

**Using young adult literature to explore
the causes and impact of teen violence**

by

Jill Ellen Hathaway

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Program of Study Committee:
Donna Niday, Major Professor
Amy Slagell
Susan Yager

Iowa State University

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Abstract

This project addresses the use of young adult literature in the classroom to teach about teen violence. The research questions addressed are:

1. How is violence depicted in young adult literature from post-Columbine (1999) to present day (2009)?
2. How does young adult literature attempt to inform teens about the causes, effects, and warning signs of violence?
3. How do real students respond to the causes, effects, and warning signs of teen violence in young adult literature?

The study was conducted in a class of 10th grade Honors English students, who formed six literature circles to read six recent young adult books that addressed teen violence. A variety of qualitative data was collected, including interviews, journal entries, essays, and group presentations. The two major findings were that students could identify causes, warning signs, and effects of teen violence in their books, and they said they now recognize the hazards of bullying.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I distinctly recall where I was when I learned of the Columbine shootings in 1999. As people all over the country watched the disturbing footage of high school teenagers clutching each other and crying over their lost friends, I ingested the news from my freshman college dorm room.

At the time, I related to the news as a student would. The thought that such a tragedy could happen in America was terrifying to me, and I wondered what possibly could have pushed Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris to commit such a heinous crime. My heart broke for parents, teachers, students, and the rest of the community.

Now, as a high school teacher, I view the calamity (and similar school shootings that have happened since) from a different perspective. I understand that there is a real possibility of extreme violence occurring in my school, despite the illusion that our school environment is safe and accommodating to all students. The reality is that violence is always a moment from happening, whether it's another school shooting, a fight, rape, or suicide.

Administrators, counselors, and teachers today must accept the possibility of violence and strive to recognize warning signs in order to take preventive measures against violent activity. Often students who are experiencing trauma that could lead to violent actions display unusual behavior. They may act out, write aggressive stories, or draw sadistic pictures. They may joke or hint about their destructive intentions. An example of this can be found in the disturbing plays written by Seung-Hui Cho, who attacked students and teachers at Virginia Tech in 2007. According to an ABC News article, a professor who worked with Seung-Hui, Lucinda Roy, became so concerned about the threatening compositions that she

notified authorities (Tapper). If only someone had been able to get Seung-Hui psychiatric help, the tragedy may have been avoided.

If those surrounding a disturbed individual can recognize the warning signs, a greater chance exists of getting that person help. In addition to adults in a school setting, other students can play a crucial part in identifying troubled individuals. Ron Avi Astor, a professor of social work at the University of Southern California, has said that, in the case of most school shootings, large groups of students know about the event beforehand (Pytel). If we can educate and encourage students to be on the lookout for depressed and psychologically disturbed individuals, I believe we can prevent many acts of violence – not only school shootings, but violence against the self as well.

One way to educate our children is through literature. There have been many books addressing school violence released since Columbine. Books that address issues such as cutting, rape, suicide, and shootings tend to be of high interest to high school students because they are subjects that students are familiar with and are taboo enough that many people don't discuss them; the students read books to learn about these issues.

For instance, books like *Shooter*, *Nineteen Minutes*, and *Give a Boy a Gun* explore the causes and impact of bullying and the resulting violence. All of these books are written using interviews, police reports, diary entries, suicide notes, and news articles to narrate the action. In this way, students can see that there are a variety of viewpoints on the issue. These books show that there are usually multiple instances of bullying that lead the perpetrator to feel helpless and desperate to take control of his life.

In my profession, I see bullying every day, and I know what a huge impact it has on children. Incidents that happen in high school leave scars and change people's lives. The

intense, stifled environment of high school leaves no room for escape for children who feel trapped and alone. It is my hope that, through the use of young adult literature, teachers can encourage feelings of empathy for students who are normally picked on and stem bullying before it leads to irreparable damage.

I wish to know whether young adult literature can be used to deepen teenagers' understanding about the causes and impact of violence. Many of the authors of these books conducted extensive research before writing these novels. For instance, in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the deceased protagonist (a high school girl who ends her life and leaves cassette tapes behind to explain her pain) demonstrates many traditional signs of withdrawal and depression. She changes her appearance, her grades drop, and she begins giving away cherished possessions. If I can use literature in my classroom to educate my students about how to identify students in crisis, I believe they can become strong advocates and supporters of one another.

Because bullying is so prevalent, students need to see its causes and consequences. Literature is a powerful educational tool to allow people to experience the emotions and perspectives of others. In this way, literature can be used to help build empathy in teens for each other and possibly even deter them from making poor choices.

To learn more about the connection among students, young adult literature, and violence, I propose the following research questions:

1. How is violence depicted in young adult literature from post-Columbine (1999) to the present day (2009)?
2. How does young adult literature attempt to inform teens about the causes, effects, and warning signs of violence?
3. How do real students respond to the causes, effects, and warning signs of teen violence in young adult literature?

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

One of literature's primary functions is to explore real life issues. Teachers often use young adult literature, commonly abbreviated as YA literature, to broach relevant topics with their students. This chapter will explore YA literature's definition, as well as examine the appropriateness of violence, such as school shootings and suicide, in YA literature and also analyze the causes, impact, and warning signs of teen violence. Finally, the chapter will conclude with the studies of educators who have successfully taught about social issues through YA literature.

Specifically, the research questions explored here are as follows:

1. How is violence depicted in YA literature from post-Columbine (1999) to the present day (2009)?
2. How does YA literature attempt to inform teens about the causes, warning signs, and impact of violence?
3. How do real students respond to the causes, effects, and warning signs of teen violence in young adult literature?

Definition of YA Literature

YA literature, as defined by Beach and Marshall, is "literature written for and marketed to young adults." Other characteristics include (but are not limited to) the following: a teenage (or young adult) protagonist, first person perspective, adult characters in the background, a limited number of characters, a compressed time span and familiar setting, current slang, detailed descriptions of appearance and dress, positive resolution, few subplots, and an approximate length of 125 to 250 pages (Beach and Marshall).

Trends in Young Adult Literature

Sales of YA novels have exploded in recent years. In a 2007 article, Cecilia Goodnow describes the boom in YA books as “one of the most fertile periods in the history of young adult literature” <<http://seattlepi.com>>. As the YA market expands, so does the selection of books. Goodnow reports “a new strain of sophistication and literary heft as publishers cater to the older end of the spectrum with books that straddle the adult and teen markets.”

An article about the 2008 Young Adult Literature Symposium reflects that, though the economy is struggling, “young adult literature remains a strong draw” (Kuenn 58). More than 600 educators and librarians gathered to celebrate the literature that, according to one attendee, “touches readers in very real ways.”

YA books are exploring serious issues such as sexuality, substance abuse, and violence. For instance, *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser tells the story of two boys who plan to get revenge on a bully at school by shooting him. The main character in Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Twisted* has such a hard time at school and at home that he contemplates suicide, going so far as to stick a gun in his mouth. In Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why*, a boy learns the reasons why one of his classmates ended her life. This trend of YA literature toward portrayal of questionable actions provokes the question of whether such literature is helpful or a hindrance.

This shift toward dark, controversial content is reflected in an article entitled “YA Lit and the Deathly Fellows” in *Horn Book Magazine*. In the article, Patty Campbell, a young adult literature specialist, explores numerous books that have recently been released that feature “deathly fellows,” or dead people. Campbell relates that, in the two years preceding

the article's publication, she counted more than twenty-five novels in which "the narrator is dead or in the process of dying, or other dead characters have speaking parts" (357).

Campbell contends that the trend of exploring mortality began with Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* in 2002. This novel is narrated by a deceased girl who tells her story from her place in heaven. Campbell counts Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, Chris Crutcher's *The Sledding Hill*, Gary Soto's *The Afterlife*, Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and Gabrielle Zevin's *Elsewhere* as books that follow in this tradition.

Throughout the article, Campbell grapples with the reason so many recent address the subject of mortality. She wonders if the YA authors are exploring spirituality or if the serious topic reflects our "perilous times" (361). Ultimately, she decides that the authors have simply found a new way to tap into adolescent angst. She quotes YA critic Jonathan Hunt, who says that "the dead narrator gives the narrative a sense of immediacy that is so characteristic of young adult fiction, but at the same time allows for a degree of reflection and self-awareness that would probably otherwise seem jarring for a young adult narrator" (361). Campbell concludes that teachers and parents shouldn't worry about this morbid fascination with death; it only puts "trivial teen difficulties in perspective and make[s] every minute of life seem even sweeter" (361).

YA novels have examined more serious issues in recent years. Not only are they investigating mortality, but they also show what happens when teens cause death through violence. This is something that makes adults question whether such issues are appropriate for teens to read.

The Appropriateness of Violence in Young Adult Literature

With this wave of violent young adult novels, parents and teachers wonder whether it is appropriate for teenagers to read such material. Mike Klaassen recently addressed this issue on the website Helium.com in an article entitled “Violence in Young Adult Fiction: Acceptable, Beneficial, or Inexcusable?” Klaassen contends that the subject matter is not the critical factor in determining whether a book is suitable for teenagers; rather, the key is the way in which the violence is handled.

Klaassen, a YA novelist, says he employs the devices of action and violence to entice reluctant male readers. However, he grapples with the questions of how much violence is too much and whether violence in fiction can propagate violence in real life. He ultimately decided that violence could be portrayed in young adult literature but must avoid “trivializ[ing] serious subjects or encourage[ing] destructive behavior.” <helium.com> Some questions he asked himself regarding each instance of violence are:

- How does the violent scene serve the story?
- Who commits the violence?
- Was the violent act intentional or accidental?
- What was the character’s motivation?
- Was the act malicious or cruel?
- Was it in self-defense?
- Did the offending character express remorse?
- Did the violent character suffer the consequences, or was he rewarded?
- Was death or injury presented as a trivial event? Or tragic?

- Were alternative courses of action considered?
- Did the victim's behavior contribute to his own demise?
- Did the character actually commit the violence, or just imagine it? <helium.com>

If Klaassen can answer these questions and determine that a violent scene is being handled appropriately, he includes it in his novel. He believes that he has a responsibility to handle violence in a way that is “appropriate within the context in which the violence occurs.” <helium.com>

Chris Crowe, an author and former president of ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents), explores this question of appropriateness in his article “The Problem of Young Adult Literature” published in *The English Journal*. He asserts that opponents of YA literature think the books are bad because they are not classics and they “corrupt the young” (46). He cites Marianne Jennings, who said that books like *The Pigman* are “trash that plants the destructive seeds of violence, theft, and sexual perversion in the still malleable minds of children” (48). He rebuts these claims by reasoning that some YA books are brilliant, while others are lousy, just as with any genre of books. Likewise, some YA novels address bleak issues, while others don't. Crowe cites several books that take hard situations and illustrate growth in the main character, like *Whirligig* by Paul Fleischman, in which a boy accidentally kills a girl while drunk driving but grows into a thoughtful young man trying to honor her memory.

Crowe argues that the benefits of young adult books outweigh the possible negatives: they can inspire reluctant readers to enjoy literature, and they promote critical thinking skills.

If teachers and parents can get unenthusiastic readers to connect with a book, YA literature has served its purpose.

School Shootings in Life

If educators want to teach YA literature because it can inform students about social issues in real life, they must be sure that the books are realistic. For example, numerous books—including *Shooter*, *Give a Boy a Gun*, and *Nineteen Minutes*—were published about school shootings after the incident at Columbine High School in 1999. The circumstances surrounding that tragic event provides information about the causes of violence, which teachers can use in classroom discussions to promote a dialogue about bullying and gun violence.

