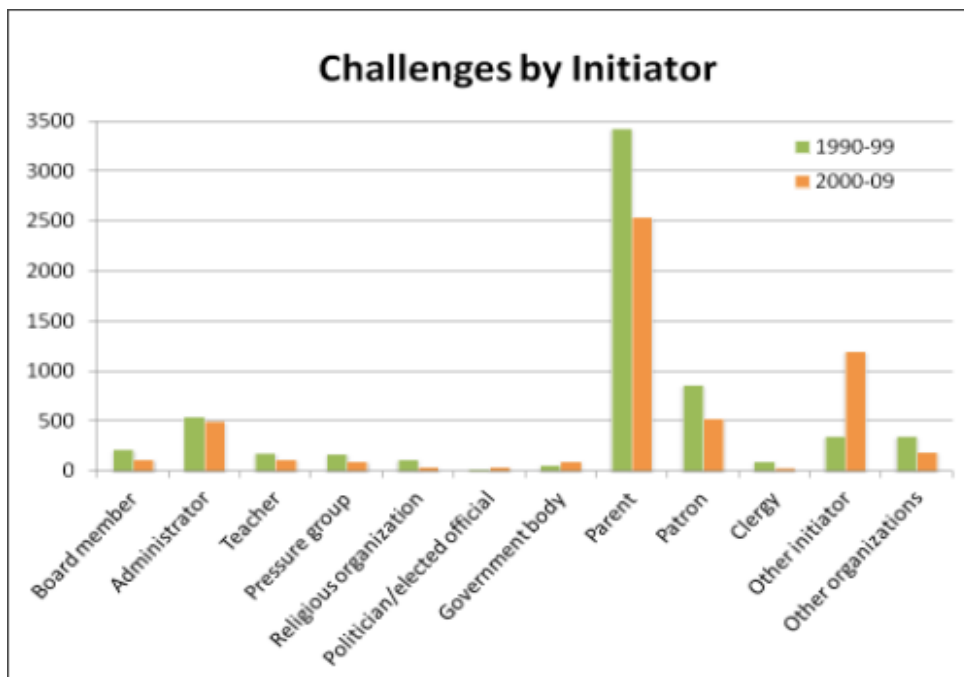
While the need people feel to challenge and ban books has not changed, the reasons for banning books have changed greatly over time. Between the years 1990-99 and 2000-09, various reasons for challenging books emerged. According to the Office of Intellectual Freedom, between 1990-99 there were 8,207 reported challenges and between 2000-09 there were 7,971 challenges. These challenges were broken down into twenty-four subcategories, which are shown in the graphs in Figures 1, 2, and 3 below.

Figure 1.



(American Library Association, *Banned & Challenged Books*, 2013)

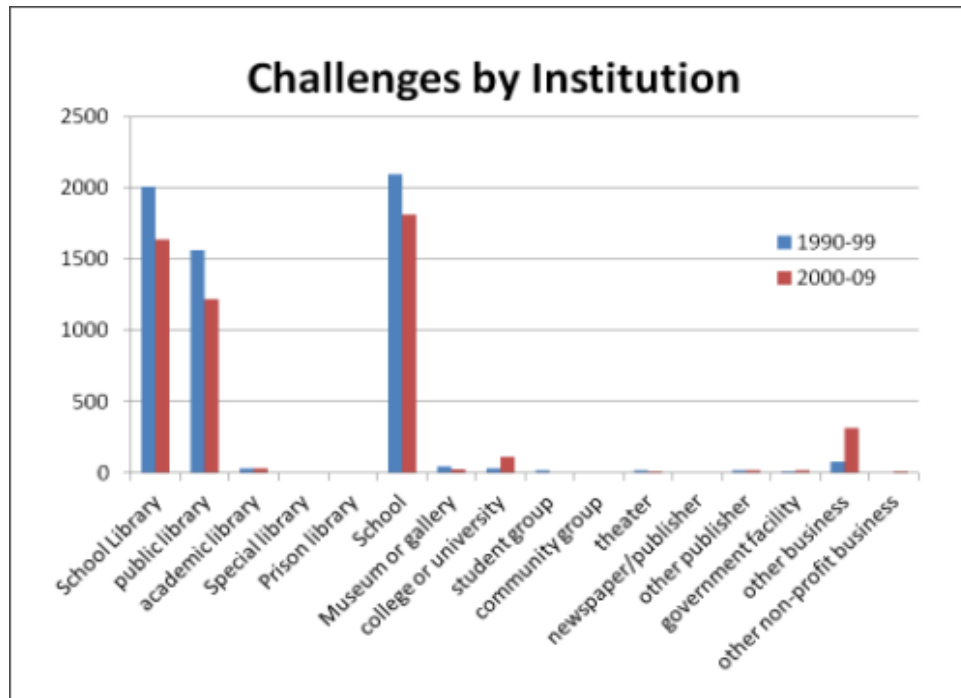
Figure 2.



(American Library Association, *Banned & Challenged Books*, 2013)



Figure 3.



(American Library Association, *Banned & Challenged Books*, 2013)

This data shows that there have been fewer challenges from 2000-09 in comparison to 1990-99. There is a difference of 236 challenged books between the two data sets. This shows fewer overall challenges to text selection. There was also a significant decrease in the topics of Satanism/occult themes, as shown by Figure 1, which had a difference of 496 reported challenges, being unsuited to the age group, which had a difference of 173 reported challenges, and homosexuality, which had a difference of 134 reported challenges. There were also increases of challenges in four categories: sexually explicit (+145 challenges), offensive language (+32 challenges), drugs/alcohol/smoking (+76 challenges), and political viewpoints (+73 challenges) (American Library Association, *Banned & Challenged Books*, 2013). The topics of offensive language and sexually explicit content were the most cited reasons as to why books were challenged, so I expect these reasons to be cited as factors which may influence teachers' text selections.

The data from Figure 2 shows the differences between challenges made by initiators. In this data set initiators are the individuals, groups, or organizations that challenge books in an attempt to ban books. From 1990-99 there were 6,288 challenges made by initiators and from 2000-09 there were 5,403 challenges made by initiators. This shows that there were 885 less initiators challenging works in 2000-09. Two of the most prominent categories of initiators, parents and patrons, also had noticeable decreases from 1990-99 to 2000-09. There were 886 less parents and 338 less patrons that challenged books (American Library Association, *Banned & Challenged Books*, 2013). This shows that the largest groups of potential censors are becoming more relaxed on what they deem should be removed from student's education as time goes on. This graph also informs viewers that parents are the ones most likely to challenge and question teachers' literature selections.

The data from Figure 3 shows the differences between challenges made by institutions. In this data set an institution is any organization, establishment, or foundation that has challenged books. From 1990-99 there were 5,926 challenges made by institutions and from 2000-09 there were 5,220 challenges. From 1990-99 to 2000-09 there was a decrease of institutions challenging books by 706. This decrease was mainly in the institutions of the school library and public library. There was a decrease of 366 challenges made by the school library from 2000-09 and 348 less challenges were made by the public library. Challenges made by schools also decreased by 284 (American Library Association, *Banned & Challenged Books*, 2013). These decreases are significant because school, school libraries, and public libraries are where students have access to books. Fewer challenges made by these institutions shows that they are slowly but surely becoming more accepting of literature available to students.

Even though there have been significant decreases in the challenging of books, as shown by the most recent data set from 2000-09, there are still a significant number of challenges that go unreported every year. According to the Office of Intellectual Freedom, 82-97% of challenges remain unreported (American Library Association, *Banned & Challenged Books*, 2016).

## **Defining Curriculum**

The curriculum is a key aspect of any high school English course. Curriculum is defined as “all organized and intended experiences of the student for which the school accepts responsibility” (Ryan, Cooper, & Bolick, 2016, p. 118). This includes both the content of the subject that is being taught as well as the methods used to teach them, social interactions, and any school sponsored events that contribute to students’ life experiences. Curriculum can be broken down into two main categories: formal and hidden (Tanner and Tanner, 1995, p. 58). The formal curriculum is the planned content and objectives of all subject areas available to students, which is determined by state and local school boards (Ryan, et al., 2016, p. 118). Beyond the formal curriculum is the hidden, or informal, curriculum. This is when the teachers or administrators indirectly conveys certain attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavior through the content that is taught. These values are viewed as acceptable to the institution and society at large and either support or undermine the formal curriculum. According to Ryan, Cooper, and Bolick, “many observers believe the hidden curriculum carries more weight” when it begins to conflict with the formal curriculum (Ryan, et. al., 2016, p. 118). Some critics believe the the hidden curriculum of schools works against diversity, equity, and social justice (Cornbleth, 2003).

Sandra Stotsky, former Senior Associate Commissioner at the Massachusetts Department of Education who was in charge of the development of the state's English Language Arts Standards and current professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas, sees little value in this more progressive curriculum because it stresses "that the school curriculum should be relevant to students' lives, interests, and perceived needs and above all foster personal growth" (2012a, p. 49). Stotsky believes a more traditional and formal curriculum should be in place that values academic rigor and uniformity above the progressive philosophy and ideals. I will be focusing my research on examining how the formal curriculum impacts the hidden curriculum, and how the hidden curriculum is capable of revealing more about the education of students.

According to Tanner and Tanner (1995), the hidden curriculum branches off of the progressivist curriculum, one of the two main categories of curriculum. The first type of curriculum is a traditionalist concept which is defined as the body of subjects that teachers create for students to learn (Tanner and Tanner, 1995, p. 151). A traditionalist curriculum is focused on maintaining literary tradition through the use of canonical texts. In comparison, the progressivist curriculum is defined as "the embodiment of the best elements of the experience of culture in the process of acculturation" (Tanner and Tanner, 1995, p. 166). A progressive curriculum promotes the use of literature to address and improve social conditions. For progressives, those concerns usually center on improving educational access, educational equity, and otherwise addressing injustices seen in the larger society. The hidden curriculum, which branches off of the progressivist curriculum, aims to provide a more powerful and enduring impact on student learning by connecting their learning with different attitudes, appreciations, and values that can be connected between the text and current issues within society (Tanner and Tanner, 1995, p.

183). A progressivist curriculum allows for texts outside the canon to be incorporated in order to include more contemporary ideas as opposed to the older canonical works which have been set and agreed upon for a longer time. This curriculum highlights the need for intellectual curiosity alongside the formal course of study of specific skills and information. Teachers become more focused on students' interests and desires in learning. An emphasis on intellectual curiosity would better engage students and encourage them to become more actively involved in their learning.

However, others do not agree that this should be the curriculum taught in schools. Sandra Stotsky believes that curriculum should focus on a more traditional, American literature. Stotsky states that the current curriculum that is based around Common Core Standards focuses far too much on informational and nonfiction reading as opposed to complex literature (2012b, p. 1). Stotsky is concerned that the current ELA curriculum has been "dumbed down" and is not appropriately challenging students (1991, p. 55). Chester Finn, a former professor of education, and educational analyst, and a former United States Assistant Secretary of Education, agrees with this when he states "as the Fordham Reports demonstrate, the majority of state standards in every subject are mediocre or worse" (Finn, Petrilli, and Vanourek, 1998, p. 21). Finn realizes that there can be controversy when it comes to standards, but they must be instituted so that "every student who achieves these goals is prepared for post-secondary education or for employment in the increasingly demanding global economy" (Finn et al., 1998, p. 21). Finn and Stotsky put a greater focus on what the curriculum is lacking in regards to making students better American citizens, as opposed to acknowledging their changing culture. Both Finn and Stotsky's major concerns revolve around the inherent loss they believe stems from a lack of focus on traditional, rigorous, American texts. Stotsky is also concerned with creating a standard, country-

wide curriculum focused on the same texts. Her argument is that “if our students have few reading experiences in common, will they as adults be capable of engaging each other in responsible public discourse?” (1991, p. 56). Stotsky values a traditionalist curriculum which focuses on inclusion of canonical works from American authors instead of a wider inclusion of worldwide texts.

Stotsky and Finn’s stances on curriculum seem to be the opposite of major English organizations, such as the NCTE. According to the NCTE, materials included in an English language arts program must “have a clear connection to established educational objectives and address the needs of the students for whom they are intended” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a). Instructional materials should also “align with the general philosophy of the school or district, the curriculum goals and objectives of the English language arts program, and the learning outcomes of the particular course or grade level” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a). The English language arts curriculum is flexible, ever-changing and intended to meet several objectives (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a).

The curriculum must also meet the needs and reading levels of many students. It is up to the discretion of the English teacher what books to select. Selection differs from censorship because teachers use their professional judgment to choose books that will be accessible yet complex enough to properly challenge students and serve a greater educational purpose in their classroom. A book that may not be suited for whole-class instruction in an average class might be better suited for small-group use or for independent reading by more capable readers (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a). This emphasis on the inclusion of complex texts within an English language arts curriculum is due to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Text complexity should be determined by three factors: quantitative

measures (such as Lexile levels), qualitative measures (to be assessed by professionals measuring content, structure, clarity, etc.), and reader and task considerations (assessed by teachers to take into account the knowledge of their student's individual reading motivation, experience, background knowledge, and complexity of the tasks associated with the text (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a).