The book *Comprehending Columbine* by Ralph W. Larkin delves into the peer structure at Columbine High and studies the instigators of the tragedy, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. Larkin describes a group of outcast students at Columbine, including the shooters, as joining together for protection against the ridicule thrust upon them by “the jocks.” The outcast group was “at the bottom of the social structure and such antipathy was directed toward them” (81). Later in the book, Larkin describes many Columbine students as unsurprised by the shooting because of the level of harassment and bullying that occurred daily in the halls.

One girl Larkin interviewed described the harassment as bullies pushing or shoving other students, throwing food at them, or even pouring baby oil on the floor and physically tossing the less popular students down the hall to see how far they would slide. The bullies referred to this as “bowling.” The administrators acknowledged and stopped the practice only when one girl broke her arm (89). Another outcast describes getting death threats in his

locker on a near daily basis and being assaulted by glass bottles thrown from moving cars as he walked home from school (91). Dylan Klebold, one of the shooters, self-recorded an incident of abuse on videotape, in which a group of football players elbow him as they pass through the hallway (90-91).

Larkin's research on the other shooter, Eric Harris, shows that he was a normal teenage boy on the exterior, and the Harris family were "good neighbors" and "an ideal, loving" family (123). One of Eric's old friends reported how shocked he was to hear about the Columbine shooting. In videos (shot by Dylan Klebold), Eric spoke of "school, girls, and cars," normal teen concerns (123). Since his father was in the military, he was forced to move around a lot and start out over and over again at "the bottom of the social structure" (124).

Before the shooting, a psychologist diagnosed Eric as obsessive-compulsive, but afterwards, another psychologist disagreed and identified him as a psychopath. It was discovered, two years after the shooting, that Harris and Klebold had allegedly written violent threats and were building pipe bombs. Around this time, Harris started a hit list of boys who had harassed him and girls who had turned him down for dates (127). He even took a pipe bomb to work to show to his colleagues (129). These warning signs indicated that violence could be imminent.

Clues show that, while Eric Harris may have been the visionary of the tragedy, Dylan Klebold was the willing follower. Early in his education, Dylan was placed in a talented and gifted program. This may have separated him from the majority of children from the very beginning, making it more difficult for him to fit in. It is Larkin's opinion that Dylan's identity was confusing to him, as his parents were of different religious backgrounds, one of

which was Judaism, a religion publicly reviled by his best friend, Eric (138). Teachers saw him as unattractive and rejected by his peers (139). All of this confusion about his identity is possibly what led him to construct the personality of “badass outlaw” (141).

In a more recent book, *Columbine*, journalist Dave Cullen presents another view of the Columbine incident and the shooters. Cullen touts his book as debunking lies about Columbine, including that one of the causes for the shooting was the bullying that Eric and Dylan Klebold suffered.

Cullen disagrees with Larkin on the boys being “outcasts,” and he portrays the boys as having many friends and girlfriends. Though Cullen’s bibliography is extensive, he uses a narrative structure that allows him to recreate the shooters’ thoughts. He claims to base these on journal entries, but he does not cite (within the book) where he got his information.

In an online review of *Columbine*, Larkin accuses Cullen of using only details that further his thesis (that the boys were bullies and not victims) and dismissing the authorities and society from any responsibility in the tragedy.

Despite the controversy surrounding the causes of the Columbine shooting, one can reasonably assume that both authors are partly correct. Obviously, the boys had some mental problems that allowed them to commit the heinous crime. Larkin presents evidence that the boys were indeed bullied. These factors, combined, probably contributed to the shooters’ decisions to retaliate against their classmates.

School Shootings in Literature

Since the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, several novels have been written based on school shootings. Like typical Americans, the authors tried to make sense of the heinous act of school violence. Many of these books use the events of the Columbine

shooting to add realism to their novels. By exploring the actual events that inspired this literature, teachers can better understand how to use it in an educational setting.

If educators wish to use literature to explore the causes and effects of school violence, they must carefully select pieces that accurately reflect reality. The selection of books about school shootings is wide, with the following titles that have been published since 1999: *Give a Boy a Gun*, *Nineteen Minutes*, *After*, *Hey Nostradamus!*, *Project X*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, *Shooter*, and *The Hour I First Believed*.

One way to analyze whether literature echoes real life incidents is by looking at the way authors research their topics before writing and how well they translate their findings into their books. Jodi Picoult conducted extensive research for her novel, *Nineteen Minutes*, about a young man who doesn't fit in and wreaks havoc on his hometown by committing a horrific school shooting. Picoult says she was drawn to the topic as a parent who saw her own children have trouble assimilating with others. She conducted research for the book by contacting the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, which had investigated the Columbine shootings. By talking to the police officers, she gathered information that was not available to the general public "to get into the mindset of the shooters." Also, she was able to speak with a counselor who had helped Columbine families through their time of grieving.

When Picoult was asked during an interview what surprised her the most during her research, she responded that she was astounded by the fact that authorities told more than one family that their child was the first to die in the Columbine shootings. This was done in an attempt to dissuade the families from imagining their child's terror during the event, but the families spoke with each other, and they realized they had not been told the truth. Picoult notes that the "aberrant characteristics" of a school shooter, as defined by the media, "fit all

teens at some point in their adolescence.” She says, “These kids who resort to violence are not all that different from the one living upstairs in your own house.”

<<http://www.jodipicoult.com>>.

Picoult used this knowledge in composing her novel. She included specific details from the Columbine incident to add verisimilitude to her tale of humiliation and horror. Since the story is told from multiple perspectives, Picoult conveys the experience from the viewpoint of the shooter, his classmates, and his mother. In this way, the reader understands contributing factors to the shooter’s final act of defiance. The fact that Picoult spent so much time researching her portrayal of the shooting makes it worthy to open a dialogue among students, parents, and teachers.

Other authors also carefully researched the topic of school shootings. Todd Strasser combines fiction and nonfiction in *Give a Boy a Gun*. By using a college journalism major to frame the story, Strasser adds a sense of realism to the tale. Throughout the book, at the bottom of each page, he places actual quotes and statistics concerning the topics of guns and violence. For example, he includes an entire chart entitled “Death by Car vs. Death by Gun,” proving that death by firearm is actually almost as likely as death by car (77). He cites important resources at the end of the novel, including magazine articles such as “The Troubled Life of Boys” and “Two Boys and Their Guns.” He also lists pertinent websites such as The Violence Policy Center. The fact that Strasser incorporates so much reality into this fictional world makes the book seem more relevant and immediate to the reader, making it adaptable to the high school classroom.

Jodi Picoult and Todd Strasser are only a couple of the authors who have written about school violence. They conducted extensive research to make their stories realistic.

Other Violence Depicted in YA Literature

School shootings are not the only type of violence depicted in YA literature. Indeed, Judith Franzak and Elizabeth Noll, in their article entitled “Monstrous Acts: Problematizing Violence in Young Adult Literature,” posit that the violence found in YA literature is as “multifaceted” as the violence seen every day on the news (663). Franzak and Noll subscribe to a definition of violence put forth by Van Soest and Bryant, as “any act or situation in which an individual (or individuals) injures another, whether physically or psychologically, directly or indirectly” (663).

Franzak and Noll categorize the violence in YA novels into three groups: individual, institutional, and structural-cultural. The YA novels often depict multiple levels of violence. They describe the first type of violence as “individual,” or the violence “we can see,” that one person visits upon another (663). Examples are fights in the hallway or rape. Almost all of the novels Franzak and Noll present contain this obvious type of violence. Gang violence and an altercation between a boy and a pimp occur in *True Believer* by Virginia Wolff (664). Again, gang violence is seen in Gary Soto’s *Buried Onions* (668). A boy and a girl describe how their father murdered their mother in *When Dad Killed Mom* by Julius Lester (665). In *Monster* by Walter Dean Meyers, a boy is on trial for murder (666). A girl deals with the aftermath of a rape in *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (668). Murder and assault occur in *Tangerine* by Edward Bloor (669). Since “individual” violence can be easily observed, it is the most prevalent type in these YA books.

The second type of violence, described by Franzak and Noll as “institutional,” is the violence committed by an institution like a church or justice system. This level of violence is more complicated and harder to pinpoint in the books. In *True Believer*, the protagonist is

moved from a rowdier class to a more well-behaved one in which everyone gets a textbook; this scene exposes the system public schools have of separating more promising students from less promising ones (664). *Tangerine* also highlights “school policies that privilege some students over others” (669). *Monster* shows the injustice within the judicial system (666).

Franzak and Noll’s last type of violence is “structural-cultural,” meaning that it is the violence accepted as “a natural part of life.” They point out an example of this violence in *Speak* when the rape victim internalizes the guilt from the crime (668). They point out another example in *Buried Onions* in which gang violence shows the link between poverty and violence (668).

By exposing students to books with depictions of individual, institutional, and structural-cultural violence, Franzak and Noll hope “to give adolescent readers access to words that help them understand how violence touches their souls through books and through life” and that their students will “gain a better understanding of [violence] in their own world” (671).

Franzak and Noll present an interesting framework for teachers that teachers may use to present violent YA literature. Students can define the violence in the novels as individual, institutional, or structural-cultural to better understand where they fit in the cycle of violence.

Causes and Impact of Teen Violence

It is crucial to discuss with students the causes and impact of teen violence in order to examine whether literature portrays violence realistically. Just as there are numerous types of violence, many factors could potentially lead someone to commit a violent act. Different

types of violence have different origins. For instance, a teen struggling with depression may be more likely to attempt suicide, while someone who is angry may act out against others.

On a website designed for teens to research health-related issues, Sandra Giddens writes in a March 2009 peer-reviewed article entitled “Suicide”:

Suicide rates among ten- to fourteen-year-olds have nearly doubled in the past few decades. White teenage boys have the highest rate of suicide. Black teenagers are now more than twice as likely to kill themselves as they were twenty years ago. Out of every five people who take their own lives, four are likely to be male. Females are three times more likely to attempt suicide, but males are the ones who complete their attempts. Males tend to use more violent methods, like shooting themselves, than women do. Women might use pills, so, therefore, some can be saved. Recently, many teenage girls who have died by suicide have used violent methods like guns. Gun deaths continue to be on a steady climb. Frighteningly, nearly 60 percent of all suicides in the United States are completed with a gun.

The suicide rate for teen girls has skyrocketed recently, shocking and puzzling experts. Suicide rates among 15- to 19-year-old teen girls have risen 32 percent, based on the most recent data available in 2007. . . . Rates for males in that age group rose too—but only by 9 percent. And the suicide rate for preteen and young teen girls, aged 10 to 14, jumped a staggering 76 percent. (1)

Giddens cites depression as the major cause of suicide. She also points to “family breakdown, sexuality, body imagery (anorexia, bulimia, obesity), and social, school, and peer pressures” as factors that complicate teenage life, possibly leading to teens wishing for a way out (1). Interestingly, she notes that experts warn that public fear of antidepressants may be causing teens not to get the medication they need, ultimately leading to higher suicide rates.

On the same website, Charles Quill writes about how teen violence can stem from anger. He lists common causes of anger, the main one being stress caused by too many commitments (homework, home obligations, school activities). All of these expectations cause pressure to build up in teenagers. Another source of anger can be low self-esteem,

which Quill asserts is “one of the biggest causes of anger among young people today” (Anger and Anger Management 1).