One of the most important aspects of the high school English literature curriculum is the novel. The novel has been a pillar of secondary education for as long as English language arts has been taught. The novel is a dominant component of the English curriculum because it often “portrays characters in a process of change and development- a phenomenon that is central to adolescent experience” (Beach and Marshall, 1991, p. 301). Some of the most frequently required texts in public, Catholic, and independent high schools in 1990 were *Romeo and Juliet*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Lord of the Flies* (Applebee, 1990, p. 2).

However, these novels contain elements that are often given as reasons for banning books, which include racism, offensive language, sexually explicit language, and violence. Carly Grace Akers (2012) that during the period 2000-2010, contemporary novels were challenged more often than classic novels. According to Akers, a contemporary novel is one which is “existing, occurring, or living at the same time; of the present time; modern” (2012, p. 386). Out of the 389 challenged books that were recorded in her study, 374 were contemporary and 15 were classics, which leads her to conclude that “contemporary books were challenged more often than classics in the years 2000-2010” (Akers, 2012, p. 392). Those who are most concerned with censoring the text selections of high school students seem to have moved away from classic novels, which have been around for a much longer time, and shifted their focus to newer,

contemporary novels. In the most recent list of the “Top Ten Most Challenged Books” for 2016, the ten novels that were challenged most often were all contemporary novels. These novels are contemporary because they have all been published within the past 10-15 years and the setting of each story takes place in the modern day, with exception to the Little Bill series (American Library Association, 2017).

Selecting materials for in-class use requires in-depth knowledge of the content as well as knowledge of the students’ abilities and backgrounds. Responsible and well-considered selection requires experience, education, and the ability to defend the choices made (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014). It is a crucial part of a teacher’s planning to choose literature texts for students to read during the school year. English teachers must consider the possible contributions each work may make to the education of the reader. They must take into account its level of complexity, its appeal to adolescents, and its educational value (National Council of Teachers of English, 2009).

However, parents and other community members sometimes disagree. The most common reasons parents challenge teachers’ selection of books as shown by the ALA infographic (year) is offensive language. However, this goes against the position of the NCTE which strongly believes that literature taught in schools should have strong literary merit that both engages and appropriately challenges students. Novels with literary merit may include this offensive language, but as Jennifer Rossuck (1997) states, context is crucial and “students learn to never isolate one word, sentence, scene, or passage but to consider the whole in order to properly analyze each part” (p. 69). Materials included in an English language arts program must “have a clear connection to established educational objectives and address the needs of the students for whom they are intended” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a). Instructional



materials should also “align with the general philosophy of the school or district, the curriculum goals and objectives of the English language arts program, and the learning outcomes of the particular course or grade level” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a).

This emphasis on the inclusion of complex texts within an English language arts curriculum is due to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Text complexity should be determined by three factors: quantitative measures (such as Lexile levels), qualitative measures (to be assessed by professionals measuring content, structure, clarity, etc.), and reader and task considerations (assessed by teachers to take into account the knowledge of their student’s individual reading motivation, experience, background knowledge, and complexity of the tasks associated with the text (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a). As trained and well-educated professionals, educators are qualified to select appropriate classroom materials and resources from a variety of sources given their teaching goals and the needs and interests of the students they serve (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014b). Parents and community members often challenge the very books that the NCTE, scholars, and English teachers deem as academically rigorous books that should be included in the curriculum.

### **How Curriculum Has Changed Over Time**

The subject of English has been taught for as long as there have been schools, but the focus of literary study did not assume “a central role in the high school English curriculum [until] around 1900 due to the efforts of the Committee of Ten” (Stotsky, 2012a, p. 39). This committee was created in the 1890s to create a more structured set of requirements for college admittance. This led to the creation of an English syllabi along with syllabi for other subjects. The English syllabus “combined literary study with composition and rhetoric” and included an

outline for texts to use from classical works to British literature. The focus on a reevaluation of this English curriculum is much more recent. It was not until the years after World War II in which the structure and content of secondary English curriculum in the United States began to be scrutinized and reformed in response to “the academic deficiencies the U.S. military had found in recruits” (Stotsky, 2012a, p. xiii). The next large change in curriculum as a result of reform was the implementation of electives. Beginning in the late 1950s, the year-long English course was divided into shortened, semester-long courses. Students were given the opportunity to choose which courses they would take. This can still be seen in schools today as students are often given the choice to take English electives in their senior year of high school. According to Sandra Stotsky, the “electives movement” resulted from the early Progressive movement as these educators stressed that “the school curriculum should be relevant to students’ lives, interests, and perceived needs and above all foster personal growth” (2012a, p. 49). Curriculum has continued to be rethought and reformed throughout the years and it will likely continue this change and adaptation in the many years to come.

Studies have been conducted in which researchers have looked into various high school English curricula. In 1989 the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature carried out a series of studies in elementary and secondary schools on a variety of subjects, which included “a survey of the book-length works that are required in the secondary school” and “a content analysis of the selections and teaching apparatus included in secondary school literature anthologies” (Applebee, Ed. Langer, 1992, p. 1). Arthur Applebee discusses the results of these studies and the resulting implications for secondary English curriculum. Applebee notes that in the early 1990s, the teaching of literature has received increasing attention which stems from “a concern that traditional cultural values are not receiving sufficient emphasis (e.g., Hirsch, 1987),

from attempts to reinforce the academic curriculum (e.g., Bennet, 1988), and from teachers who have begun to question whether recent changes in writing instruction may have implications for the teaching of literature as well” (Applebee, Ed. Langer, 1992, p. 1),

More recent influences on curriculum have been the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) which began to be implemented in 2010. These standards have impacted how curriculum is created and what is included. While Sandra Stotsky is in favor of more of a traditionalist curriculum, she does state that the Common Core standards “put academic quality at risk” since “a diminished emphasis on literature in the secondary grades makes it unlikely that American students will study a meaningful range of culturally and historically significant literary works” (2012b, p. 2). Christina Berchinni (2016) also critiques the CCSS, but for reasons beyond just a lack of traditional, American authors. Berchini noted how the Common Core’s list of exemplar texts “seemed to represent the traditional English language arts (ELA) curriculum, which historically excluded literary contributions by authors of color” (2016, p. 55).

A more recent look at curriculum by Sandra Stotsky shows a similar yet different outlook on how it can be improved. Stotsky believes that secondary English curriculum is “is now in shambles, but it once was something that literature professors, their students who became English teachers, and their students who also loved to read were proud of” (2012a, p. xi). In regards to the current secondary English curriculum, Stotsky believes the texts are not challenging enough and do not have enough of a focus on educating students about traditional, American texts. Stotsky states that “our schools lack a challenging reading curriculum that enables all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or parental income, to read more than “graphic” novels and to be able to think “critically”” (2012a, p. xi). Stotsky also laments that current

English teachers “do not realize or do not care that the secondary literature curriculum is incoherent” (2012a, p. xii). Stotsky believes that the curriculum that was put in place by the Committee of Ten was much more uniform and demanding than present day curriculum. The Committee of Ten urged teachers to “choose works for literary study based chiefly on their literary merit rather than on their capacity to develop character and desirable cultural values” (Stotsky, 2012a, p. 40). Reflecting the views of the Committee of Ten, Stotsky believes that “moral improvement and cultural assimilation” are placed at a higher value in today’s curriculum than literary merit. While literary merit is a necessary factor, including texts that are able to develop character and cultural values are also important. It is important to include texts with a variety of cultural values and characters because the singular inclusion of older, traditional texts written by white authors, allows “White children whose experiences are depicted in books [to] make many more text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections than children of color” (Gangi, 2008, p. 30).

### **Criteria for What is Included in a High School English Curriculum**

Selecting materials for in-class use requires in-depth knowledge of the content as well as knowledge of the students’ abilities and backgrounds. Responsible and well-considered selection requires experience, education, and the ability to defend the choices made (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a). It is the duty of the English teacher to select books for students to read during the school year. English teachers must consider the possible contributions each work may make to the education of the reader. They must take into account its level of complexity, its appeal to adolescents, and its educational value (National Council of Teachers of English, 2009).

The creation of curriculum should be left to the professional discretion of the English teachers enlisted to teach these courses.

However, parents and other community members sometimes disagree. Through their actions, they undermine the professionalism of these teachers by challenging their book choice. English teachers must select books that not only line up with the curriculum frameworks, but also aim to teach students some truths about life. English is a subject that focuses largely on the human experience, so students should not be concealed from this reality. The books included in an English class, whether they are classics or contemporary, should discuss topics such as fear, hope, joy, and other frustrations people may experience (National Council of Teachers of English, 2009). These novels should discuss the broad spectrum of the human experience discussing everything from the harsh realities of the world to the true potential humanity possess (National Council of Teachers of English, 2009). They should have a strong literary merit that both engages students and appropriately challenges them.

According to Judith A. Langer, texts that are less problematic “may yield less to the analysis and thus may be seen as less valuable” and texts that are problematic, too obscure for interpretation, and complex “may be viewed simply as unintelligible” (1992, p. 58). It is up to the teachers to find this balance that will encourage as opposed to discourage students. English teachers must also select materials that can meet a diverse range of students who vary in most aspects of life, especially linguistically and culturally. They must develop an appropriate curriculum to meet the needs of these students. When it comes to this precise selection, censorship differs greatly from the use of selection guidelines. The goal of censorship “is to remove, eliminate or bar particular materials and methods” while the “goal of professional guidelines is to provide criteria for selection of materials and methods” (NCTE Board of

Directors, 1982, p. 1). Teachers must weigh the value of these materials as a whole, in comparison to the abilities of their students. Books included in a high school English curriculum should improve student learning by leading to inquiry, improving analytical skills, increasing comprehension, and teaching students a greater lesson about life (Greenbaum, 1997; Rossuck, 1997). Education is ultimately an effort to improve the quality of choices open to all students and these choices begin with the literature that is available to students in the classroom (National Council of Teachers of English, 2009).

As trained and well-educated professionals, educators are qualified to select appropriate classroom materials and resources from a variety of sources given their teaching goals and the needs and interests of the students they serve (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014b). However, basing curriculum selection on “age-appropriateness” alone, which is the concept that literature read in class should be matched to a student’s age and not their reading level, is not a sufficient reason to include particular materials in the English language arts program. According to Vicky Greenbaum, the idea of “age-appropriateness” can only be effectively applied to behavior. As long as students are taught “strategies to become skillful, intelligent readers” then they should be able to think for themselves and make informed decisions on what they believe to be morally right despite any content or themes present in literature (Greenbaum, 1997, p. 17). The reality that many adults struggle to grasp is that students, especially those at the high school level, not only live in a world where “sex, violence, intolerance, and profanity are a reality”, but also read about these topics on their own and see it on television (Niccolini, 2015, p. 27). Appropriateness should not be a factor that inhibits the choice of literature for students because with the correct skills, students are capable of handling much more than adults, especially their parents, believe they can. Nevertheless, materials should still be suited to the maturity level of

the students for whom they are intended based on measurements such as Lexile reading levels (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014a). A lexile reading measurement is a numerical representation of an individual's reading ability that will inform teachers how difficult a text might be. Adolescents have been typically configured as being more deeply influenced by literature than adults, so selection of literature for high school students is a task that should not be taken lightly (Niccolini, 2015, p. 24).

The voices of these various competing groups are relevant to my research in order to gain a broader understanding of the thoughts of other professionals. Each group presents different ideas, beliefs, and findings in regards to the process and thoughts behind literature selection for high school ELA curriculum. Sandra Stotsky and Chester Finn, educational policy analysts who both formerly served in the US federal department of education under the Reagan administration, focus on traditional curriculum and canonical texts. The NCTE is a policy group that creates different standards and statements to guide English teachers in their practice and tend to be more progressive in their outlook. I have also included several researchers, such as Langer and Applebee, who are arguing for complex texts that appeal to students. Each group has a different focus in their research and publications that has helped to inform my own research.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used through the distribution of a survey and a semi-structured interview. Qualitative research aims to “understand the social reality of individuals, groups and cultures as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it... and seeks to explain ‘how’ and ‘why’ a particular phenomenon, or behavior, operates as it does in a particular context” (McLeod, 2017). Quantitative research “gathers data in a numerical

form which can be put into categories, or in rank order, or measured in units of measurement” (McLeod, 2017). This combined research method was used because the surveys would be able to provide more factual, concrete evidence (quantitative) and the interviews would be able to provide more open-ended responses in which the content of the responses were assessed (qualitative). I chose to conduct my research in this way so I would have quantitative data to compare to other studies as well as qualitative data from interviews with specific English teachers.

I was able to use the respective websites for the department of education for Massachusetts and Rhode Island to access a spreadsheet of all schools in the state. This was not available for Connecticut, so I researched and compiled my own list of schools to contact.

The survey was created using Google Forms and included questions regarding demographics as well as Likert scale questions (Appendix A). A Likert scale question is “a five (or seven) point scale which is used to allow the individual to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement” (McLeod, 2008). Likert scale questions were used in order to give participants a range of options to choose from. Participants had the option to choose strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree in order to best reflect their thoughts. Surveys were distributed via Google Forms and interviews were conducted either in person or through a website called Zoom. Interviews were optional. The questions included in my survey and interviews can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B. The surveys and interviews are an example of an observational case study in which the “major data-gathering technique is participant observation and the focus of the study is on a particular organization” (Wiersma, 1995, p. 63). I chose to focus my study on a specific group of people, high school



English teachers, and research a specific activity of these teachers, literature selection for curriculum planning.

Before distributing the surveys, I contacted the appropriate high school principal or administrator for permission to contact their teachers. After being granted permission, I sent out an email with information about my research, how the teacher could help, and a letter of consent for them to sign before I sent the survey (Appendix D). As is stated in the letter of consent, names have been changed here to maintain confidentiality of the teacher participants. I then sent a link to the survey for the teacher to complete. The survey consisted of twenty-two questions on demographics as well as more specific questions in relation to literature selection. These questions ranged from multiple choice questions, to open response questions, to Likert scale questions. Teachers were informed that completion of the survey would take no more than five minutes of their time. The teacher participants were given the option to skip any questions they were not comfortable answering. At the end of the survey they were asked if they would be interested in completing a thirty minute, in-person interview. If yes, they were then asked to provide their contact information. After the surveys had been completed, I began contacting these teachers who had expressed interest in being interviewed. I analyzed the survey responses from these teachers and chose to contact those whom I believed would provide the most interesting answers for my research. Of the 212 survey responses, sixty-one teachers agreed to be interviewed, fifty-nine tentatively agreed, and ninety-one declined. Due to limited time, I then conducted nine interviews from those teachers who said yes. Of those nine, six were from Massachusetts, two were from Connecticut, and one was from Rhode Island.

Interviews were conducted in person or via a video chat through the website, Zoom. Interviews were semi-structured. A list of questions was prepared, but the interview itself

remained open-ended giving me the opportunity to follow up on questions and the interviewee the opportunity to discuss a variety of topics that came to mind. As stated by Wiersma, “qualitative interviews offer the interviewer considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offer the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview” (1995, p. 97). These semi-structured interviews focused on one topic, the factors that influence text selection, with general questions as a guideline, but also allowed for further questions and responses to be included. Interview participants were chosen using purposeful sampling. After analyzing the survey responses from the teachers that indicated they would be willing to be interviewed, I then “chose particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (Wiersma, 1995, p. 71-72).

## **Participants**

High school English teachers (N= 212) were the participants of this study. Teachers were surveyed from public, private, and charter high schools in the states of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Public, private, and charter high schools were used in this research to include a representation and range of school systems. The majority of survey participants were female (65.1%), have taught for 6-10 years (22.6%), taught in schools with fewer than 500 students (34.6%), and taught in suburban schools (70.3%) (Appendix C).

## **Findings**

### **Contemporary**

Maintaining currency is a common focus across many disciplines and literature selection is no different. The focus of curriculum selection has continued to change alongside society. In

both surveys and interviews, the teachers were most concerned with including contemporary, multicultural texts. When asked how they were looking to change or improve their literature selection in the coming years, several teachers stated that they were looking to include more modern or contemporary texts. Caroline Mason\*, a teacher from a rural public high school in Massachusetts, stated that “I would like us to as a department stand up more for students reading books that fit into the curriculum, but that are more current” (July 26, 2018). Mason believed that this can best be accomplished through “a balance of contemporary texts and other texts” (July 26, 2018). As Mason suggested here, texts should be related to more contemporary issues. In multiple statements and documents, the NCTE has also encouraged the use of more modern, multicultural texts. The first standard listed in the “NCTE / IRA Standards for the English Language Arts” encourages this inclusion of texts since students need “to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world...among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works” (2012, p. 1). The ninth standard listed in this document also states that “students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2012). As a result of this thinking, more teachers are becoming concerned with how their texts are reflecting a modern, changing society.

Benjamin West\*, who has been teaching for more than twenty-five years at a rural private school in Connecticut, expressed the more recent concerns and questions of his younger department head who asks “Is it multicultural? Could we get a female author in there? ...our curriculum ought to be diverse, what can you do?” (July 23, 2018). West then goes on to agree that his department head is “absolutely right, English should not just be dead white guys, even

though that's what a lot of the classics are" (July 23, 2018). This increasing need for multicultural texts is reflected in the NCTE's "Framework for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Curriculum and Assessment". These guidelines state that successful members of the "21<sup>st</sup> century global society" must be able to "build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought" as well as "design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes" (2013, p.1). Through these statements the NCTE is discussing ways in which teachers need to address the concerns of a global society in their classroom. A variety of cultures and global concerns should be included in the content of students' learning, which can be best accomplished through multicultural, contemporary literature.

On the opposite side, however, Stotsky does not believe there is value in incorporating contemporary texts into high school ELA curricula. Stotsky cites a 2009 report from Renaissance Learning which showed that "contemporary young adult fantasies" such as the Harry Potter series and the *Twilight* series as the "most widely read books by secondary school students" (2012a, p.17). Stotsky admits that "the database does not indicate whether the books students read were assigned or self-selected", so she is unable to make a valid argument that these books are being included in curriculum and leading to the decline of reading scores (2012a, p. 17). While Massachusetts public high school teacher, Paul Evans\*, agrees that young adult literature, science fiction, and fantasy "don't do much good in an English class because you're trying to teach them reading skills and critical thinking and those books are all plot driven, they're all character driven" (May 1, 2018), he can also see the benefit to these genres. Especially in lower level classes with struggling readers, the most important task at hand is not only to get them to read, but also to get them to enjoy reading. Evans states that he is willing to incorporate these

more plot driven novels because “anything [students] will read or that you can get them to read with a lower level class becomes a guiding principle for sure because reading is what matters” (May 1, 2018).

Some teachers interviewed note that traditional, canonical texts that have worked in the past are no longer working as well, listing *Great Expectations* and *The Great Gatsby* as examples. Paul Evans and Michael Dean\*, both teachers at a public high school in Massachusetts, agreed that they noticed *Great Expectations* has not been working as effectively as it used to. This text is the only text left from their complete revamp of their curriculum upon their arrival to the school. Evans and a second teacher went through the bookrooms during this revamp to recycle old texts that they felt were outdated and were no longer worthy of being taught. Evans recalled how they “recycled so many books [that] we actually broke the Harvey’s truck when it came to pick up the bin. It was so heavy from the books the arms broke off” (May 1, 2018). They had thrown everything out because their philosophy of what they were looking for in the books changed so much. *Great Expectations* was one of many texts that had been used by their predecessors to express the theme of the coming of age story. Despite this seemingly universal theme, the age of the book was showing and both agreed that in five years they would no longer be teaching *Great Expectations*. Evans and Dean understand the importance of acknowledging when texts are no longer working as effectively with their students. When this occurs they reevaluate their literature choices in order to either alter their approach to the novel or update their literature selection to find a similar or more contemporary replacement. Dean also discussed how he was beginning to notice that *The Great Gatsby* did not seem to be as engaging and interesting to students as it had been in the past. Both teachers understand that times change and it is better to move on with a different book than hold onto a text that is no longer working.

As Evans notes, “it’s not going to kill them if they don’t read it” (May 1, 2018). There are texts from past generations that are no longer read, just as there will be texts from this generation that students will no longer read because they will become old and outdated for students of the future. Updating curriculum to include more contemporary works or approaching these texts in a new way are some solutions to this dilemma.

### **Ability to Relate to Students**

Finding texts that relate to students’ lives emerged as another factor influencing teachers’ literary selection. Students are more engaged in their learning if they find it interesting or relatable. Teachers are concerned with finding texts that students will be able to identify with by attempting to include texts with familiar settings, themes, and characters. Johnson states that if “you really are serious about wanting to foster reading and make kids readers for life, you really do have to consider their interests” (July 24, 2018). The consideration of students’ interests is an important aspect of literature selection and the impact of this can be seen in survey responses. When asked how much students’ thoughts and feelings influence the literature selected, 79.2% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed (Appendix C). While other considerations do need to be made alongside this, the interest and desires of students are also a critical component of selection in the minds of teachers. When asked what the most important criteria was for literature selection, Sarah Richardson\*, a teacher from a rural public high school in Connecticut, listed the ability to relate to the students as her most important consideration. Richardson believes this is the most important because “we have books like *Ethan Frome* that are so old and things we’ve stopped using because they’re just so irrelevant to the kids’ lives” (August 9, 2018). The NCTE, in their “Guidelines for Selection of Materials in English Language Arts Programs”, supports this

need to have texts that students will be able to relate to. Literature and other supplemental texts “which draw upon students’ backgrounds are desirable. Both comprehension and engagement are enhanced when students can activate relevant background knowledge as they read, connecting their personal experiences with vicarious experiences” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014 a). Sarah Richardson, a public school teacher in Connecticut, echoes this statement when she articulates that “I think just looking at who’s in front of you is most important when you look at what text to do...you get better over time with just moving forward and saying alright what do the kids in front of me need? What books can I give them? Or what poem do I think would really help? Even if it’s one kid in the room” (August 9, 2018). Finding literature that represents the students and relates to their lives is the focus of many teachers as they select literature to increase student engagement in reading.

This desire expressed by teachers to relate texts, authors, and characters back to the students to whom they are teaching reflects the ideals of the progressivist curriculum. The titles and authors chosen to be included in a high school ELA curriculum “reflect what schools explicitly value as the foundation of students’ literary experience” while the progressivist curriculum is more implicit in how it affects students. The function of the progressivist curriculum, according to Tanner and Tanner, was to foster “personal control of knowledge and experience” as well as “personal-social growth” (1995, p. 188). Being able to find texts that can not only challenge students with elements of literary merit, but also engage and relate to them seems to be the goal of the teachers that have been surveyed and interviewed. The most important attitude that can be formed by the progressive curriculum, according to Tanner and Tanner, is the desire to continue learning, which is ultimately what teachers are looking to do by using texts that students can find relatable (Tanner and Tanner, 1995, p. 184).

However, the desire to find texts that students can relate to is not the focus for all teachers. Dean and Evans expressed their lack of concern with making sure texts reflected familiar elements to students' lives. When looking back on the texts chosen by their predecessors, Evans noticed that "one of the things that was huge with them back in the seventies and eighties was choosing books they felt were thematically related to things the kids were thinking or feeling" (May 1, 2018). Evans and Dean found that these texts were repetitive and continuously driving the same theme of the bildungsroman into students' heads. They stipulated that "the kids that weren't inclined to read weren't going to be pushed over the edge because they were like wow, this is about me now" (May 1, 2018). Dean and Evans still choose texts with themes that students can possibly identify with, such as love and betrayal in *Macbeth*, but they are more focused on giving students a new perspective instead of using stories that are already familiar to students.

Popular young adult novelist John Green also agrees with the idea that students shouldn't always read texts they can directly relate to. According to Green, "I do think it's a mistake to give white kids "white kid books" or Latino kids "Latino kid books". If anything, reading across cultures is vital because reading critically is an act of empathy and not an act of identification" (Barkdoll and Scherff, 2008, p. 70). Suzanne M. Kauer, assistant professor of English at Radford University, also believes that students should not "read books that portray their particular religion, class, or race exclusively" because "that kind of relativism seems as dangerous as fitting everyone into the same mold" (2008, p. 58). In Kauer's mind, "one of the best reasons to read is to understand other people and places" (2008, p. 58-59).



## Literary Merit

Literary merit is the quality of the literature that makes it valuable enough to teach. While only two teachers defined and used the term literary merit outright, similar qualities and criteria of literary merit were present in the thoughts expressed by other teachers. Dean defines literary merit as “an opportunity for me to take a look at a particular passage in a book and to stop and to say, hey let’s take a minute and let’s talk about how this is put together...let’s talk about how it was written and how the writing works and how if it has a particular thematic meaning, let’s talk about how the passage does that. And it’s an opportunity to talk about the choices that that author makes and how those choices manifest itself in a bunch of different ideas” (May 1, 2018). Paul Evans had a similar definition in which he described literary merit as the chance “to look at the book as a work of art and answer the question how it communicates meaning so that [students can work on] their critical thinking skills” (May 1, 2018).