Quill even holds up the Columbine shootings as an example of what can occur when anger gets out of hand:

Sometimes anger in teens escalates into violence. In the most notorious case of school shootings, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold went into their high school in suburban Colorado wielding guns. That morning in 1999, they killed thirteen people before they turned their guns onto themselves. Before the shootings, Harris had started a blog in which he posted information on making explosives and aired threats against his teachers and classmates. He was clearly an angry person, and without having any effective mechanisms to deal with his anger, he and his friend decided to take it out on others and themselves. The Columbine High School tragedy is an extreme example of anger that spins out of control. (1)

Quill emphasizes the importance of learning productive ways to deal with anger. For example, teens might use deep breathing techniques or they might leave a situation until they feel less overwhelmed. They might count to ten to give themselves time to cool off, or they might talk it out.

Both of these articles show how factors like stress can lead to depression and anger, which can ultimately lead to violence against the self or others. Teachers, when teaching literature that contains violence, must highlight these causes so students can identify these factors in their own lives and recognize the potential danger, possibly preventing further violence in our schools.

Warning Signs

Likewise, teachers must educate students about the warning signs of suicide or other types of violence. In “Depression,” published on the same website intended to help teens, Sandra Giddens explores the symptoms of depression, which could lead to suicide. Among

others, warning signs of depression include loss of interest in hobbies and school, oversleeping, lack of personal hygiene, weight loss or gain, crying spells, or suicide attempts (1).

In “When a Loved One Is Suicidal,” Giddens posits that “young people who have attempted suicide exhibit classic warning signs” (1). For instance, the troubled individuals might suggest that they won’t be hurting for much longer or that others will miss them when they’re gone, or they might talk obsessively about death or ways to commit suicide. Others might make an extra effort to get their affairs organized or give away personal belongings. By discussing these signs, teachers may help students be aware of those around them who are depressed. Giddens emphasizes how important it is for someone to help depressed individuals, whether that involves staying with them or reporting the troubling behavior or comments to the authorities. If teachers review this information on warning signs with their students, a life could possibly be saved.

Educators’ Studies of Violence in Young Adult Literature

Teachers have used literature to teach about social issues for many years. C.J. Bott, an educational consultant with thirty years of experience in teaching high school English, believes that students can be educated about relevant issues through literature. She supports this idea in the introduction to her book, *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom*:

Whenever I have wanted to get a point across subtly to my students, I have looked to books dealing with that specific social behavior. Children’s literature and young adult literature have never let me down. . . . These books translate right off the page and into the daily lives of most students. (xvii)

Although Bott refers specifically to bullying as the social issue in this case, the general idea can be carried over to many other issues—drugs, abuse, depression, and violence. In her

book, Bott lists many books that focus on bullying and poises discussion topics for the classroom. Much of the literature that features bullying also depicts teen violence.

One of the books Bott recommends teaching is *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson because of the harassment the main character receives from other students, who believe she is a “snitch.” Bott includes some interesting questions, including, “Andy Evans is a bully. Why does his ‘bad guy’ reputation make him attractive to girls?” (125) This would be an excellent question to raise in a classroom.

Bott also highlights an important quotation from the book which reflects the social dynamic described in Larkin’s study on Columbine High School and represents what happens in many high schools. In *Speak*, Melinda, the protagonist, says, “I’m getting bumped a lot in the halls. A few times my books were accidentally ripped from my arms and pitched to the floor. I try not to dwell on it. It has to go away eventually” (14). This instance closely reflects Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s film of their own hallway abuse. The difference lies in what the victims chose to do as a response. While the victims, in the case of the Columbine shooters, as well as the depicted shooters in *Nineteen Minutes* and *Give a Boy a Gun*, choose to get physical revenge on their attackers, Melinda withdraws and refuses to speak. Teachers could lead discussions contrasting these reactions to violence.

Another book Bott recommends, *Breaking Point* by Alex Flinn, shows the prevalence of bullying that occurs between social classes—namely, rich kids bully poor ones. Bott poses questions to prompt the students to articulate what differentiates bullies and victims (147). Teachers could use this book to explore and discuss socioeconomic differences and their impact on students “fitting in.”

Bott also recommends Chris Crutcher's *Whale Talk* because of the multiple levels of harassment in this book, against people of multicultural backgrounds, women, individuals with disabilities, and people of lower social status. At a school where athletics are valued above all else, students who haven't succeeded at basketball or football get a chance to earn recognition through swimming. This book challenges the stereotype of "athlete as bully" by awarding those who are normally outcast with a higher self-esteem through a sport.

Bott presents a guide to recent young adult literature about bullying and concludes her introduction, "I just happen to believe that literature written specifically for these ages is one of the best anti-bullying programs around" (xviii). These books can stimulate conversation within the classroom about the topic of bullying and can possibly open students' eyes to the effect it has on individuals.

Janet Alsup, an English educator at Purdue University, is another proponent of using young adult literature to help students face difficult issues, such as violence. In "Politicizing Young Adult Literature: Reading Anderson's *Speak* as a Critical Text," she argues that literature can help young adults through a time of "storm and stress" (159). Though she does not claim that reading young adult literature can prevent violence, she asserts "reading literature can be an ethical as well as intellectual process, and as such it can assist adolescents in coping with their adolescent lives" (159). She believes that literature can make students not only critical thinkers but "critical feelers" (159).

Just like Bott, Alsup touts the quality of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, the story of a high school girl in the aftermath of a rape. She encourages teachers to make available books like *Speak*, which treat controversial issues like drinking and rape, thereby "politiciz[ing] their literature classrooms" (162). By encouraging students to read books and

talk about real issues, she says that teachers are helping students to think critically and solve problems, rather than insisting students “be quiet and conform to the status quo” (162).

Alsup points out that students might suggest that Melinda could have gotten help sooner if she had told someone about her problem. Or students might mention that other students could have reached out to her and helped her (163). If students start having conversations like these, they can apply their realizations to situations in real life. In this way, discussing literature becomes a lesson in ethics.

Other books Alsup suggests include Meyers’ *Monster*, Crutcher’s *Whale Talk*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chobsky, and Strasser’s *Give a Boy a Gun*. All these books have violent, yet realistic, themes. These critical texts, in Alsup’s words, don’t “break down into meaningless clichés and predictable plot patterns” (165). They are books that, she suggests, might even “help [students] be better citizens and more empathetic human beings” (166).

Jacqueline Glasgow, an English professor at Ohio University, also believes literature can be used to help students grow in unique ways. In her article “Teaching Social Justice through Young Adult Literature,” published in *The English Journal*, she explores how books can be used to “nurture the prizing of differences in race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and language” (51). She believes “young adult literature provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations” (54). She proposes to foster growth in her students by encouraging them to discover texts that confront their own views of the world. She posits we can do this by adding quality multicultural texts into the curriculum.

Glasgow explains that we must select literature that breaks down stereotypes. She cites Hazel Rochman, who in her book *Against Borders* states that “Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community; not with role models and literal recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others” (19). The specificity of the characters’ stories helps us build empathy for their distinct situations.

Glasgow organized her college Young Adult Literature course around books that cause readers to “question the ways that systems (e.g., race, gender dominance, social class advantage) are implicated in specific actions, events, or situations” (55). The titles she suggests include books which challenge specific stereotypes, including *A Lesson Before Dying* (race stereotypes), *Ella Enchanted* (gender stereotypes), *The Year They Burned the Books* (sexual orientation stereotypes), *The Triumphant Spirit* (religious stereotypes), *Life in the Fat Lane* (stereotypes about overweight persons), *Maniac Magee* (class stereotypes), and *The Pigman* (age stereotypes). The books on her list offer a wide variety of interests and reading levels. At the end of the course, Glasgow asks her students to concentrate on one form of oppression that piqued their awareness. She then pairs her students with a local high school English class. The students work together to prepare PowerPoint presentations focused on the social issues presented in the books. These presentations contain quotations from the novels that portray the students’ understanding of the oppression in the books and the characters’ reactions to it. They also think of metaphors to represent the characters, which they explain during their presentations. The students add images and music that help convey their insights.

Throughout the project, Glasgow asks students to keep cyber journals that explore the theory of social identity development. After each chapter, they fill out an entry and look at “ways that oppression affects the identity development of adolescents as they are socialized into the dominant or subordinate social groups” and “discuss[ed] how adolescent protagonists react to oppression” (56).

Some sample questions Glasgow asked the students are:

- What is the oppression?
- What is the naïve stage? (This is before the character reels against the oppression.)
- Is there evidence of acceptance of the dominant values?
- What events trigger resistance to the identity embedded in the dominant culture?
- Is there evidence of a redefinition of the identity toward just and inclusive possibilities for social life?
- Is there evidence of internalization of the new identity that is committed to working democratically with others? (Glasgow 57)

At the end of the unit, Glasgow asks the students to “highlight passages that showed their ‘best’ discussion of social issues” (56). By studying these journal entries, Glasgow is able to determine how well the students understood the social roles of the main characters. She gives the example of one student, Lynn, who wrote a letter to the character Maggie Pugh in the book *Spite Fences*. Lynn empathizes with Maggie because, as she states in her letter, the character can “face the ones [injustices] that have to do with others more easily than injustices that have been done to myself” (58). From this, Glasgow concludes that “Lynn’s

insight into truth and justice shows her understanding of the cost of social identity development in the main characters” (58).

Another student, Violet, wrote poems in response to the novel *White Lilacs*. Her poem starts and ends with the phrase, “We are all flowers.” From this, Glasgow infers that Violet “responded [to the book] with a message of hope and respect for a more inclusive world” (59).

Glasgow concludes her description of her social justice unit with a metaphor by Beverly Tatum: “As a person ascends a spiral staircase, she may stop and look down at a spot below. When she reaches the next level, she may look down and see the same spot, but the vantage point has changed” (Tatum 12). By helping students reach that next vantage point, Glasgow says that educators can build a society that is more tolerant of different races, genders, ages, religions, and sexual orientations.

Judith Franzak, a professor in the Department of Education at Montana State University, and Elizabeth Noll, a professor in the Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies at the University of New Mexico, also believe in using YA literature to help students cope with the stress of potential violence in their everyday lives. They describe the “double consciousness or psychic dissonance” students go through when facing the violent reality of everyday life (662). They assert that the portrayal of violence in literature has not been sufficiently explored and urge educators to engage students in a dialogue about violence based on quality YA literature (663).

Bott, Alsup, Glasgow, Franzak, and Noll are several examples of the many teachers who assign books with serious, relevant themes. They believe these books can help students become more empathetic and better able to confront life challenges and that teachers must

avoid censoring the materials they use in class and embrace the learning opportunities such books provide.

As this review of literature indicates, the school shootings in literature tend to mirror events in reality. Similarly, literature about self-harm and suicide also reflects the actual causes, warning signs, and effects of real-life issues. Many educators use young adult literature to broach social issues such as teen violence.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I conducted my study in two parts. The first part involved studying recent young adult literature to determine how violence is depicted in young adult literature from post-Columbine (1999) to the present day (2008). Initially, I was also interested in the way gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and social status (popularity) function in the genre.

I examined popular young adult novels from the last ten years. Some, like *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson and *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher, were already being taught at my high school. Other books, such as *Inexcusable* by Chris Lynch and *Cut* by Patricia McCormick, were popular choices for student book projects, of which my students complete four per year throughout their high school career. Additionally, I asked my school librarian for possible titles, and she introduced me to books such as *After* by Francine Prose and *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher.

I organized information about twenty books into a chart that recorded information such as the sex of the protagonists and antagonists, what (if any) role the media played in each story, and whether the narrator was reliable. The amount of information began to feel unwieldy, so I decided to narrow my selection to ten books and focus on the causes, effects, and warning signs of the violence. I decided to let each student select a book from this list to study more in depth.

Each of the books I chose for my study describes some type of violence committed by an adolescent, whether self-harm, date rape, suicide, or a shooting. All the books can be found in the young adult section of any Barnes and Noble, with the exception of Jodi Picoult's novel, *Nineteen Minutes*, in which a boy commits a Columbine-like school

shooting. Picoult seems to straddle the divide between young adult and adult fiction, appealing to teens and their parents alike. Recently, *Nineteen Minutes* was chosen as an Iowa High School Book Award nominee. Since so many of my high school students read Picoult, I decided to include her novel in the study. Ultimately, I decided to eliminate *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold from the list because an older man rather than a teen perpetrates the violence in the novel, and I offered students nine choices.

The second part of my study involved exposing teenagers to these books in order to examine how real students respond to the depiction of causes, effects, and warning signs of violence in young adult literature. I offered a list of ten potential book choices to the students (minus *The Lovely Bones*), who then rated their top three choices. (See Appendix C.) From these, I tried to assign each student one of his or her top three books. I formed the students into literature circles for the following six books: *Breaking Point* by Alex Flinn, *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser, *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult, *Speak* by Anderson, *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Asher, and *Twisted*, also by Anderson. Because I tried to accommodate my students' wishes, the groups varied from two to seven members.

I chose four students (two boys and two girls) at random to interview for more extensive information. I interviewed these students three times during the next three weeks. (See Appendix D for specific interview questions.)

During the unit, I assigned three journal entries of approximately 10-15 minutes each. I asked them questions about the protagonist and the plot, whether any oppression occurred, and about the causes, warning signs, and effects of the violence. (See Table 1 on page 80.)

Finally, I asked the students to individually write final papers on the causes, effects, and warning signs of violence in their books. (See Appendix F for the assignment sheet.)

They used their papers on these three factors when they met and discussed the novels with their literature circles on the last day of the project. I then asked the groups to come to a consensus about the causes, effects, and warning signs in their books. They presented this information to the rest of the class and added to a class chart to compare their book with the other five books. (See Appendix G for the final product.)

Context

For this study, I used my own school district, which is located about ten miles from a Midwestern city. In the 2008-2009 school year, the district served around 1800 students, the highest number ever. Since people move away from the nearby city but still want to be close enough to commute, the community is thriving. A new middle school and relatively new elementary school attract many families to the area.

As the district grows, the faculty is focusing on increasing rigor and relevance in an effort to be competitive with the city schools. Recently, the language arts department decided to create honors level courses for the freshman, sophomore, and junior classes, and those classes began in 2008-2009. I teach the only section of honors level Language Arts 10, and I used this community to test my theory of using violence in young adult literature to teach about the causes, effects, and warning signs of literature.

Subjects

The class consisted of twenty-three students, six males and seventeen females. All of the students were Caucasian except for one African American, one student of Middle Eastern descent, and one student of Asian descent. The students' previous language arts teachers nominated students to be invited to the class, and the school sent letters home to the parents

explaining what the honors level classes would entail. During the few months prior to the study when I worked with these particular students, I judged them to be hardworking, goal-driven, and mature. In the first month of school, we read *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver, and the students shared poignant, thoughtful responses during class discussions. These characteristics contributed to my decision to conduct my research within this group.

Schedule

Early in the third quarter of the school year, the students received permission slips for the book project with one week to return them. The majority of the parents were supportive of the project, and a few even contacted me to express excitement that their child was given this opportunity. One mother decided she would read the same book her son was reading so that she could discuss it with him. The only parent who seemed negative was a father who believed I asked his daughter to begin reading her novel before he signed the permission slip; in reality, she was so eager to begin her book, she started early.

After students returned their permission slips, they began reading their chosen books. They were required to read their books outside of class but were given a few minutes in class on some days when my student teacher finished her lesson early. The students were motivated enough to finish their books within three weeks, while simultaneously reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Throughout the unit, I conducted in-class interviews with four randomly chosen students about once a week for three weeks. Similarly, all students journaled three separate times on their novels, about once a week. Students presented their final group presentations and turned in their final papers about three weeks after the start of the project.

Assessment

On the final day of the project, students met in groups with others who had read the same book. I asked them to list the causes, effects, and warning signs of violence in their books. Then each group presented their lists and added their information to a chart on the board. (See Table 1 on page 80.)

Other assessments I used to gauge student learning include the journal entries and transcripts from student interviews. I also used the final papers the students wrote to find out what they learned about the causes, effects, and warning signs of violence.

Data Collection

The majority of my data collected was qualitative, as students were required to read the books and respond to them individually. I looked at inferences and conclusions the students made to answer my research questions about how violence in young adult literature would be received by actual students.

Case Studies

I selected two boys and two girls randomly from the class to interview about their books. We met three times throughout the unit, and I audio taped each conversation. Following the unit, I transcribed these talks and analyzed them to discover how the students felt and what the students thought about their books. (See Appendix D.)

Student Journals

On three separate occasions throughout the unit, I asked the whole class to journal on topics such as the students' thoughts about different characters and their actions, the themes of the novels, and the way students would behave if they were in the same position as the

characters. (See Appendix E.) I found these journal entries to be useful in determining how real students respond to violence in young adult literature and whether it was possible to use this literature to teach about important social issues.

Final Projects

For the students' final project, I asked them to write a one-to-two page paper exploring the causes, effects, and warning signs in their novel. This was a chance for them to synthesize the information they had gathered over the previous weeks into an organized statement about the cycle and consequences of violence.

My methodology, therefore, consisted of using multiple qualitative sources: interviews, journal entries, essays, and group presentations. Since I monitored student work and discussion, I could analyze the changing attitudes throughout the unit.

Chapter 4: Data and Analysis

The first segment of my project addresses this question: **How is violence depicted in young adult literature from post-Columbine (1999) to the present day (2009)?** To answer this question, I searched for a selection of recent young adult literature that contained elements of violence. I heard of many such books through my students' previous book projects, and I also asked for suggestions from other language arts teachers, as well as the librarian.

I gathered information from twenty of these novels to investigate my first research question. I organized data from ten of these novels into a chart, particularly focusing on the characteristics of the perpetrators and victims of violence, the role of the media, and causes, effects, and warning signs of the violence. However, the amount of information I had collected became unmanageable. Ultimately, I decided to narrow the scope of my project down to ten novels, which I would introduce to my students with the intent of focusing on causes, effects, and warning signs of violence.

My last research question was: How do real students respond to the causes, effects, and warning signs of teen violence in young adult violence? To answer this question, I needed to introduce real students to these books. I organized ten of the books into a list so the students could rate their top three choices. As I assigned the books for the students to read, I tried to take into account their preferences. I formed the students into six different book groups; the students read *Breaking Point* by Alex Flinn, *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser, *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, and *Twisted* by Laurie Halse Anderson.

In the next section, I will summarize and analyze each book and then provide student commentary from their interviews, papers, and class discussion.

***Breaking Point* by Alex Flinn**

Breaking Point explores how far a teen will go to fit in with a peer group. The book begins with a prologue in which the main character, Paul, is locked away in jail. In this way, Flinn starts the tale with the consequences of the main character's actions. The reader is not sure what Paul's offense is, but his deeds were serious enough to condemn him to a jail sentence. A curious passage at the end of the prologue leaves the reader wondering what exactly Paul did. . . and with whom:

Some people say age doesn't matter. I should have paid more for what I did, even though I was only fifteen.

Maybe they're right. But they don't know what I've paid—inside my head, where it matters.

And doing the right thing isn't always easy. Maybe it's just been too long since they were in high school. Maybe they don't remember what it was like.

Or maybe they didn't going to school with someone like Charlie Good. (i)

Charlie Good is, as we soon learn, a very negative influence.

When Paul starts school at Gate-Brickell, a wealthy Christian school, he is vulnerable and doesn't fit in. When his parents split up years before, he chose to stay at home with his mother. He has been home-schooled ever since, and his only communication with the outside world has been through Internet chat rooms. When his new classmates start teasing him, he has no one to turn to, besides his other "misfit" friend, Binky. The other kids harass him: they phone him and whisper "faggot"; they slap lewd signs on his back at school; they trash his locker and change the locks.

However, Paul sees that his situation could be infinitely worse when he looks at another social outcast, David Blanco, the son of a lunch lady and a janitor. The bullies hang a picture of an obese naked woman and write “Blanco’s Mom” across the stomach. After David lets his dog defecate near some of the athletic fields, his dog’s body is found decapitated, a nearby note reading, “Should have scooped” (46). The other students’ reactions are troubling, ranging from, “Cool,” to “Who cares?” to “Had it coming” (47). These comments foreshadow the apathy the other students show when David kills himself by jumping from a bell tower on campus.

Paul’s only hope for escaping this social persecution is through Charlie Good. Charlie offers a certain amount of protection, but only for a price. First, Charlie asks Paul to do small favors for him, such as doing research for a school paper. Paul’s reward for these deeds is Charlie’s so-called friendship. Charlie convinces Paul to take more risks—drinking, smashing mailboxes, and stealing. Even so, Charlie ignores Paul at school. When Binky tells Paul that Charlie did the same thing to David Blanco the year before, Paul refuses to believe her. He is desperate for Charlie to acknowledge their friendship. Finally, when Charlie asks him to sneak into the school to change a grade for him, Paul accepts the challenge. Paul’s prize is acceptance into the popular crowd and a pretty girlfriend (who basically does whatever Charlie tells her to).

When Paul realizes that Charlie has been visiting websites that explain how to make bombs, he is too invested in the friendship to bow out. He is convinced that Charlie is his best friend. Despite an anonymous note he receives advising him to ask Charlie who killed David’s dog, Paul ignores all warnings and continues to hang around Charlie.

Paul even feels disloyal to Charlie when he talks to David Blanco, who is noticeably depressed. If Paul were not so in love with his newfound popularity, he might have picked up on some of the warning signs before David's death. Paul asks David why he doesn't try to be more normal, and David replies that he had tried to fit in with the popular crowd, but "the price was too high" (158). David concludes the conversation by claiming that the teasing wouldn't be for much longer. This was a crucial warning sign of depression and impending suicide that Paul missed.

Days later, Paul looks for David to ask him if he was the one who had sent the anonymous note. He finds David at the top of the clock tower, ready to jump. Paul has a rare moment of clarity, in which he realizes that he could have been David's friend, if only Charlie were not around. He thinks, "This is what Gate [does] to people. It [eats] them alive. It could have eaten me" (176). This comment on the social structure of the school reveals the damage that can be done to those on the bottom. Though Paul tries to talk David out of suicide by saying that David would just be giving the other students what they want, "some excitement on a dull Wednesday," David struggles out of his rescuer's grasp and plunges to his death.

David's death brings Paul closer to Charlie, as Charlie pretends to be the only one to understand Paul's painful experience. Perhaps this drama even leads Paul to give in to Charlie's deadly wish—to bomb the school. Against his better judgment, Paul allows Charlie to talk him into placing a bomb in the ceiling lights in a classroom so that the bomb would go off when someone flicked on the lights. After setting up the bomb, Paul begins to have second thoughts. He tries to warn his friend Binky not to go to her first period class,

but she goes anyway. Luckily, the teacher evacuates her classroom when she realizes it reeks of gasoline.

An interesting scene occurs between Paul and Charlie toward the end of the book. After Paul confesses to the felony and implicates Charlie, Charlie confronts him. Paul realizes that Charlie intends to blame Paul for the crime. In this exchange, Charlie's words make sense in an eerie way:

I heard something then, a low chuckle from the back of his throat. "Without me," he said. "Is that what you'll tell them, Paul? Is that what you tell yourself—that I made you? Charlie Good took your innocent baby hands and made them plant the bomb?"