In his book, *The English Teacher’s Companion*, Jim Burke discusses the topic of literary merit. Burke cites a text by Barry Gilmore which outlines the literary merit considerations for more “complex and sophisticated literature” that would typically be included in an advanced placement class. Gilmore’s list is as follows:

- “1. Entertains the reader and is interesting to read. 2. Does not merely conform to the expectations of a single genre or formula. 3. Has been judged to have artistic quality by the literary community (teachers, students, librarians, critics, other writers, the reading public). 4. Has stood the test of time in some way, regardless of the date of publication. 5. Shows thematic depth: The themes merit revisiting and study because they are complex and nuanced. 6. Demonstrates innovation in style, voice, structure, characterization, plot, and/or description. 7. May have social, political, or ideological impact on society during

the lifetime of the author or afterward. 8. Does not fall into the traps of “pulp” fiction such as clichéd or derivative descriptions and plot devices, or sentimentality rather than “earned” emotion. 9. Is intended by the author to communicate in an artistic manner. 10. Is universal in its appeal (i.e., the themes and insights are not only accessible to one culture or time period)” (2013, p. 144).

Even these guidelines for more complex literature lists the need for the text to be entertaining and interesting for the reader as the first consideration. While not every one of Gilmore’s considerations for literary merit were cited or agreed with by the teachers interviewed, they still share the same common concern first. This concern is creating lifelong readers by getting students interested in the texts.

### **Choice vs. Requirement**

Deciding whether to make a novel required reading or give students a choice of options was frequently discussed by teachers as a factor influencing their selection. The difference between student choice and student requirement depends on whether the students have a say in what they are reading. Required literature for all students is more likely to be questioned or challenged than if students were given several options. Teachers are conscious of this contrast and for this reason they place books that they believe may be considered more controversial for their school on the summer reading lists. This allows teachers to give students a variety of options while still having valuable, yet possibly controversial literary choices available to those who choose to read it. It is up to the student to choose from this list, so it is less likely that any parent or other community member will complain that the student was forced to read a book. Parents are often “more reluctant to challenge a book if their child is not *required* to read it,

especially when selections are offered by teachers who know students' interests and abilities" (Lent, 2008, p. 62). James White\*, a charter school teacher in Massachusetts, is aware that summer reading choices are less likely to be challenged in comparison to the required texts used during the school year. White states that any book he's concerned about will be included in the summer reading choices so "they can always pick from a wide variety" (August 7, 2018). Rachel Nelson\*, a teacher at a private Catholic high school in Massachusetts, makes use of the freedom that summer reading choices allows. As a teacher at a private Catholic high school, Nelson stated that anytime they think that a parent might bring the book they'll be reading to the Bishop they have to hold back. As a private, Catholic school teacher, Nelson must stay in line with the church's teachings, which is overseen by the Bishop. Nelson's solution to this is to have an outside reading list with a lot of choices. One book that was recently included on this list was "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas because she was worried that parents would feel like this book was against police officers or "trying to glamorize police brutality" as the story follows an African American girl who witnesses a police officer shoot her friend (Nelson, August 9, 2018).

### **Teacher Preference**

Teacher preference for texts appeared as another factor that influenced literature selection. These may be the texts that teachers are most knowledgeable about or have devoted the most time to teaching. They have crafted and re-crafted multiple lessons and units on these works of literature and are hesitant to relinquish their ownership over these texts as they desire to maintain a stable curriculum. Nelson shared that "I will probably teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* until I die and I'll teach *The Crucible*" because there "are some [texts] that stay forever and ever" (August 9, 2018). Becoming comfortable with teaching a text leads teachers to be more

resistant to change books. George Johnson\*, a private, Catholic school teacher in Rhode Island, described how their curriculum tends to stay consistent with the teaching of core, grade-level texts because they “had teachers that stayed many years [who] would just get used to” the order in which books are taught based on grade level (July 24, 2018). Because teachers “tend to stay a while, [text selection] wouldn’t change that much” (Johnson, July 24, 2018). Johnson discussed how in the past few years they were attempting to change this continual, unvarying usage of the same literature for each grade level, but there are still some texts even he does not want to part with. Teacher preference also emerges from fear of students not getting a complete English education. Even after having taught for over twenty-five years, Johnson still states that “it drives me crazy to think that we’re going to drop certain books, that you’re going to go through our school and you didn’t read *The Great Gatsby* or you didn’t read *1984* [or] *Macbeth*” (July 24, 2018). Some teachers see no problem with maintaining the same texts across several years of teaching. However, some teachers do find this stubbornness frustrating. Michael Dean and Paul Evans, two teachers from a public high school in Massachusetts, discussed this issue of teachers refusing to budge in the texts they teach. “We have a lot of teachers who are teaching sophomores, around twenty something years of teaching sophomores and aren’t interested in changing out some of the books because they still work. *Lord of the Flies* [was here] when I got here [in] 1999, still here. *Separate Peace*, still here. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, still here. *Oedipus and Antigone*, still there. *Othello*, still [here], that’s five books that have been here as long as I have in the sophomore curriculum. They haven’t moved.” (Evans, May 1, 2018).

However, it is important for teachers to enjoy what they’re teaching and be passionate about the texts they are using. As Jim Burke states, “nothing sells reading more than a passionate teacher, an engaged practitioner who walks the talk when it comes to reading” (2013, p. 174).

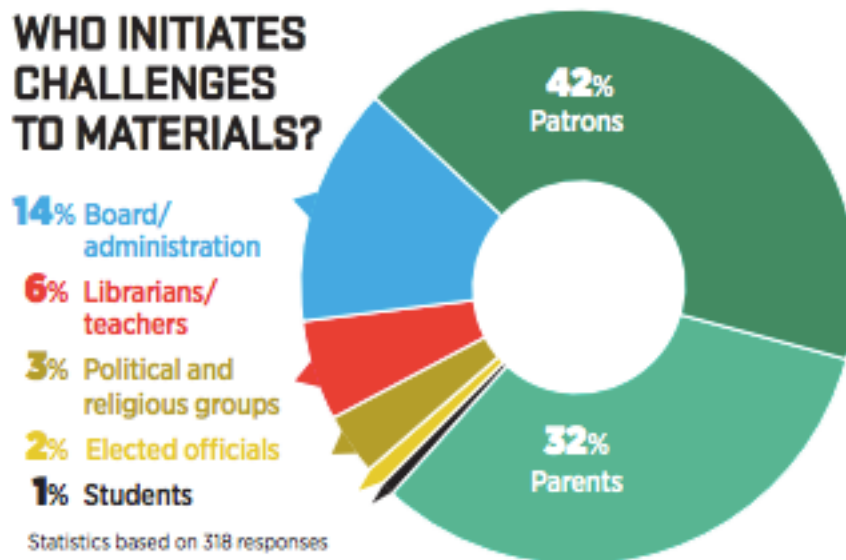
When teachers are not passionate about the literature in their classes students can pick up on this. They notice that the reading is solely taught for the facts which reduces reading to a monotonous “series of endless multiple choice questions” which then causes students to turn to online summaries or study guides in place of reading the text (Burke, 2013, p. 174). However, the opposite is also true that when teachers are extremely passionate about a book, they may not notice or want to notice if the book is failing to grab students’ attention. James White discusses the difficulty of this concept, “I think getting teachers on board with the idea that if you think you’re teaching the book and no one’s reading it, you’re not really teaching the book. But there are teachers that are so enamored of their own teaching that they don’t really care if the kids are reading it” (August 7, 2018). White continues to elaborate on this difficulty since it’s “hard to get an experienced teacher who has kind of established him or herself in teaching a certain novel to care more about the kids reading” (August 7, 2018). Teachers need to find a balance of instilling passion into their work as well as receiving the opportunity to exercise the latitude and autonomy to choose the literature they wish to be included in their classes.

### **Administration, Parents, and Community**

The administrators in a high school have the potential to make or break an English Language Arts curriculum. These powers in the school range from department chair, to curriculum coordinator, to principal, to superintendent. While about 38% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that administrators had an influence in their considerations for what they select, this did not reflect in the interviews (Appendix C). Many teachers that were interviewed agreed that the administration very rarely gets involved and does not seem to be as concerned with their literature selection as one might think.

Parents have a large impact in students' lives. Parents have the ability to control what their student does, where they go, and potentially what they read. According to the American Library Association infographic on banned and challenged books from 2017, 32% of parents initiated challenges to texts (Figure 4). However, according to my survey about 55% of teachers either disagree or strongly disagree that parents have any influence on the literature they select (Appendix C). This result surprised me due to the influence I had believed parents had from reading several texts and articles on challenging literature.

Figure 4.



(American Library Association, *Banned & Challenged Books*, 2017)

The majority of teachers expressed that parents rarely challenge or question the texts their student is reading. However, those who have experienced this push back from parents have cited offensive language as the most challenged aspect of books. One teacher states that “while the administration attempts to give the teachers autonomy to choose literature, if even one parent complains about anything, it is frequently the case that a book is removed from the curriculum.

Use of profanity in the books, even for those assigned to seniors, is the most common complaint” (Geoghegan, 2018g).

The surrounding community of a school can have an impact on the community and culture that is created within a school. Many community members get involved with schools because they have a child that is a student there. While one would think that the community would not have much of an influence on teacher’s text selection, according to my survey more teachers either agreed or strongly agreed (35%) than disagreed or strongly disagreed (32%) that the thoughts and feelings of the community influenced their literature selection (Appendix C). Only one teacher elaborated on how the community had an impact on text selection. This is an outlier, but shows just how large of an impact the community can have. Mason discusses how the public school she works in is a “very middle class, white dominated school” in which the parents are very vocal and they “have a very small, yet loud conservative group” which makes it “difficult at times to get texts through” (July 26, 2018). Mason and other English teachers had to keep the thoughts of this vocal, conservative community in mind for the texts that they chose, even for summer reading choices. Mason shares that “we do have a small contingency that unfortunately, I believe, infringes on our ability to show students a wide array of books and other pieces of literature that are out there” (July 26, 2018).

## **Students**

Teachers keep many factors in mind when it comes to selecting literature, but students are the main focus of their considerations since they are the audience the literature is targeted for. According to my survey, 79.2% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that students’ thoughts and feelings are factors that are considered when selecting literature (Appendix C).

However, when asked in the formal interview if there was any formal way for students to give feedback on the literature they're reading, only one school seemed to have an assignment in place to accomplish this. James White has his AP literature students complete an assignment at the beginning of the year which has students "write letters to the principal about which three books they should absolutely keep in the curriculum and why, which one they would drop and why, and which two we don't use they think should be in the curriculum" (August 7, 2018).

However, some teachers stated that they do not place much consideration on student's input. One teacher expresses that along with their colleagues, he or she is "concerned that the level of rigor will diminish if student choice is the only determinant for reading selections... Teachers are professionals and in most cases, know what is best for a student and what is best may not necessarily be a student's preference" (Geoghegan, 2018j). Paul Evans shared a similar belief when discussing what factors he considers when selecting literature. Evans states that the students not liking the selected texts "has nothing to do with the books that we pick" (May 1, 2018). Students may not enjoy books such as *Moby Dick*, but "they're going to read it because they need to and it's good" since "it has a tremendous amount of literary merit" (May 1, 2018). Stotsky would be more likely to agree with these teachers as she does not see the value in finding literature that will engage students and help to foster their love for reading. Stotsky believes that "the imperative to "engage" students in reading anything at all has trumped the academic functions English teachers have been expected to carry out" (2012a, p. xii). Too much focus on finding engaging texts has, in Stotsky's eyes, been detrimental to the academic skills they should be learning, such as reading critically and analytically.

Students were cited by teachers across both the survey and interviews as the most important consideration when it came to literature selection. This is not surprising seeing as the



texts that are selected are selected for these students. But what is surprising is that few teachers interviewed had a formal method in which they could receive student feedback in a serious manner besides hearing their fleeting complaints or comments in class. James White emphasizes the importance of keeping students in mind before anything else when he states that “I’m not concerned that I’m answering up the chain, but I’m answering down the chain to the students” (August 7, 2018). White is also the only teacher of those I interviewed that some way in which students could formally give their input on a text. White shares that “in AP literature one of the first assignments I do at the beginning of the year is I have them write letters to the principal about which three books they should absolutely keep in the curriculum and why, which one they would drop and why, and which two we don’t use they think should be in the curriculum” (August 7, 2018). While this assignment is only given to the AP literature students, it is still a formal way in which students are able to have a say in the curriculum that is geared towards them.