"You got me to do stuff I'd never have considered." I stared at him, silhouetted in the sun filtered through the Gumbo Limbo trees and our blinds. He said nothing, so I added, "It's true."

"You could have said no."

I started at his words. The pine was stronger, choking me. And something else. The realization that he was right. I could have said no, but I hadn't. No matter what Charlie had done, I could always have said no.

Why hadn't I? Because I'd wanted to be cool for Charlie? No, not just that. Because I'd *wanted* to do it. In that way, I was no different from Charlie. The realization terrified me. (227-228)

This is a turning point for Paul and a learning opportunity for the reader. Although the reader sympathizes with Paul's outsider status, one identifies Paul's bad choices throughout the novel. Discerning readers will perceive earlier in the novel that Paul's willingness to do whatever it takes to be popular will end badly, but those who don't make this prediction will realize the true extent of Paul's guilt at this point in the novel.

The penultimate chapter of the novel takes place in a juvenile detention center. Flinn does not water down his description of this setting; an inmate named Hemp tells Paul he was

raped when he first arrived at the facility. Paul finds out through his lawyer that Charlie set everything up to look as if Paul instigated the crime. When Paul sees Charlie at the courthouse, Charlie grins and tells Paul that he forgives him, which makes Charlie seem almost unbelievably evil. Paul ends up serving two years in the detention center, while Charlie gets off scot-free. One of Flinn's major messages in *Breaking Point* is undeniably that one has to pick friends carefully and be careful to avoid manipulation or peer pressure of any kind.

At the end of the novel, Charlie's mom visits Paul. Her words, the last in the book, are chilling: "You've learned a hard lesson, haven't you, Paul?" (239) The reader must assume that the lesson is that wealth promotes privilege that extends beyond justice. Paul did commit an abominable crime, but his accomplice avoided punishment due to his social status. This lesson is a hard one to learn (not just for Paul, but also for the reader), but it is not necessarily untrue.

This book shows how family dysfunction and susceptibility to peer pressure can lead to destructive choices. It also illustrates how ostracism can lead to depression and possibly suicide. For both forms of violence (the bomb and the suicide), warning signs were evident. The book emphasizes the consequences of the violent actions by showing David's suicide and Paul's jail sentence.

Student Reaction to *Breaking Point*

Two male students chose to read *Breaking Point*. When asked why he chose it, one responded, "It seemed like it had an interesting male character" with whom he would be able to relate. He observed that the cover had a picture of a "dented-in mailbox," so he expected the character was "violent" with "maybe a little built up anger."

Both students who read the book acknowledged that Paul had some problems; his parents had separated after his father's affair, and he was struggling socially at his new school. One student observed that Paul "hates his school for many reasons, but mostly because it illustrates the socioeconomic levels of the students." Because Paul and his mother lived in "a run-down apartment," he felt especially poor when compared with his other classmates.

The other student observed that Paul was "humiliated by some kids that are fighting" and later "meets a boy [Charlie Good] who is said to be trouble," but Paul "can't help but be tempted to join him." His classmate agreed that Paul "has hope when a boy from his school addresses him and offers him his friendship."

Both students saw this friendship as a main source of conflict within the book. One claimed that Paul "does bad things in order to 'fit in' with" the popular crowd. The other agreed that Paul "gives into peer pressure" because he was lonely. He was "paying the price" to get out of his lower social status.

Both students saw evidence of oppression in the book. One boy pointed out that the main character was oppressed and not treated with respect because he is "poor in a rich school." The other student stated that the character David Blanco, the son of a janitor and lunch lady, encountered oppression every day because he was "financially hampered." As a result, the other kids teased him, putting "unpleasant surprises in his locker." The students seemed to agree that most of the oppression in the book was due to socioeconomic differences among the students at the school.

Gender issues also played a role in the novel, according to one of my students. He saw the boys as "the power people in the school." He said the athletes are used to "having all

of the women” and “the women are like property.” So, although the main power system at the school was arranged according to wealth, males always were placed higher than the females, even among the rich.

One of the students noticed a culture of acceptance when it came to the bullying at the school. He said, “The characters in my book don’t really pay attention to the others’ actions. They have the mentality that as long as they aren’t the ones getting picked on, then things are fine. They have gotten used to the way things are at Gate and the way certain people treat others.”

In my students’ eyes, social relationships and acceptance seemed to be the focus in the book. One student observed, “They all want to have someone they can talk to and feel comfortable with. When things don’t go as planned, the characters take risks to become what they want. These include strings of illegal acts and, in one case, suicide.” The other agreed, saying, “The major theme in this book is acceptance. This is what the main character yearns for throughout the book. Acceptance changes his whole perspective of his school, and it changes him from nobody to somebody.” Interestingly, both students viewed social acceptance as a prize to strive for; at the same time, they saw it as the chief cause of problems in the book. Both students agreed that, if it hadn’t been for Charlie Good and his gang urging Paul to do bad things (such as drinking, vandalizing, and stealing), Paul would have ended up in a much better place.

Still, both students agreed that Charlie Good was only a strong influence and not entirely to blame for Paul’s actions. One student stressed that Paul was depressed when he made his poor decisions, and the other pointed out that Paul might have stood up to Charlie if he hadn’t been having such a hard time at home. In his words, “Many dominoes fell before

this big one crashed down [as] a big surprise, and everyone had a part in it.” All of Paul’s problems made him vulnerable to the peer pressure that ultimately landed him in jail.

According to the students, warning signs showed that violence was about to happen. One student pointed out that David Blanco read depressing poetry before he committed suicide and also avoided his peers. One of the students also pointed out that Paul began to enjoy the trouble he was causing, and that was a warning sign that he might go too far.

The students effectively analyzed the causes of violence by articulating the humiliation that Paul and David undergo. They also talked about the warning signs and analyzed the theme of the price of acceptance, feeling the need to fit in at any cost. They targeted Paul’s jail sentence as one of the long-range effects.

Give a Boy a Gun by Todd Strasser

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this book is the format. The narrator is a sophomore journalism major who returns to her hometown after a school shooting to interview witnesses and family members of the involved students. The readers learn at the end of the book that the narrator is the sister of one of the shooters. However, not much is revealed about her life. The book is a mishmash of interviews, instant message transcripts, e-mails, and the perpetrators’ suicide notes. As a result, the reader gets to peek into the lives of everyone involved with the shooting. We get to know the teachers, the principal, the perpetrators’ friends, the perpetrator’s enemies, a perpetrator’s girlfriend, and even—to a limited extent—the perpetrators themselves.

The culture in the Middletown schools becomes apparent as the different characters give accounts of their experiences. Even in middle school, the students are categorized into popular and unpopular groups. After Brendan, one of the shooters, comes to the district in

the middle of the school year, Ryan Clancey, a classmate of Brendan's, says, "I bet three-quarters of the class didn't even know he was there" (26). A teacher at the middle school admits, "No one comes into this school in the middle of the year without some distress" (27). These quotes illustrate how difficult it is for a student to transfer to the district and forge any type of support system.

Emily Kirsch, another student who came to the school in the middle of the year, describes the climate of the middle school:

They [the popular students] got to know us, but nothing changed. Instead, this whole jock and cheerleader and designer name thing just got stronger and stronger. They were like the Sun, and the rest of us were all these little planets stuck in orbits around them. After a while I think a lot of us didn't even want to be in that [popular] crowd. All we wanted was to be left alone. (29)

Emily's words emphasize how revered the popular students at her school are. Her last comment about wanting to be left alone hints at the bullying that takes place.

In high school, life does not get any easier for the unpopular students, including Brendan Lawlor and Gary Searle, the students who end up shooting up the gym in an act of revenge. Gary accepts the rest of the students' insults, calling himself a loser. His friend, Alison, tries to tell him he's not a loser, but he does not believe her. This illustrates how damaging insults in high school can be.

Ryan Clancey tells of the torment the bullies of the school inflicted on the "losers":

Brendan and Gary got picked on. That's a fact. We all did. Little guys; fat guys; skinny, gangly, zit-riddled guys like me. Anyone who wasn't big and strong and on a team got it. You'd even see big guys on the football team push around some of the smaller players. Middletown is big and crowded, and you've got ten dillion [sic] kids in the hall at once. Maybe if it's an all-out, knock-down-drag-out fight, some teacher will notice and try to stop it. But if it's just some big jerk shoving you into a locker, who's gonna see? (37)

The actions of the popular students build a deep animosity in the less popular students, particularly Brendan and Gary. One particular incident, in which a football player named Sam Flach knocks Brendan down during a flag football game, seems to resonate with Brendan, as he targets this character during the shooting. Brendan writes, in an email to Gary:

Sam Flach will die slowly. I will shoot him in one knee, then the other, then a gut shot so he'll have no friggin' doubt where he's going. And he will stare up at me with a fear in his eyes he has never known, and I will put that friggin' barrel right against his forehead and say, "Gee, sorry, Sam," then blow his friggin' brains out. (41)

This email demonstrates the boys' emotions and partly explains their actions, however despicable.

During this football incident, another contributing factor to Brendan's rage is highlighted. He is not only furious at the "jocks" who tease him mercilessly; he is also infuriated by the teachers who stand by and do nothing. In an email to Gary, he relates a story about how a young teacher, Mr. Ellin, reacts after witnessing Sam Flach shoving Brendan in the hall. Mr. Ellin tells Brendan not to take it personally because athletes are "dominant males" who are driven by their genes "to keep the rest of the pack in line" (48). At the end of the e-mail, Brendan vows to shoot Ellin because he tried to excuse Sam's behavior. In Brendan's eyes, Mr. Ellin is complicit with Sam in the bullying.

Brendan's feelings of righteousness and rebellion come through in his suicide note. He relates that the "stupid, ignorant" people in his community teased Brendan and his friends because they didn't understand them (58). He has a special indictment for teachers. He rails against the teachers at his school for not upholding the American ideal that everyone is free to be different. Brendan accuses them of "try[ing] to make [him] conform to [their] narrow-

mind expectations of how [he was] supposed to dress and act” (58). He ends by justifying his actions as payback.

Brendan and Gary’s final act is elaborate. After trapping most of the student body in the gym during a dance, the boys run around, shooting at the ceiling. When the principal tries to stop them by waving his walkie-talkie (to indicate he could contact the police), Brendan shoots and wounds him. Brendan and Gary tie several students and teachers up, including Sam Flach, the football player. Brendan presses a gun against Sam’s head and then kicks him, cracking two ribs. Later, Brendan shoots Sam in both knees, effectively ending his football career.

Despite all their plotting, Brendan and Gary’s plan goes awry. When Brendan and Gary find out that their good friend Allison Findley is at the dance and has witnessed their foul deeds, they begin to argue about whether to let her go. Gary decides to shoot himself rather than deal with the repercussions of their actions, and when a group of boys gets free, they tackle Brendan and beat him mercilessly. He is in a coma at the end of the book.

Gary’s tragic death reminds the reader that no good comes of violence such as this. In adult fiction, the writer is not required to make sure each immoral character gets what he deserves in the end. But many people believe that young adult books should teach a moral lesson. Strasser certainly does this in *Give A Boy a Gun*, illustrating the grim consequences for the boys’ actions.

One especially interesting element in this book is the different perspectives. Brendan blames his teachers for allowing the bullying to occur. The teachers, however, have a chance to defend themselves. Mr. Flanagan, another teacher at Middletown High School, asserts:

A schoolteacher's job is to teach, not to raise children. As far as raising children, I raised my three just fine. They are all good, moral young adults, and two of them own guns, which they use for target shooting and hunting. If you're looking for answers [to what caused the shooting] you're not going to find them in school. Many people around here believe that, at least in this case, the parents were pretty blameless. I'll be honest with you. I don't know what to think about that. And I don't have any answers. (179)

Mr. Flanagan's helplessness in this section highlights the feelings that many in the community expressed after the tragedy. Maybe no one was to blame; maybe everyone was.

In *Give a Boy a Gun*, Strasser's views on gun control become perfectly clear. The reader can almost hear his voice through a girl named Chelsea, who expresses confusion about why semiautomatic weapons are legal:

I read in the newspaper that the kind of guns they had are pretty much the same thing the army uses. They're not made for hunting or target practice. They're just made to kill people. Why in the world are stores allowed to sell them? (181)

Strasser attempts to balance the anti-gun rhetoric by including comments from the principal, a gun rights supporter, but even he is against semiautomatic weapons.

Actual statistics and quotes from real newspapers appear at the bottom of the pages throughout the book; these drive home the message that semiautomatic weapons ought to be banned. For instance, a quote appears at the bottom of page 128 that reads, "In 1999 not a single person was killed flying on an American airline. More than a dozen were killed by guns in schools." This, along with many other facts and charts about guns, adds to the authenticity of the book and emphasizes the urgency of the issue.

The novel concludes with a list of shootings that occurred while Strasser was writing the book from 1999 to 2000. He cites nineteen shootings from that time. Strasser also includes a short message at the end, entitled "Final Thoughts," in which he admits that he

does not have “one simple black-and-white answer to the problem of school violence” (204). He does, however, offer a few suggestions: first, semiautomatic weapons should be banned; second, handgun sales should be restricted; third, children should be taught how to respect those who are different from them; and fourth, students’ non-athletic achievements should be celebrated just as much as sports victories.

This novel is an excellent choice for the classroom. First, the way Strasser mixes media (IM messages, interviews, facts and statistics, and letters) in *Give a Boy a Gun* provides a text that students in the twenty-first century can relate to. The fact that it presents so many different points of view will make for great discussion and encourage students to see events from others’ perspectives. The book exposes many problems in public schools today: bullying, teacher favoritism, and the worship of athletics. Teachers can use this book to prompt students to talk about these issues and offer possible solutions.

Student Reaction to *Give a Boy a Gun*

Three of my students chose to read *Give a Boy a Gun*—two males and one female. In an interview, one of the males said he chose the book because it was about two boys, so he thought he might be able to relate to the book. After he looked at the cover and the back of the book, he guessed that the novel would be about the two boys shooting people who “did bad stuff to them.” He was surprised when he found out that the book was broken into interviews, IM transcripts, and letters, but he liked the format because “it sounds real.”

The student said that the two shooters, Brendan and Gary, fit into the “freak category,” as determined by the football team and popular people’s standards. Another student described Gary as quiet, friendly, and smart. He pointed out that Gary’s parents

divorced when he was young, and ever since then, Gary “kept it all inside,” ultimately leading him to “snap” and shoot up the school and commit suicide.

The female student, in her assessment of Gary, agreed that he was “very smart” and noted that he was “obsessed with video games and the computer.” She was surprised that, though Gary told his mother in his suicide note that everything would be okay, he did not tell his mother that he was sorry for his actions. She compared Gary’s note to Brendan’s, which she described as “aggressive.” She said, “He basically told everyone it was all their fault and that he hoped they felt guilty and that they had to pay for making his life hell.”

She saw bullying as the main conflict in the book, but she saw Gary and Brendan as equally complicit in the violence. She said, “In this story it seems to be someone’s goal to make someone’s life ‘hell.’ Those that get picked on make sure they give them a reason to be beaten up. It’s a battle of equal effort.” In her final paper, she expanded: “Now it seems like you want to get angry at the kids for being a bunch of big bullies but you can’t. You can’t get mad at a student for taking advantage of the opportunity to be cool, get ahead or to be a little cocky.” She admitted that what Brendan and Gary did was wrong, but she claimed that all parties were similarly responsible for the outcome.

The male students, however, seemed to believe that the “popular kids” alone were to blame for the bullying. One said, “The ‘popular’ kids bully and isolate the ‘losers and freaks’ from their group. The populars constantly ridicule and physically abuse the other kids without teachers having the power to stop them.” The other student agreed, “Gary and Brendan are oppressed by the football team because they aren’t ‘cool’ enough, and basically, the football players rule the school.” The boys clearly faulted the popular group for pushing the boys to their breaking point.

One student identified the impact of the violence as not only the physical injuries that the characters suffered but also the precautions the school took after the attack: “The school cracked down on the students after that, using metal detectors and banning backpacks. They also paid more attention to the students and made sure that no one was planning to do that again.” Because of the two boys’ actions, the rest of the student body’s freedom was restricted.

When asked about warning signs, the three students agreed that there were clear indications that Brendan and Gary were up to no good. In his final paper, one of the students listed these:

[Brendan] had been researching a lot of information on guns, and he and Gary actually went to the library and checked out a book on how to make homemade bombs. He and his friends went out into an open pasture one day to test a bomb that they had made, and it was successful. You could easily tell that they were building up to their breaking point because there were instant message chats that were all about violence, and they smoked, drank, and played extremely violent video games.

The other two students also mentioned that joking about violence and showing interest in guns and explosives were clear warning signs that something was wrong.

The students ultimately came away from the novel with interesting reactions. The female student spoke about how she would think differently about what she said and what others said. Her cynical streak emerged, though, when she said at the end of her paper:

Brutally stated, there is no way to prepare, predict, or prevent something like this. You can try, but the conflict will forever be there. High school is insane, and people don’t take the time to consider other people’s feelings. You just go with it. Go with how things have always been, and it’s always been “losers,” “preps,” and “jocks.”

Though her defeatist statement may be depressing to those who seek change, the male students' reactions were more hopeful. One student admitted that "teen violence in America today is a big problem," and he hoped that the book would raise awareness and prevent further tragedies from occurring. The other student identified guns as the leverage that aided Brendan and Gary in their attack; he was grateful for the statistics about guns Strasser provided at the bottom of the pages, and he hoped that semi-automatic and handguns would be banned in the U.S.

The students who read *Give a Boy a Gun* analyzed the politics of high school and how these politics affected those on the lower social rungs. They agreed that Gary and Brendon committed violence because of continual bullying. Warning signs discussed by the students were researching weapons and making practice bombs. Finally, the students identified the effects of the violence as a change in school culture where freedom was restricted.

***Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult**

Perhaps the most notable feature of Jodi Picoult's writing is her narrative structure. By using multiple points of view, she is able to take a controversial subject and shed light on all angles of it. This is certainly true of *Nineteen Minutes*, a book that delves into the Columbine-like tragedy of a school shooting.

Though most YA authors write from a first person perspective, Picoult jumps back and forth from the perspective of Peter Houghton, the shooter; Lacy Houghton, Peter's mother; Alex Cormier, the prospective judge in Peter's case; Josie Cormier, Alex's daughter and an old friend of Peter's; and Patrick Ducharme, the police detective. One of Picoult's strengths lies in developing complicated relationships among her characters. This proves

especially true in this book, as two mothers—Lacy and Alex—who were once close are pitted against each other when Peter takes a gun to shoot his classmates. Peter and Josie’s childhood friendship (and the fact that Peter has a crush on Josie) complicates the situation even more.

Picoult also plays with the concept of time in her novels. The novel starts on the day of the shooting but then jumps back to years before, when Peter and Josie are young. Several scenes also reveal what happens in the days after the shooting, including the trial in which Peter is tried for the murder of ten of his classmates.

The author uses this technique to show the bullying (the main reason that Peter gives for shooting his classmates) that he experiences when he is younger. As early as kindergarten, Peter’s peers torment him because he is shy and keeps to himself. On his first day of school, another boy on the bus calls him a freak and throws his lunchbox out of the window. Josie, his friend, sticks up for him on the playground when others beat him up.

Peter’s teacher tells Lacy, Peter’s mother, that the reason the other kids pick on Peter is because he is “sensitive” and “sweet.” She assures Lacy that she disciplines the other boys when they tease Peter, but warns that punishing the boys has negative consequences for Peter because the boys blame Peter, and that “perpetuates the cycle of violence.” The teacher says that she is “showing Peter how to stand up for himself” and encourages Peter’s mother to do the same (72). Authority figures push Peter to, from an early age, stick up for himself against bullies. Unfortunately, they don’t tell him how.

The bullying worsens during Peter’s middle school and high school years. A particularly awful episode occurs in high school. Peter sends Josie Cormier a love letter, which falls into the hands of the wrong person. The girl who finds the letter forwards it to

everyone, making him the laughingstock of the whole school. When Peter tries to approach Josie during lunch one day, her boyfriend pulls down his pants and underwear in front of the whole student body. This incident seems to be the breaking point for Peter, because not long after, he launches his attack.

Another contributing factor to Peter's actions is his early access to firearms. From the time he is five years old, he knows how to unlock the safe that holds his father's guns. Though Peter's mother is horrified when he takes out a rifle to show his young friend, Josie, Peter's father believes the way to keep Peter safe is to familiarize him with guns and how to use them safely. Since Peter's father had guns in the home and taught Peter how to use them, it was much easier for Peter to acquire the weapons he needed to commit his assault on his classmates.

Peter exhibits many warning signs of distress prior to the shooting. At work, he sets a dumpster on fire. He visits websites like *The Anarchist Cookbook* that teach him how to make Molotov cocktails and timed explosives. He even designs a video game called "Hide-n-Shriek" that enables him to go through a school, shooting at the jocks.

Unfortunately, Peter's home life is strained. His father, a college professor, spends more time pondering mathematical calculations than thinking about his son. Peter's older brother, Joey, treats Peter badly. He is everything that Peter is not; he is better at sports and infinitely more popular. Joey even joins in when Peter's classmates tease him, calling him a "fag" and a "freak" (200).

Peter's mother shows warmer feelings toward Peter, but she turns a blind eye to what he is undergoing. She admits that she continually avoids Peter's room because, as she says, "Sometimes when you start looking [...] you find things you don't really want to see" (175).

When interviewed by a lawyer, she says that she does not monitor Peter's Internet use, and when she enters Peter's room, he closes the Internet browser so she cannot see it. Perhaps, if Peter's mother was more diligent in observing Peter's behavior, she could have helped him.

Picoult expertly shows that the shooter, Peter Houghton, is a person in pain. Peter tells his lawyer, "I was going to kill the person I hated the most. But then I didn't get to do it" (194). He says that the ten people he killed just got in the way of the intended victim. When the lawyer asks who he was trying to kill, Peter responds, "Me" (194).

Many factors contribute to Peter's actions the day he kills his classmates. From his first day of kindergarten, he is mercilessly teased by his peers for being different. His home life is difficult, with a father who would rather be at work, a brother who mocks him, and a mother who ignores his sadness. He is given free rein to indulge in violent websites and video games. Finally, he has easy access to weapons to aid him in his quest for revenge. He shows great interest in weapons and designs a game in which he can shoot fellow students. Picoult shows us that Peter is definitely to blame for his deadly rampage, but she also shows us that a whole host of other conditions are present that made his crime possible.

Student Reaction to *Nineteen Minutes*

Jodi Picoult is a favorite author among my students, so four female students in my class chose *Nineteen Minutes*, a much longer novel than the other options. One of the students, in her first journal entry, expressed how scary teen violence was because "it's hard to know where it comes from and how it starts." She could not imagine how a boy could get so upset he could kill his classmates or how a girl could seem happy on the outside but be depressed on the inside, as occurs in *Nineteen Minutes*.