Teachers consider students first when selecting literature because their ultimate goal is to create lifelong readers out of their students. As candidly stated in a survey response, teachers need to consider whether they would rather have students “actually read a book they’re interested in (or have a greater chance of being interested in) or risk having them bullshit an entire novel written over a hundred years ago by some old, dead white guy” (Geoghegan, 2018c). Johnson echoes this idea when he states “getting kids to read and picking books that are going to get them to want to read more is a major criteria, less so than they should read x, y, and z” (July 24, 2018). Benjamin West echoes this idea of using literature to inspire students to read more because “if you get the right book, taught the right way, in the right class, it can be life changing” (July 23, 2018). English teachers have the opportunity to impact students’ lives in a way that the students

may not even be aware of at the time. In a growing age of technology, getting students to read can seem like a more difficult challenge, but as West states, “if you can hook them, I think they will read it and they’ll make time for it. I don’t think technology is the problem” (July 23, 2018). Finding and incorporating texts that will engage students and lead them to a sustained love for reading is depicted as crossing a bridge by Lois T. Stover. Stover states that “if readers can’t feel comfortable in the world of the text, and can’t find some way to connect with the minds and hearts of the characters, it seems unlikely that their own minds and hearts can be transformed” (2003, p. 79). It is then “the responsibility of the English teacher to build “bridges” between our students and the texts we value” (Stover, 2003, p. 79). As shown by these survey and interview responses, teachers are becoming more conscious and more willing to act on the task of finding texts which will maintain literary merit while also engaging students in an effort to spark not only an appreciation, but also a love for reading.

## **Implications**

### **Similar Studies**

In her book, *The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Curriculum*, Sandra Stotsky discusses the results of the 2010 national survey conducted by the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (ALSCW). This survey was a report of a nationally representative sample of four hundred English teachers from public schools in grades 9, 10, and 11 which sought to “find out what major titles they assign in standard and honors courses and what approaches they use for literary study” (Stotsky, 2012a, p. 15). While this survey is similar to mine, it has a different focus and a broader group of participants. This study focuses on public school English teachers across the nation and does not focus on the factors that influence the

literature selection. According to the ALSCW's survey, "between 70 and 80 percent of the teachers across grade levels select the major novels, plays, and book-length poems they assign" (Stotsky, 2012a, p. 29). This is reflected in my own research as 84.3% of teachers either strongly agreed or agreed that they felt they had a great deal of latitude in selecting literature for their classes and 86.3% of teachers either strongly agreed or agreed that they had the autonomy to pick and choose among books available within their department (Appendix C). The ALSCW's survey also found that "30 to 40 percent are influenced by their department or school curriculum" (Stotsky, 2012a, p. 29). My research shows a similarity to these findings as 30.2% of teachers were neutral, 33% of teachers either disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 38.7% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that the thoughts and feelings of the administration influenced the literature they selected (Appendix C). The ALSCW's survey also found that "about 14 percent are influenced by student choice" (Stotsky, 2012a, p. 29). In my research I found that teachers were much more influenced by student choice as 79.2% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that the thoughts and feelings of students influence the literature they select (Appendix C). However, in the interviews conducted beyond the survey, several teachers kept students in mind while selecting literature, but did not have a formal way for students to provide feedback on the literature or offer their thoughts and feelings about future in-class readings.

Arthur Applebee also conducted a research study into the literature taught in secondary English classes (grades 7-12) in 322 public schools in 1989 in order to find out if assigned literature "adequately reflected the diversity of American culture" as opposed to supporting a "white, male, Anglo-Saxon tradition" (Stotsky, 2012a, p. 20). Applebee found that while many changes had been made over the "last half of the twentieth century, he did not deem the changes

“sufficient to reflect the multicultural heritage of the United States”” (Stotsky, 2012a, p. 20).

Through his research, Applebee determined that a “re-examination of literature curriculum and instruction is necessary to provide teachers with a unifying framework that will better inform their decisions about what and how they teach” (Stotsky, 2012a, p. 21).

As states earlier, Watkins and Ostenson (2015) also conducted a similar study. Their study focused on the impact of the Common Core State Standards on text selection for grade 7-12 teachers in Western states. Watkins and Ostenson only used surveys to collect data while I used both surveys as well as semi-structured interviews. These interviews helped fill a small gap in this study as the interviews would “help us understand how” factors play a role in literature selection (Watkins and Ostenson, 2015, p. 271). Watkins and Ostenson’s findings were both similar and different to mine. Both studies concluded that a major factor influencing teachers’ literature selection is finding texts that are a good, engaging match for students. However, the teachers surveyed in Watkins and Ostenson’s study “largely considered the potential community reaction to texts...because they feared problems (real or imagined) with community discontent over the literature’s content” (2015, p. 250). This contrasted the responses from teachers in my survey as 34.9% of teachers chose neutral and 32.1% of teachers either strongly disagreed or disagreed that the thoughts and feelings of the community influenced their text selection (Appendix C). Community influence was a stronger nonfactor in the Eastern states I surveyed as opposed to the Western states included in Watkins and Ostenson’s research.

### **Latitude and Autonomy**

Prior to receiving responses to my survey, I was under the assumption that teachers would not have felt as strongly as they did in regards to having latitude and autonomy. Latitude

is the freedom from narrow restrictions and the freedom of action. By possessing latitude teachers do not feel restricted in the choices they are able to make for literature selection.

Autonomy is the freedom from external control or influence. By possessing autonomy teachers feel that they are able to independently select and recommend texts to teach. However, as shown by the charts in Appendix C, teachers felt strongly on the topics of latitude and autonomy.

Because of their latitude and autonomy, teachers are able to select literature for the reasons most important to them such as finding texts that students will relate to, incorporating texts with strong literary merit, and including more contemporary and multicultural books and authors.

When asked whether they felt they had a great deal of latitude in selecting literature in their classes, 41.4% of teachers strongly agreed and 42.9% of teachers agreed (Appendix C). This total of 84.3% of teachers that agreed or strongly agreed shows that teachers in the Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut areas do not feel that their freedom to select literature is inhibited. When asked about their level of autonomy, 46.2% of teachers strongly agreed and 40.1% agreed (Appendix C). This total of 86.3% increased by about two percent from the previous question of latitude. Teachers may have felt stronger about this question due to the fact that the statement they had to either agree or disagree with stated “I have the autonomy to pick and choose among books that are available in our department”. This could imply that teachers may not have the latitude to pick and suggest outside books that they would like to bring into the curriculum.

This latitude and autonomy was expressed in a variety of different, yet similar ways. Several survey responses described having the freedom to choose among core texts decided upon by the department. One teacher stated that they “usually have several core/department texts (decided by the dept) and the freedom to choose one or two of our own. Senior electives are

entirely chosen by the teacher” (Geoghegan, 2018a). This displays a limited freedom to choose among books that have been agreed upon for certain grade levels, but then getting complete freedom to choose texts for elective classes. Another teacher explains a similar situation in which they “have a lot of freedom to choose the literature for my AP literature class” but “there are 4 required texts for my freshman classes; I don’t get to choose those” (Geoghegan, 2018d). When given the opportunity to have the freedom and control to choose texts, teachers become more comfortable with their teaching. One teacher explains that they are “comfortable with the current curriculum since ninety-five percent of what I teach is my choice to begin with” (Geoghegan, 2018k).

Responses from those that were interviewed were similar to those responses from the survey. White, a teacher at a charter high school in Massachusetts, expressed that he absolutely felt that he had autonomy in text selection. As the current department head, he was able to “talk with two hats” from the standpoint of both a regular member of the English department as well as the department head (White, August 7, 2018). When he was a teacher, the “head of the English department let me do things my way... as long as I got good results from the students and the students were engaged, then I was able to do it anyway I wanted to” (White, August 7, 2018). This sentiment of autonomy was echoed by Nelson, a teacher at a private high school in Massachusetts, who stated that she had a lot of autonomy since she can choose which texts she would like to use. Nelson states that “I don’t have to pick based on certain curriculum standards. I get to pick what I want to read” (August 9, 2018). However, there is a slight restriction in the fact that she teaches at a private, Catholic school, so she still has to keep this consideration in mind. While public school teachers may not be restricted by these religious affiliations, they are still restricted by what is available to them as well as what has been decided upon as the texts to

be taught at each grade level. Beth Lane\*, a teacher at a public school in Massachusetts, states that “we don’t get much choice in terms of what novels we teach for most of the English classes, they’re just core texts for each grade” but for AP classes and “for short stories and supplemental texts, for the most part, we’ve always been able to choose what we teach” (July 24, 2018).

One dilemma that can arise from being limited to choice within the book closet is that most of the books teachers are able to choose from “are ‘old, dead, white guys’ and we need to revamp the selection to include high interest texts” (Geoghegan, 2018f). A second dilemma that arises from this discussion of latitude and autonomy is the issue of funding. While some schools are fortunate enough to never have to deal with a lack of funding, others are not as lucky. One teacher made the distinction that they “feel comfortable choosing texts within the selection we have” but “because of the lack of funding, I do not feel comfortable requesting new texts” (Geoghegan, 2018e). This is echoed in a second teachers concern that “with funding continuing to decrease, it is difficult to keep novels current and relevant to students, parents, and community” (Geoghegan, 2018h). A third dilemma that is noted by the NCTE is that “attempts to standardize curricula to accommodate mandated testing, we fear, will position teachers as mere delivery systems for prepackaged curricula produced by publishers and testing services, rather than as trained professionals whose judgment should be relied upon in determining appropriate texts and assignments for students in their courses and classrooms” (2014b, p. 1). Teachers need to be respected as educated professionals and given latitude and autonomy in order to select engaging and academically challenging texts that would not otherwise be chosen by testing services.

However, understanding that other groups can also have an influence on how teachers select literature is necessary to look at. In the following sections, I will explain the impact each does or does not have on literature selection according to survey and interview responses.

### **The Future of Literature Selection**

Based off of the survey and interview responses I received in my study, literature selection for high school ELA curriculum seems to be becoming increasingly more focused on gearing curriculum to create lifelong readers as well as including more contemporary, diverse texts and authors. Prior to beginning this research, I had believed that the factors that would influence literature selection would be those that also influence censorship, such as the opinions of parents and administration and the avoidance of controversial topics. While certain controversial topics such as profanity were cited as the most common controversial topics that had to be taken into account during text selection, parents and administration were not as large of a factor as other research and data showed. When asked what influence, if any, parents had on text selection, the majority of teachers agreed that parents had little impact on their decisions. Only 2.4% of teachers strongly agreed that parents had any influence and 14.6% agreed that parents had an influence (Appendix C). On the opposite side, 38.7% of teachers disagreed that parents had an influence and 16% strongly disagreed that parents had an influence (Appendix C). Evans, a teacher at a public high school, states that he has only had one parent complain in his twenty years of teaching. This complaint was over a religious issue that was misread by the parent in the text. Evans responded by telling the parent to “read the book and come back and explain to me why I shouldn’t [teach] it and I never heard back” (May 1, 2018).



Those teachers from private, religious high schools stated that they had the autonomy to choose texts, but were still asked to be mindful of parents when choosing texts. This is to be expected as these parents are paying tuition towards a school in which they expect certain values to be taught to their child in accordance with their respective religion. Nelson, a teacher at a private, catholic high school, states that she has been “asked in the past if parents complain to avoid that book in the future at least for a while” (August 9, 2018). White, a teacher at a charter school, believes that “some of the books that we use would probably cause a bit of a stir in regular public schools because of language or mature subject matter”, but he has only ever had one complaint from a parent (August 7, 2018). This parent was uncomfortable with the novel’s inclusion of two homosexual characters, but White responded that that is the text their student would be reading and it would not be changing. While parents’ thoughts and feelings about specific texts may be considered more heavily in private, religious high schools, it is still surprising that there has been either one complaint or none from parents according to the teachers who were interviewed.

A second factor that is impacting current ELA curricula is the focus on including more contemporary and multicultural works and authors. In order for teachers to best create this contemporary curriculum that will engage and inspire lifelong readers, they need the latitude and autonomy to select literature. They also need to be extremely well-read in order to know what will work best for their students. Lane reaffirms this idea as a crucial aspect to effective literature selection. Having the “knowledge of what’s out there” was her response as to how literature selection could be improved to be made more effective (Lane, July 24, 2018). The creation of curriculum should be left to the professional discretion of the English teachers enlisted to teach these courses. This is echoed in NCTE guidelines as they state that “as professional practitioners,

English language arts teachers are best qualified to decide what constitutes informed practice and curriculum content” (1985). The NCTE goes on to reaffirm their stance in 2006 by stating that “teachers’ rights to use their professional judgment and experience on behalf of their students are highly constrained. Therefore, NCTE must reassert the critical role of teachers in the selection and implementation of reading programs and policies” (2006). The NCTE also goes on to state that “responsible selection demands not only the experience and education needed to make sound choices but also the ability to defend the choices made” (2014a, p. 3).

The most difficult and focused combination of considerations for text selection that multiple teachers cited in the surveys and interviews was the balance between student interest and literary merit. Teachers are mainly concerned with getting students interested and engaged with the literature in an effort to create lifelong readers. However, teachers are also concerned with the content, or literary merit, of these novels as they need to teach students higher level English skills beyond simply reading words on a page. Nelson states that “it’s really hard, but I try to find something that they’ll be interested in, something that they’ll like to read, and something that has a lot of meat that we can talk about in class” (August 9, 2018). A public high school teacher from Massachusetts states that when selecting literature for his newly created elective class, he considered the combination of “literary merit and high-interest at the same time” (May 1, 2018). This contrasted with his colleagues’ criteria as Evans stated that students “not liking it, by the way, has nothing to do with the books that we pick” because “if there’s one thing that we use to guide whatever we choose, it’s that. It’s that the book has some literary merit” (May 1, 2018).