In early journal entries, the students described the main characters, Peter and Josie. One girl called Peter a “loner” and mentioned that he loved guns because they were something he could talk about with his father. Another student expounded that Peter’s classmates did not like him “basically since he ever started school.” A third student, a very blunt individual, described Peter as “the abnormal geek in high school who has no friends and bottles everything up until he can’t take it anymore.”

The students said that Josie was “popular and pretty and has the perfect stud boyfriend.” Though Josie seemed like she had a perfect life, one student noted that she really was not happy. Another student intuited that Josie was “struggling to accept herself and the life that she has chosen to lead.” As in *Breaking Point* and *Give a Boy a Gun*, acceptance seemed to be a major issue in *Nineteen Minutes*; though Josie had made it in the “popular crowd,” it seemed she had to give up a lot of herself (and her friendship with Peter) to get there.

Peter also struggled with fitting in, and his peers teased him mercilessly. All of my students agreed that Peter was oppressed because of his lower social status. One student explained that Peter’s classmates called him names like “homo.” Another pointed out that the school and his teachers did not help him; they simply told him to “suck it up” and “get tough.” The students all agreed that it was this constant bullying that led Peter to kill ten of his classmates.

Peter’s shooting had long-range results, as one student in particular outlined. First, she pointed out that Peter spread fear throughout the community; parents were afraid to send their children to school. The parents of the dead were grief-stricken, and one devastated mother even killed herself.

Several of the students blamed Peter's parents for his behavior and contended that the parents might have even prevented the massacre. Since he exhibited so many warning signs (the violent video game he designed, his setting fire to the dumpster at work, his isolation), they reasoned that his parents should have seen that he was troubled. One student described Peter's mother as "the kind of mother who would try to be Peter's best friend and not a parent." The students felt that the parents should have tried to get Peter help.

However, the parents were not the only ones to blame. One of my students mentioned a culture that condones bullying, similar to that in *Give a Boy a Gun*. She said, "Sometimes kids knowingly hurt other kids to better their own status. They don't care because they don't know how much they are hurting the other person." If this is true, then taking the time to recognize and celebrate an individual's differences and humanity might help curb the bullying and put a stop to these violent crimes.

The same student observed that Josie "grows by seeing how teen violence is caused." She said that Josie, after seeing that Peter killed his classmates in reaction to the bullying, "wasn't mean to other people" and "questioned her popular status." The student expressed sadness that it took such a "traumatic event" to provoke empathy in Josie.

The students said they grew in numerous ways from reading this book. One student stated that she was "more aware of how bullying can affect some people," vowing to be more sensitive to her peers. Another said she learned about how bullying can "affect someone's emotional state." She was horrified at how acts such as pushing books off someone's desk, calling someone a "homo," "fag," "loser," or "retard," pushing someone into a locker, or excluding someone because they are "different" could push someone to commit such heinous acts.

The last student said she would pay more attention to warning signs. She elaborated: “If you realize someone is depressed enough to want to get violent, and you pay attention to them, they will probably become less depressed and hopefully not commit the violent act they were going to.” She realized she could make a difference in someone’s life.

Students referred to Peter’s loneliness and ostracism as possible causes for the violence. They pointed out possible warning signs: Peter designed a violent video game and set fire to a dumpster at work. One student pointed out a positive effect in that Josie became more empathetic to fellow students.

***Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson**

Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*, published in 1999, has won many awards, including the American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults, the Michael L. Printz Award, the Golden Kite Award for Fiction, and the School Library Best Books of the Year. *Speak* has been taught in classrooms all across America and was made into a movie in 2004 starring Kristen Stewart.

The story is about a high school freshman named Melinda Sordino. The novel is written in first person perspective in a fragile yet sarcastic voice that provokes admiration from the reader. From the first page, the reader experiences the awkwardness and drama of high school. Melinda is miserable as she tries to survive in a toxic social environment. Melinda labels the groups: “Jocks, Country Clubbers, Idiot Savants, Cheerleaders, Human Waste, Eurotrash, Future Fascists of America, Big Hair Chix, the Marthas, Suffering Artists, Thespians, Goths, Shredders” (4). Melinda describes herself as “Outcast” (4).

Melinda’s friends have abandoned her, although the reader doesn’t learn the reason until about twenty pages later. At a pep rally, a girl identifies her as “the one who called the

cops at Kyle Rodgers's party at the end of the summer" (27). Another girl adds that her brother got arrested at the party (28).

Melinda undergoes social torture at school. For instance, in Spanish class, the students learn that "Linda" means "pretty." The kids spend the rest of the class making jokes about Melinda, saying, "No, Melinda no es linda" and calling her "Me-no-linda." Melinda thinks to herself that this "is how terrorists get started, this kind of harmless fun" (41-42). Anderson subtly shows the psychological impact that bullying can have.

Though most of her classmates give Melinda a wide berth, a new girl named Heather befriends her. Heather is a social climber, determined to make as many new friends as possible. She complains to Melinda, ironically mirroring Melinda's own angst:

Why is it so hard to make friends here? Is there something in the water? In my old school I could have gone out for the musical *and* worked on the newspaper *and* chaired the car wash. Here people don't even know I exist. I get squished in the hall and I don't belong anywhere and no one cares. (34)

This speech echoes Melinda's thoughts that it is impossible to fit in unless you are part of a group.

After Heather breaks into the Marthas group, a preppy crowd, Heather decides Melinda is just not cool enough to associate with any longer. Heather breaks the news in the cafeteria in a section of the book that Anderson entitles "Lunch Doom." The reason Heather gives for the end of the friendship is that the two are too different. Heather accuses Melinda of being depressed and needing professional help. Melinda feels this loss acutely:

Up until this very instant, I had never seriously thought of Heather as my one true friend in the world. But now I am desperate to be her pal, her buddy, to giggle with her, to gossip with her. I want her to paint my toenails. (105)

Heather assures Melinda that plenty of people will want to hang out with her once she gets through her “Life Sucks” phase, but right now she’s just too depressing (106).

Melinda’s issues manifest themselves physically. She cannot stop chewing her lips until they are scabbed up and sore. Others make fun of her appearance. One peer says, “She’s creepy. What’s wrong with her lips? It looks like she’s got a disease or something” (45). After this comment, Melinda hides in the bathroom to wash her face “until there is nothing left of it, no eyes, no nose, no mouth” (45). The fact that she tries to erase her mouth foreshadows that she has a secret that she isn’t telling anyone. Even the reader doesn’t know, but might suspect, what Melinda’s secret is.

Melinda hides in her room when her parents fight. She is convinced that she is the only reason they stay together and feels unworthy. During Christmas break, however, her parents almost break through to her when they give her a sketchpad with some charcoal pencils and say they have noticed her drawing. Melinda is tempted to tell her secret at this time because her parents proved that they notice her. However, she cannot think of how to start, and her parents leave the room before she gets the chance.

The major clue to Melinda’s secret is her reaction to a person at school she refers to as “IT.” In a section called “Naming the Monster,” Melinda describes how “IT” creeps up and whispers to her: “Freshmeat” (86). The way that Anderson constructs the following run-on sentence illustrates Melinda’s pure fear of whomever “IT” is: “I can smell him over the noise of the metal shop and I drop my poster and the masking tape and I want to throw up and I can smell him and I run and he remembers and he knows” (86).

Toward the end of the book, Melinda recounts the episode that contributed to her fear of “IT,” a senior boy. She is drinking beer at a party and goes out to the woods, afraid she is

going to vomit. The boy follows her and takes advantage of her drunken state, kissing her and grabbing her buttocks. After he asks her if she “wants to,” he pushes her to the ground and rapes her. Melinda yells in her head, “NO I DON’T WANT TO!” but the words don’t come out (135). Here is one place where the lesson of the book (*Speak*) comes through the strongest. If she had been able to voice her words, she might have been able to put a stop to the act. Perhaps, because she was not able to bring herself to speak at that moment, it made it even harder to tell anyone her secret later on. She is confused about what happened to her and is not sure whether it really was rape.

When Melinda’s former ex-best friend, Rachel, starts dating “IT,” Melinda is torn. Even though they are not friends anymore, Melinda feels like she should still warn Rachel about what the senior boy is capable of. She finally works up the nerve to tell Rachel about what happened to her the night of the party, but when she reveals the identity of the rapist, Rachel turns on her and calls her a “liar.” Though Rachel’s reaction isn’t exactly what Melinda was hoping for, Melinda’s confession is enough to make Rachel suspicious of “IT”, leading her to dump him at the prom when he becomes “grabby” on the dance floor.

Melinda’s metamorphosis becomes clear when “IT” corners her in a closet at school. He yells horrible things at her, telling her she has a big mouth, calling her ugly and jealous. “IT” claims that she liked what happened to her and threatens to rape her again because he knows she will not scream. At this moment, Melinda breaks free and unleashes her voice, screaming as “IT” hits her. She breaks a mirror and grabs a piece to defend herself. The girls’ lacrosse team bangs on the door and comes to her aid. Melinda and the lacrosse team’s victory over “IT” is a great feminist triumph, and the book’s theme becomes clear—you must stand up and speak for justice.

Melinda does find an effective way to express herself—through art. Her art teacher gives her a yearlong project to work on. She must learn how to turn a tree into a piece of art and make it speak. Throughout the year, she struggles with her project, until a classmate named Ivy helps her with her drawing of a tree. Melinda's connection with Ivy gives her confidence to take chances with her art and to open up to others. Mr. Freeman pushes her to go even further with her art and to show the flaws of the tree. Although Melinda resists at first, in the end, she adds birds to the picture, possibly illustrating how free she feels once she has shared her secret. The picture is a metaphor for her growth:

My tree is definitely breathing; little shallow breaths like it just shot up through the ground this morning. This one is not perfectly symmetrical. The bark is rough. I try to make it look as if initials had been carved in it a long time ago. One of the lower branches is sick. If this tree really lives someplace, that branch better drop soon, so it doesn't kill the whole thing. Roots knob out of the ground and the crown reaches for the sun, tall and healthy. The new growth is the best part. (196)

She acknowledges that her picture is “homely” and not perfect, but she thinks “that makes it just right” (197). Melinda's growth is apparent in the last line of the book, when she responds to Mr. Freeman's comment that she must have been through a lot. She says, “Let me tell you about it.”

The cause for the sexual assault in this novel is hard to pinpoint. Melinda could have made different decisions, which could have led to a different outcome, but she could not ultimately prevent the outcome. The author leaves Andy as a flat character, as a continual perpetrator, without disclosing the underlying reasons for his behavior. The warning signs and the effects of the rape (isolating herself, scratching her wrists, etc.) are intertwined. This novel shows how violence (rape) begets violence (self-harm).

Student Reaction to *Speak*

Many of my female students wanted to read *Speak*, since they had several friends who had read it the year before and enjoyed it. The girls were also attracted to the book because of the female main character and the subject matter (rape and high school politics). I ended up with five female students reading the novel.

When asked to describe Melinda, the main character of the novel, my students used words like “quiet,” “depressed,” and “emo.” They described her as a “social outcast” who had no friends. One student explained that “when [Melinda] gets upset she inflicts pain on herself by biting her lips,” and another observed that Melinda was “desperate for friends who will understand her and parents she can actually communicate with.” This shows the students’ understanding of the connection between Melinda’s internal conflict and the outward manifestations of this struggle.

From the beginning of the book, Melinda’s problem (that she has been raped) was unclear, but many of the students picked up on Melinda’s inability to express her emotions. They saw that other students were picking on Melinda and believed that was wrong; as one student pointed out, “The characters accept the way they are treating Melinda. They think that they have to follow along with everyone else in order to fit in with the popular people at school.” Though my students saw this as morally reprehensible, they placed some of the blame on Melinda for not standing up for herself. One student said, “Melinda doesn’t really do anything about the bullying, and she doesn’t tell anyone about [the rapist].”