As society moves forward, literature selection should as well. The focus is slowly but surely shifting from exclusively teaching the classics included in the literary canon, to branching

out to include modern texts written more recently by much more diverse authors. While the classics are still beneficial, it is also important to begin to include more contemporary works in which more modern topics can be discussed and the authors and characters are not reflective of the old, dead, white men who wrote them. One teacher reflects that there is “not enough diversity in our texts in terms of race, culture, and gender” (Geoghegan, 2018i). Teachers are beginning to realize the need for a balance between focusing on traditional, canonical works and more contemporary, diverse works.

### **Nonfactors**

At the start of my research, I had believed that parents would have played a much larger role in the factors teachers considered when selecting literature. However, this turned out to be the opposite as most teachers stated that they had few, if any, issues with parents complaining about their text choices. Only 17% of teachers strongly agreed or agreed that the thoughts and feelings of parents influenced their literature selection, while 54.7% of teachers either strongly disagreed or disagreed that the thoughts and feelings of parents influenced their literature selection (Appendix C). Paul Evans states that he would take parent input into consideration to some degree, but “they lack the experience to understand what would be considered something perhaps that is a book with real literary merit” (May 1, 2018).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although I was able to survey 212 teachers, that number is still a small percentage of English teachers in New England. This study focuses on only three states in the New England area. The majority of participants in this study were from considerably small, suburban high

schools consisting of 1,000 or fewer students. The majority of teacher responses were from schools with fewer than 500 students (34.6%) and with 500-1,000 students (32.2%) (Appendix C). This limits the data to be mostly reflective of these schools as opposed to being representative of a general consensus of all schools. The majority of teacher responses were also from teachers in their early careers. Teachers that have been teaching for 1-10 years comprised 43.4% of survey responses (Appendix C). Receiving increased input from mid-career teachers with more experience selecting literature would have been more beneficial to my study.

Some of the survey questions could have been worded more specifically. Inclusion of an open-ended response area in which teachers could elaborate on how exactly they felt they had latitude and autonomy would have been able to provide better evidence of how this latitude and autonomy was exhibited by those that only responded to the survey. A better and more advanced survey system also could have been used. I was unable to easily differentiate between the public, private, and charter school survey responses in Google Forms. One change that could be made in the future would be to create separate surveys to send specifically to public schools, private schools, and charter schools. This would allow for data to be easily compared among the three school systems.

### **Implications for Researchers**

There are a multitude of factors that can have an impact on literature selection in high school English Language Arts curricula. It is apparent that certain aspects of literature are a constant consideration across a variety of schools such as, literary merit and the attempt to find literature that students can relate to. However, the need to include more contemporary literature is a recent concern that may continue to remain a strong concern, or could be deemed as less

important by teachers as new concerns come in the future. Tracking these concerns and factors could be a focus of many research studies to come.

My research only offers a limited insight into the factors that influence literature selection in public, private, and charter schools in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Further research could be done to compare similarities and differences between the factors that affect literature selection in other areas of the United States. A more in-depth study could also be done comparing the doctrines of each school to the results of the factors that teachers cite as most important for literature selection.

Repeating this survey in order to get broader responses would also be a point for further research. More rural and urban schools could be interviewed, along with larger schools consisting of 1,000 or more students. Receiving more input from teachers in their mid or late careers would also be beneficial insight to include. Younger teachers are often more willing to complete and participate in research projects such as this, so they make up the majority of responses but may not have as much experience with literature selection. It would be more beneficial to collect more data and responses from mid-career teachers as well as teachers in their later careers.

One interesting approach for further research would be to survey students to discover the literature they would select to read and compare this to both the literature read in school as well as the texts teachers would like to incorporate in their curriculum. Many teachers admitted to not having a formal way to receive student feedback on the texts they read, so researchers could elaborate more on students' thoughts in comparison to teachers' thoughts.

## Conclusion

As shown by the teachers that have been surveyed and interviewed, the factors that influence literature selection are mainly influenced by contemporary issues and driven by the desired outcome for creating lifelong readers. The needs and requirements for high school English curricula are reflective of the issues and concerns of society. Today's society has become more progressive and culturally aware compared to thirty years ago. As one high school English teacher, Walker Jackson, states in the English Journal, "What we once knew as "the canon" is not necessarily the canon anymore. The growing awareness of multiculturalism has had a steady impact on what were, twenty years ago, considered the classics" (2008, p. 21). Being limited to canonical texts can also limit the literature students can be exposed to. Instead of waiting around for a work to become canonical, Jacob Stratman, professor at John Brown University, knew that he had to make the authoritative decision to incorporate great literary choices that "were too new or too ignored to be considered canonical" (2008, p. 22).

Prior to beginning this research, I had believed that controversial topics and opinionated groups, such as parents and administration, would be the most dominant factors influencing literature selection. However, as my research has shown, teachers are more concerned with the balance between the practical reasons of getting students to read and the idealistic ways of the quality of the literature in regards to literary merit. Maintaining currency in their curriculum is also a factor cited by several teachers as they try to include more contemporary and multicultural texts. Factors associated with censorship were not as prominent in my research as I had originally believed they would be. A similarly surprising result was the limited influence groups such as parents, community, members, and administrative officials have over teachers' text selections.

As stated by one teacher in their survey response, “literature selection for high school English curriculum should be improved...based on the fact that we are constantly updating and adding to our curriculum” (Geoghegan, 2018b). Literature selection and the process of creating a curriculum are ever-changing processes as improvements and adjustments are made. Research and surveys, such as my own, allow teachers to reflect upon their current curriculum, their text choices, and the factors influencing these selections. This exact research could be replicated in ten years with the same questions and participants and they could give completely different answers. Just as Evans described overhauling the English curriculum of their predecessors, in the future this act will repeat itself as newer teachers come in to recreate curriculum based on the needs of the students at that time, the values of society, the philosophy of the school, and current educational trends.

## **Appendix A: Survey Questions**

1. Where do you teach?
2. What grade level(s) do you teach?
3. What course(s) do you teach?
4. What is your gender?
5. How long have you been teaching?
6. What is the population of your school?
7. What is the setting of your school?
8. What type of high school do you teach in?
9. What is the highest degree you have obtained?
10. I feel that I have a great deal of latitude in selecting literature for my classes.
11. I have the autonomy to pick and choose among books that are available in our department.
12. The thoughts/feelings of parents influence the literature I select.
13. The thoughts/feelings of students influence the literature I select.
14. The thoughts/feelings of the community influence the literature I select.
15. The thoughts/feelings of the administration influence the literature I select.
16. I am comfortable with teaching the texts in our current curriculum.
17. I would define our current English curriculum as academically challenging.
18. Literature selection for high school English curriculum should be improved.
19. Are you interested in completing an in-person, 30-minute interview?
20. If yes, please provide your contact information below (name, email, etc.)



21. Is there anyone else you would recommend I get in contact with to survey or interview  
for my research?

22. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Appendix B: Interview Questions**

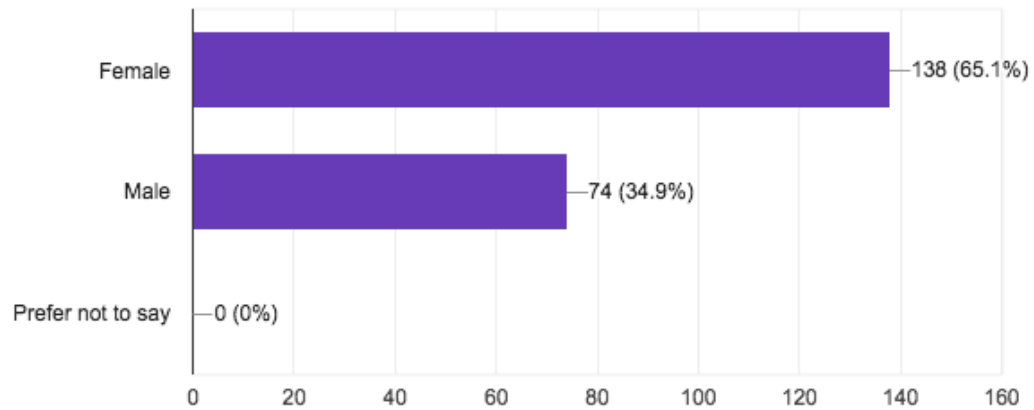
1. Can you elaborate on the latitude and autonomy questions? To what degree do you feel that you have latitude and autonomy? Can you provide examples of how you have used your latitude or autonomy? Or do you feel that you have it but have never had the occasion to use it?
2. Between students, parents, the community, and the administration who would you say has the most and least influence on the texts you select?
3. What is the most important thing you consider when choosing literature to include in your curriculum? What is your criteria for deciding which texts deserve/need to be taught?
4. Do you select texts as a department or individually?
5. How often do you switch/change the books your students read?
6. How does teaching at a public/private/charter high school impact/influence your text selection?
7. Do you think literature selection for high school English curriculum should be improved? How would you improve it?
8. How would you define an academically challenging curriculum? Would you define your current English curriculum as academically challenging?
9. How do the courses that you teach affect your text selection?
10. What book/text has worked the best? What book/text was the least successful?
11. Do you have professional status? Do you think this plays a role in literature selection?
12. How has technology impacted text selection/how you use texts?
13. Do you think that the texts suggested by the Common Core State Standards are helpful?

14. Are you willing to be contacted again if I have any follow up questions while I am transcribing the interview?

## Appendix C: Survey Responses

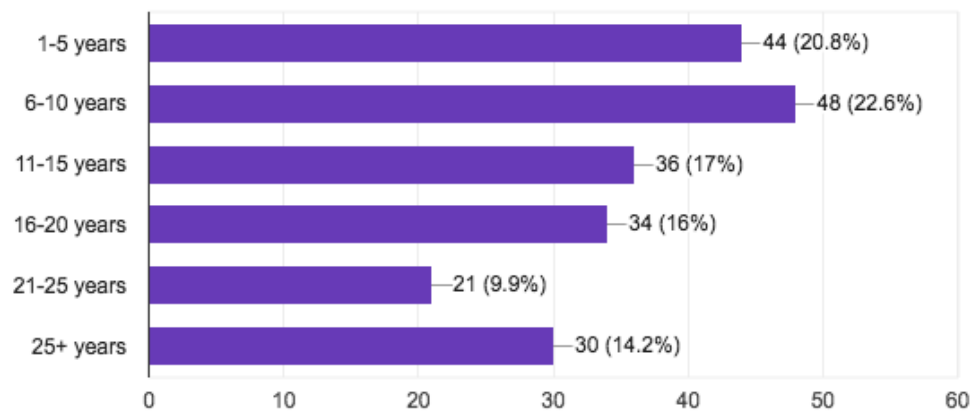
### What is your gender?

212 responses



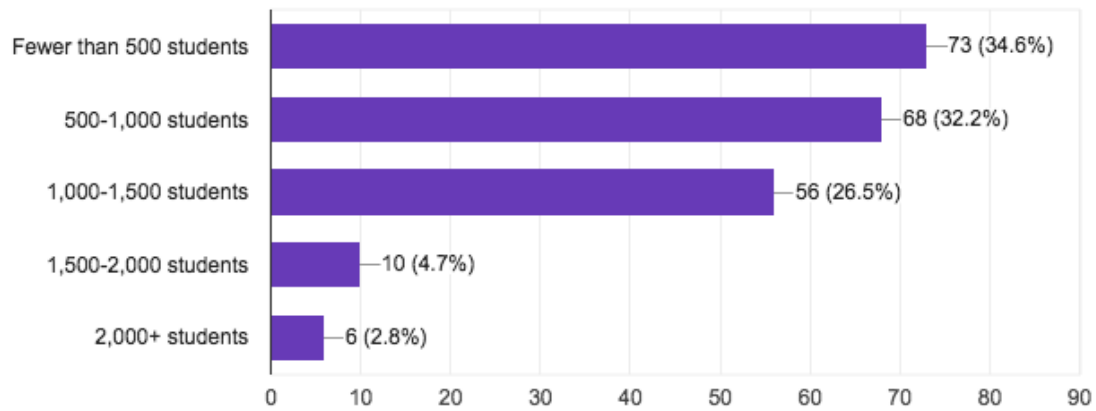
### How long have you been teaching?

212 responses



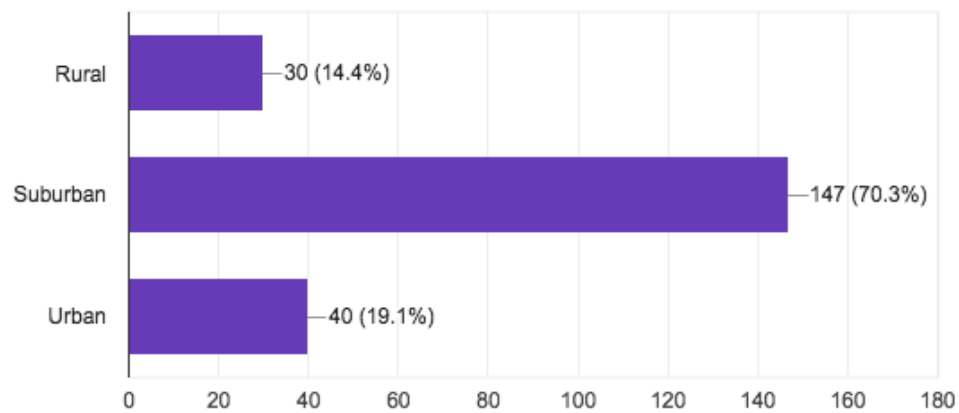
## What is the population of your school?

211 responses

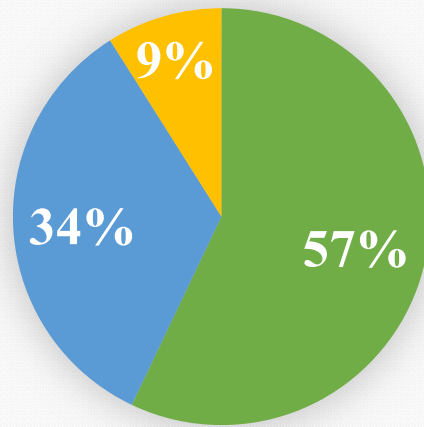


## What is the setting of your school?

209 responses



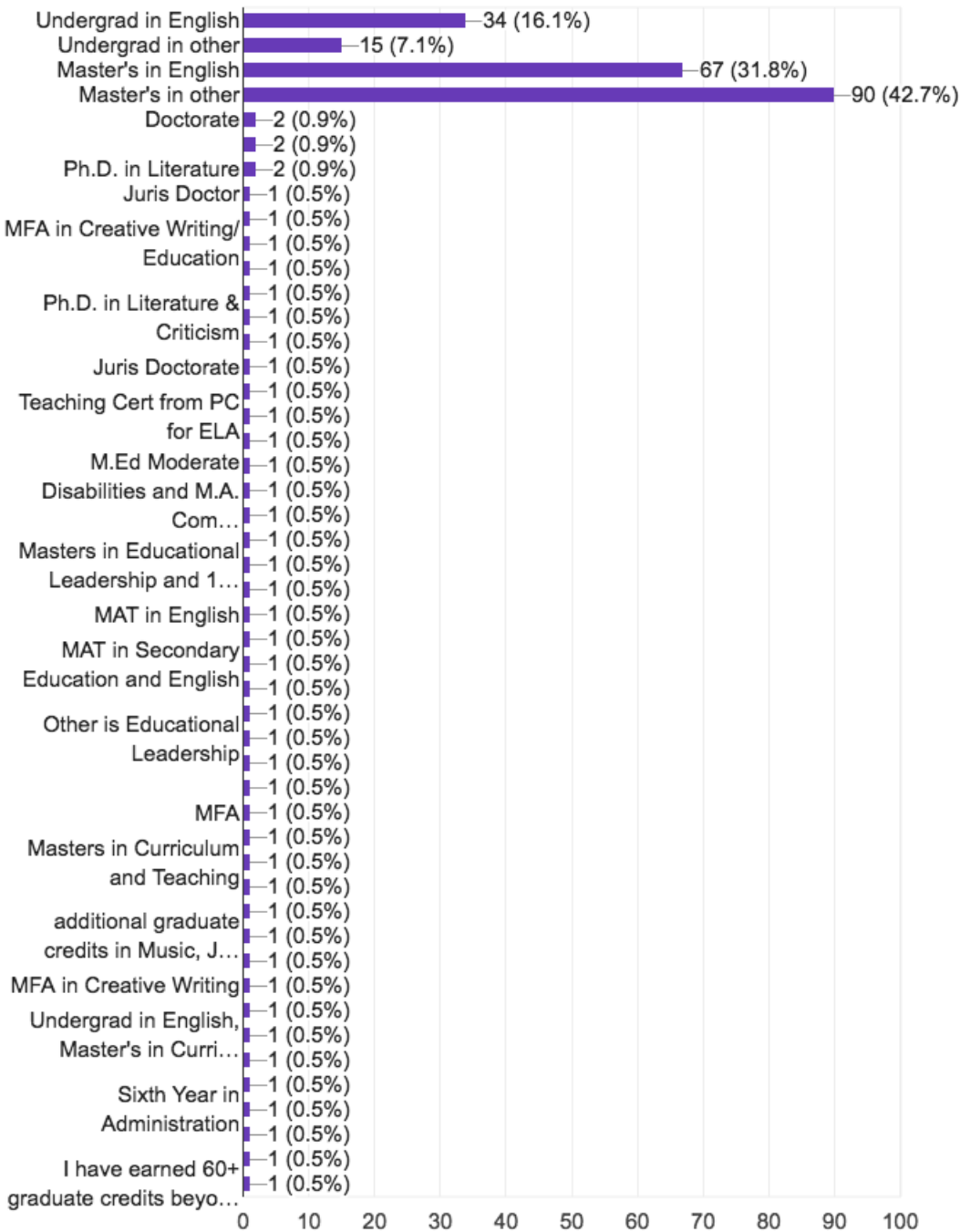
**What type of high school do you teach in?**



■ Public ■ Private ■ Charter

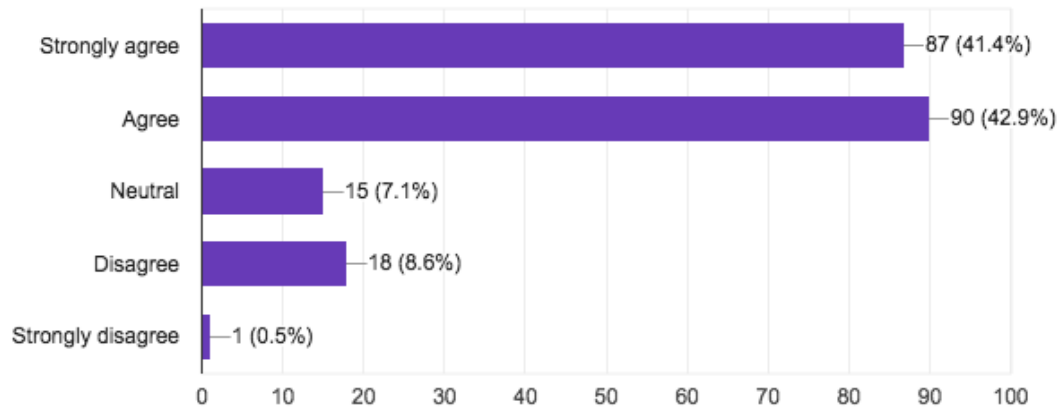
## What is the highest degree you have obtained?

211 responses



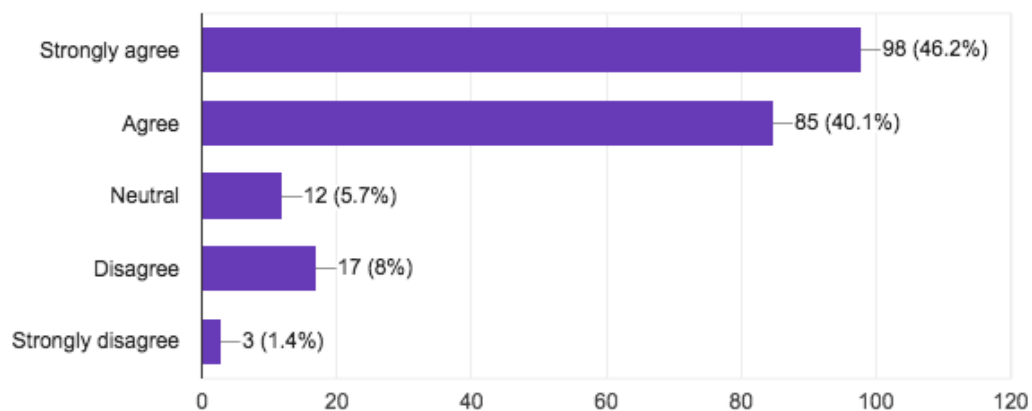
## I feel that I have a great deal of latitude in selecting literature for my classes

210 responses



## I have the autonomy to pick and choose among books that are available in our department

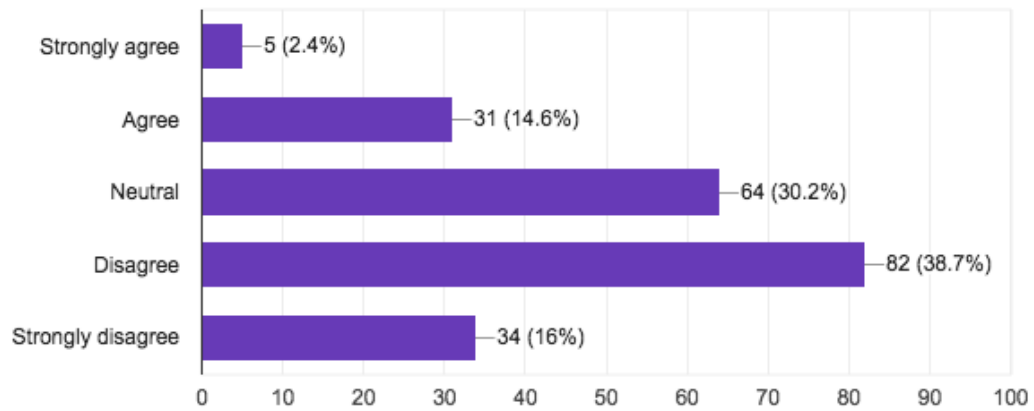
212 responses





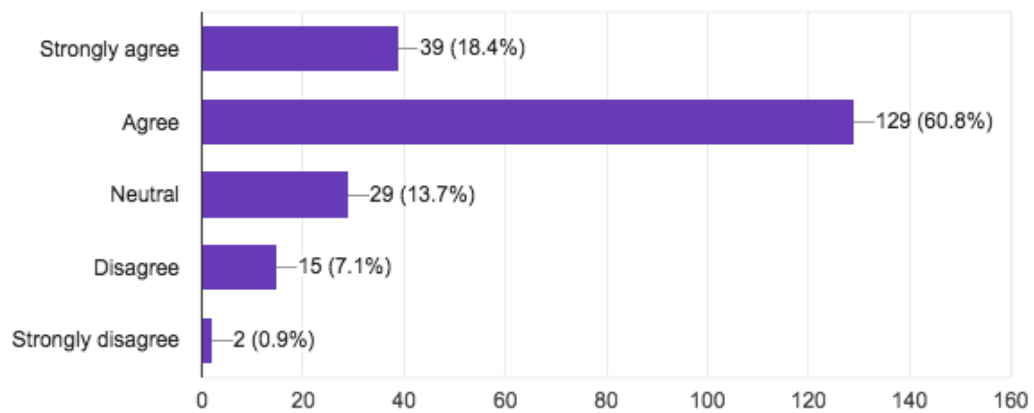
## The thoughts/feelings of parents influence the literature I select

212 responses



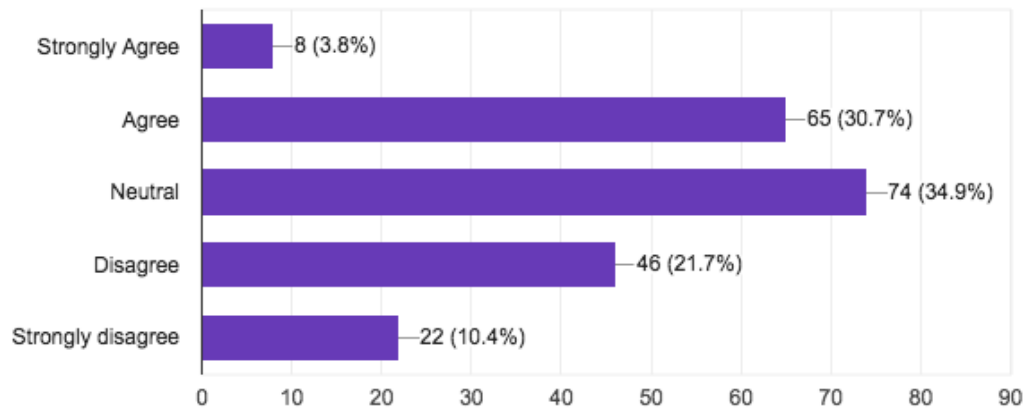
## The thoughts/feelings of students influence the literature I select

212 responses



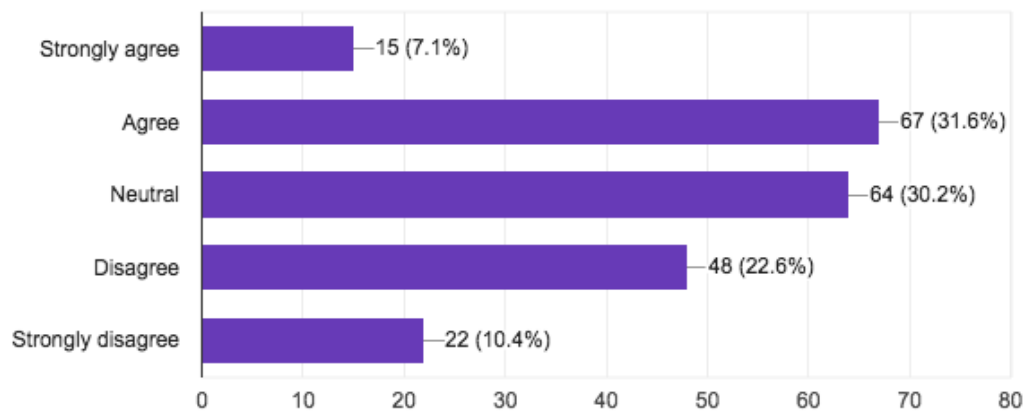
### The thoughts/feelings of the community influence the literature I select

212 responses



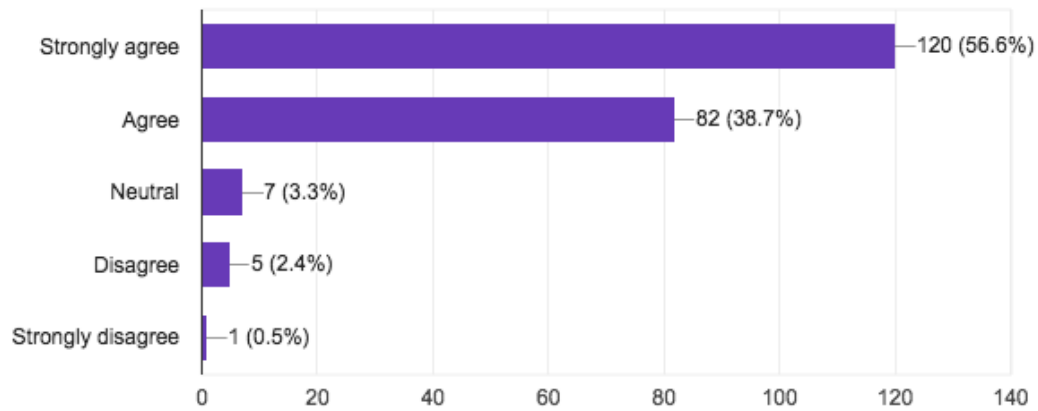
### The thoughts/feelings of the administration influence the literature I select

212 responses



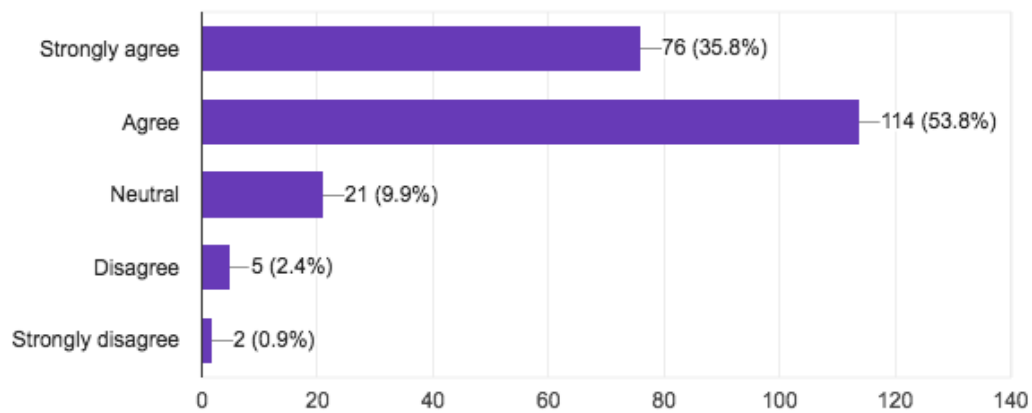
## I am comfortable with teaching the texts in our current curriculum

212 responses



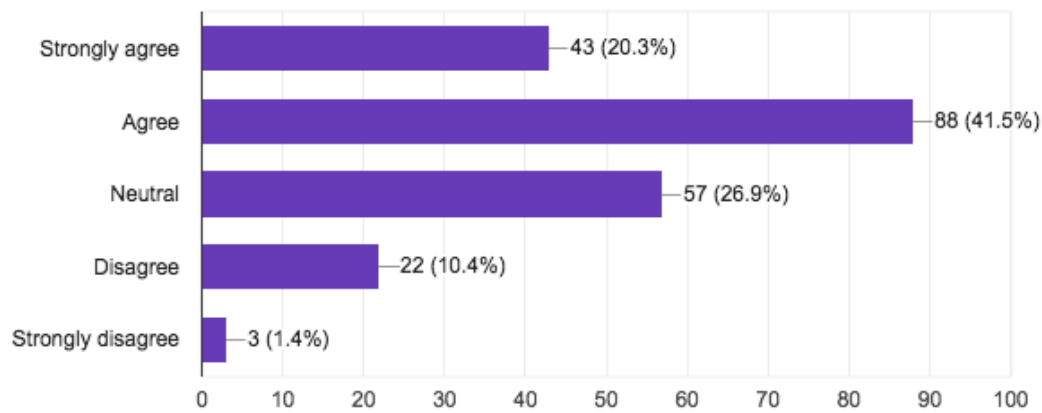
## I would define our current English curriculum as academically challenging

212 responses



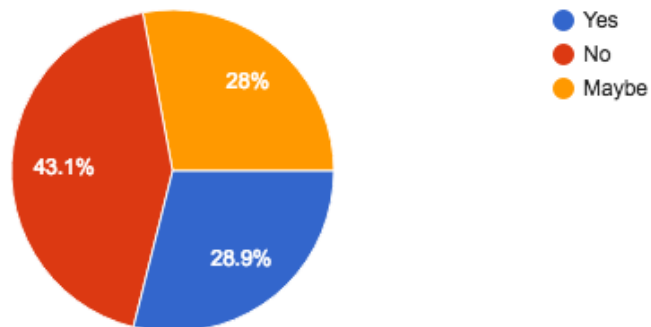
## Literature selection for high school English curriculum should be improved

212 responses



## Are you interested in completing an in-person, 30 minute interview?

211 responses



## Appendix D: Sample Consent Forms

### INFORMED CONSENT SURVEY FORM

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT ENTITLED:

The Factors that Influence the Selection of Literature in a High School English Language Arts (ELA) Curriculum

Principal Investigator(s): Maura Geoghegan

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

You are invited to take part in a research study examining the factors that influence literature selection in a high school English curriculum. You have been asked to be in this study because we are particularly interested in the thoughts of high school English teachers that play a part in designing curriculum.

Procedures: Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete one survey. I will also be conducting interviews, but you may participate in just the survey and decline the interview if you feel uncomfortable or do not have the time for an interview. The survey contains simple questions about the factors that may influence literature selection using a Likert scale of agree, neutral, and disagree answers. The interview contains questions that are more in-depth and ask participants to elaborate more on their responses from the survey. The survey will take approximately 5-10 minutes and the interview will take approximately 30 minutes. Completing the survey portion does not mean that you are agreeing to complete the interview portion.

Benefits: This study may be of no direct benefit to you, but it will improve our knowledge of how literature is selected and why certain texts get excluded from high school English curricula. The questionnaires may help you to be more aware of the reasons for selecting or excluding literature. They will give you a chance to reflect on how they have been selecting literature and if they need to make any changes.

Potential Risks: There are no inherent physical risks in the procedures themselves, and it is not anticipated that participants will experience risks in completing the survey or interview. Participants will not be exposed to any more risk of harm or discomfort than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Occasionally, an individual may be more aware of conflicts in terms of curricular selection. Participants may also feel awkward or uncomfortable with sharing their exact thoughts with me. If this is the case, you are free to discontinue completing the surveys at any time and may withdraw from the interview at any time.

Confidentiality: The information from the surveys will be used for research purposes only. Any records with your name, including this informed consent form, will be stored separately from your

responses. All data collected in this study will be kept on a password protected flash drive. I will also be using my password protected lap top to type up documents relating to this research. The researchers will keep your participation confidential - your name will not be used in any reports or publications of this study and only aggregated findings will be shared in presentations or publications of this study. You will be assigned a pseudonym (of your choosing, if you would prefer) that will be used to share your data in the research without revealing your identity.

Freedom of Choice to Participate: You are free (1) to decide whether or not to participate, (2) to skip questions and (3) to withdraw from the study at any time. A decision not to participate will not adversely affect any interactions with the investigator or any representative/employee of Assumption College.

Questions: Before you sign this form, please ask any questions on any part of this study that is unclear to you. You may take as much time as necessary to think this over. At any point in the study, you may question the Principal Investigator about the study (Maura Geoghegan, 508-468-7035, [mgeoghegan13@gmail.com](mailto:mgeoghegan13@gmail.com)) or the faculty advisor (Cathleen Stutz, [cstutz@assumption.edu](mailto:cstutz@assumption.edu)). In addition, you are free to contact the Institutional Review Board Chair about any concerns (Sarah Cavanagh, 508-767-7148, [irb@assumption.edu](mailto:irb@assumption.edu)).

Consent: This project has been explained to me to my satisfaction and in language I can understand, and I have received a copy of this consent form. I understand what my participation will involve and I agree to take part in this project under the terms of this agreement. I understand that I am not giving up my legal rights by signing this form. I also certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

Type your name below to electronically agree to participate:

Name:

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator/Designee Obtaining Informed Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## INFORMED CONSENT INTERVIEW FORM

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT ENTITLED:

The Factors that Influence the Selection of Literature in a High School English Language Arts (ELA) Curriculum

Principal Investigator(s): Maura Geoghegan

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

You are invited to take part in a research study examining the factors that influence literature selection in a high school English curriculum. You have been asked to be in this study because we are particularly interested in the thoughts of high school English teachers/administrators that play a part in designing curriculum.

Procedures: Your participation is completely voluntary. If you have completed the survey questions, then it is not required that you also take part in the interview portion. You may participate in just the survey and decline the interview if you feel uncomfortable or do not have the time for an interview. The interview contains questions that are more in-depth and ask participants to elaborate more on their responses from the survey. The survey will take approximately 5-10 minutes and the interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

Benefits: This study may be of no direct benefit to you, but it will improve our knowledge of how literature is selected and why certain texts get excluded from high school English curricula. The questionnaires may help you to be more aware of the reasons for selecting or excluding literature. They will give you a chance to reflect on how they have been selecting literature and if they need to make any changes.

Potential Risks: There are no inherent physical risks in the procedures themselves, and it is not anticipated that participants will experience risks in completing the survey or interview. Participants will not be exposed to any more risk of harm or discomfort than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Occasionally, an individual may be more aware of conflicts in terms of curricular selection. Participants may also feel awkward or uncomfortable with sharing their exact thoughts with me. If this is the case, you are free to discontinue completing the surveys at any time and may withdraw from the interview at any time.

Confidentiality: The information from the surveys will be used for research purposes only. Any records with your name, including this informed consent form, will be stored separately from your responses. All data collected in this study will be kept on a password protected flash drive. I will also be using my password protected lap top to type up documents relating to this research. The researchers will keep your participation confidential - your name will not be used in any reports or publications of this study and only aggregated findings will be shared in presentations or

publications of this study. You will be assigned a pseudonym (of your choosing, if you would prefer) that will be used to share your data in the research without revealing your identity.

Freedom of Choice to Participate: You are free (1) to decide whether or not to participate, (2) to skip questions and (3) to withdraw from the study at any time. A decision not to participate will not adversely affect any interactions with the investigator or any representative/employee of Assumption College.

Questions: Before you sign this form, please ask any questions on any part of this study that is unclear to you. You may take as much time as necessary to think this over. At any point in the study, you may question the Principal Investigator about the study (Maura Geoghegan, 508-468-7035, [mgeoghegan13@gmail.com](mailto:mgeoghegan13@gmail.com)) or the faculty advisor (Cathleen Stutz, [cstutz@assumption.edu](mailto:cstutz@assumption.edu)). In addition, you are free to contact the Institutional Review Board Chair about any concerns (Sarah Cavanagh, 508-767-7148, [irb@assumption.edu](mailto:irb@assumption.edu)).

Consent: This project has been explained to me to my satisfaction and in language I can understand, and I have received a copy of this consent form. I understand what my participation will involve and I agree to take part in this project under the terms of this agreement. I understand that I am not giving up my legal rights by signing this form. I also certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

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Printed Name of Participant

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Signature of Investigator/Designee Obtaining Informed Consent

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Date



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