By the end of the book, my students were aware of Melinda’s rape. Some of my students suggested that Melinda’s friends and family were partly responsible for her misery. Many of Melinda’s peers were aware of Andy’s (the rapist’s) reputation for being

disrespectful toward women. One student quoted Ivy, one of Melinda's friends, who described Andy as "only after one thing." If classmates knew that Andy was capable of taking advantage of a young girl, they were partly to blame for letting him and Melinda go off together, especially after they'd been drinking.

The students identified alcohol as a major factor in the violence, as well. A student explained why she thought alcohol led to the rape:

One of the major factors was that both the victim, Melinda, and the suspect, Andy, were drunk. They were not fully aware of their surroundings and they were not alert to anything happening around them. Even though they were drunk, I still believe Andy knew what he was doing, and he could have easily stopped when Melinda said no.

Another one of my students agreed: "Ultimately [the rape] could have been avoided if she didn't go to the party, didn't get drunk, and didn't leave her friend. It also could have been avoided if she hadn't danced with someone she didn't know." Here, the student possibly reflects society's tendency to blame the victim.

We see this tendency again when my students identified the message of the novel. Most of the students believed that the theme of the book was essentially the title: *Speak*. One student asserted that Melinda grew as a person "by standing up for herself and knowing [the rape] wasn't her fault." The onus was again placed on Melinda for not speaking up about the rape sooner.

However, my students did explain that the other students should not have teased Melinda after the fact, worsening her despair. One student phrased this sentiment succinctly: "She really just needs a good friend to talk to." Likewise, if Melinda's parents had been more available, she could have talked to them about her problem.

My students listed many signs that Melinda was in distress. A prominent sign that not all was well with Melinda was her falling grades. A couple of my students pointed out that Melinda receded into herself, shutting others out. She also “inflicts physical pain on herself”; this is another symptom that many of my students associated with depression.

My students enjoyed this book and related closely with Melinda, though many of them had a difficult time describing the cause of the rape. They recognized that the warning signs and effects were the same. When they saw how depressed Melinda was, many of them mentioned the importance of having someone to talk to about their problems.

***Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher**

The most intriguing aspect of this tale of teenage suicide lies in the narrative structure. Although the story is told in the first person point of view from the perspective of a teenage boy named Clay Jensen, great chunks of the novel are written in the deceased girl’s voice. Before Hannah Baker commits suicide, she makes several sets of tapes explaining her actions. She devises a plan to have an acquaintance pass around the tapes to everyone who contributed to her decision to kill herself.

This concept is ingenious because, although Hannah’s death occurs before the story begins, we can still hear her side of the story. However, we also see the reactions of her peers through the eyes of Clay, the male protagonist. This technique provides an interesting juxtaposition of the factors that caused Hannah’s misery and the effects of her death on others.

Though this concept has the potential of glamorizing teenage suicide, Asher is careful to paint a bleak enough picture that readers won’t misconstrue Hannah’s actions as romantic. Throughout the story, Clay questions Hannah’s motives:

Why would you want to mail out a bunch of tapes blaming you in a suicide? You wouldn't. But Hannah wants us, those of us on the list, to hear what she has to say. (14)

He is simultaneously condemning her for her selfishness but also admitting that she may be justified in wanting to be heard.

The reasons that Hannah commits suicide become clear as we, along with Clay, listen to the tapes. Hannah describes being used by a boy and then being laughed at by his friends. She tells of the humiliation of being voted "Best Ass in the Freshman Class," an incident that she believes objectifies her. She tells of losing her best friend over a guy. She relates how angry she was when a popular girl used her for a ride to a party.

These anecdotes seem almost commonplace in a teenager's life (if troublingly so), and the reader begins to wonder how these experiences could have damaged Hannah so badly that she would want to end her life. But then the stories get worse. She tells of being manhandled on a date. She speaks of a classmate who spies on girls and takes pictures of them with his yearbook camera.

Finally, she relates the nightmarish tale of a party that ends in date rape. At the party, Hannah is drunk and makes out with Clay in a dark room. She changes her mind, pushes him away, and screams at him to leave, which he does. Another couple stumbles into the room and begins making out. Hannah hides in the closet, but not before realizing that the girl is her ex-best friend, Jessica, who soon passes out. The boy Jessica had been kissing leaves the room but lets his friend go in instead. Hannah hears the sound of bed springs and feels sick.

Though she was intoxicated and much smaller than the rapist, Hannah feels guilty for not standing up for her friend. Her feelings overwhelm her:

And I could have stopped it. If I could have talked. If I could have seen. If I could have thought about anything, I would have opened those doors and stopped it.

But I didn't. And it doesn't matter what my excuse was. That my mind was in a meltdown is no excuse. I have no excuse. I could have stopped it—end of story. But to stop it, I felt like I'd have to stop the entire world from spinning. Like things had been out of control for so long that whatever I did hardly mattered anymore.

And I couldn't stand all the emotions anymore. I wanted the world to stop... to end. (227)

Hannah's self blame is palpable at this point. Clay's sympathy wavers for a moment after he learns of this secret. He points out that the world *did* end for Hannah, but Jessica had to keep on living, even after her private life has been exposed on these cassette tapes. Moments like these, when the selfishness of Hannah's act really stands out, is Asher's way of portraying suicide in a realistic way. Hannah is pitiable, but only to a point.

Hannah's culpability grows when she is indirectly involved in a student's death later that evening. She gets a ride home from a classmate, Jenny Kurtz, who claims not to be drunk but still hits and knocks over a stop sign on the way home. Hannah tries to get Jenny to report the accident, but Jenny kicks Hannah out of the car and drives off. Again, Hannah blames herself, wondering what she could have done differently, wishing that she had called the police about the stop sign.

Another accident occurs that night, involving an old man and a senior in high school. The senior is killed. Hannah feels horrible, knowing she could have stopped it. The occurrences of this evening precipitate her thoughts of suicide.

On the day of the funeral, Hannah pictures her own funeral:

More and more, in very general terms, I'd been thinking about my own death. Just the fact of dying. But on that day, with all of you at a funeral, I began thinking of my own.

[...]

I could picture life—school and everything else—continuing on without me. But I could not picture my funeral. Not at all. Mostly because I couldn't imagine who would attend or what they would say.

I had... I have... no idea what you think of me. (248-249)

Before, Hannah had been fantasizing about her own death in general terms. Now, she is convinced she deserves to die, based on the events of that one fateful night. After she finds out about the senior's death, she goes for a long walk in the cold. She says, "I walked for hours, imagining the mist growing thick and swallowing me whole. The thought of disappearing like that—so simply—made me so happy" (252).

After this, Hannah begins to think of ways to kill herself. She considers using a gun or hanging herself but discards both of those ideas. Clay narrates that she ends up taking pills. Hannah imagines her last words to her classmates. The way she talks about her death is incredibly self-indulgent. She wonders if, after her classmates find out about her death, they will remember the last thing they said or did to her. The self-centered way Asher portrays Hannah at this point is at once realistic and frustrating.

Hannah does exhibit some warning signs of suicidal thoughts. In her Peer Communications class, she gives an anonymous note to her teacher to request a discussion on suicide. But her classmates' comments are all "tinged with annoyance" (171). Most of them are of the mind that people who threaten suicide are just looking for attention. Her teacher hands out a flyer outlining the warning signs of suicide. One of the top warning signs was a

“sudden change in appearance” (173). Hannah reflects that the list is accurate, as she chopped off her hair the night a boy tried to take advantage of her.

Hannah’s one last cry for help is recorded on the final cassette tape. She goes to see the school counselor, Mr. Porter, and complains that everything is so hard and she doesn’t have any friends. She claims she wants life to stop. Mr. Porter points out the severity of that statement and tries to get her to talk through her pain. Hannah tells about how the rumors about her hurt. When she reveals that something happened at a party that she regrets, Mr. Porter attempts to get her to confront the problem or move on. This is particularly troubling because it is clear that Mr. Porter believes that Hannah has been sexually assaulted. Hannah thanks Mr. Porter and leaves the office, waiting for him to follow her, but he never does.

Hannah speaks her last few words: “I think I’ve made myself very clear, but no one’s stepping forward to stop me. [...] A lot of you cared, just not enough. And that... that is what I needed to find out. [...] And I did find out. [...] And I’m sorry” (280). She concludes the tapes by thanking the listener, Clay. Her thanks appear to be for allowing her to share her feelings as she was not allowed to do in life.

This last speech, and Clay’s reaction to it, is important. Hannah clearly is wrapped up in her own troubles. She wants help but feels that no one cares enough to reach out to her. However, Clay points out that Hannah was not very clear with anyone and that he didn’t know what she was going through. He feels sorry that he wasn’t there for her when she was alive but acknowledges that many would continue to be angry with Hannah for committing suicide and then blaming the world for her problems.

Clay changes considerably from the beginning of the story to the end. Hannah opens his eyes to the feelings of others. At the very end of the story, he notices a girl named Skye

who has been shutting people out for years. He struggles with the easier option of ignoring the problem but finally makes the conscious decision to approach her.

The narrative structure of this novel is really what makes it interesting. We are able to see suicide from the angle of the deceased as well as those around her. As Hannah says:

You don't know what went on in the rest of my life. At home. Even at school. You don't know what goes on in anyone's life but your own. And when you mess with one part of a person's life, you're not messing with just that part. Unfortunately, you can't be that precise and selective. When you mess with one part of a person's life, you're messing with their entire life. (201)

By reading this book, students can learn that their actions towards others can have dire consequences. They can grow to become proactive, like Clay, to be able to identify the warning signs of depression and see the importance of supporting those who need help.

Student Reaction to *Thirteen Reasons Why*

Many of my students wanted to read *Thirteen Reasons Why* due to its great hook. But because I only had my copy and a library copy, I had to require any students who read this book to locate their own copy of the book. Even with that requirement, I still had seven students who studied this novel.

One student had a specific reason for selecting this book. In an interview, she told me that she selected the book because one of her brother's friends had committed suicide two years ago. She wanted to learn more about why teens commit suicide. Throughout her interviews and journal entries, she lingered on this question of why someone would commit suicide.

At the beginning of the unit, she said:

I'm only on the third or fourth tape, but right now I don't really understand why [Hannah] would want to do this. She seemed like she

had a pretty good life. She was pretty and popular and a lot of the kids at school liked her, so I guess I really don't know why she would want to do this to herself.

By the end of the story, she described the buildup to Hannah's suicide as the "snowball effect." She claimed that many of Hannah's problems (for instance, the rumors that she was sexually promiscuous and the failure of several friendships) built up to the point where she couldn't handle it anymore.

Another girl, in an interview, agreed with her classmate, saying that Hannah started to get depressed when boys spread rumors about her that weren't true. Her level of sadness increased when one of her ex-friends passed around a list about her that basically reduced her to a sexual object. Both of these students agreed that other students' perceptions of Hannah led to a diminished sense of self.

Other students cited the occurrence where Hannah was practically molested in a coffee shop by a classmate as evidence of the blind eye her community casts toward unsavory behavior. One of my students wrote, "No one stood up to the creeps harassing Hannah or even offered their friendship, even when it was obvious she desperately needed companionship." Another wrote, "Each moment of silence was another nail in her mental coffin." Because no one reached out to her, she ended her life.

Hannah did exhibit some warning signs that she was in distress, according to my students. She changed her appearance drastically, cutting her hair very short. She stopped talking to those around her. She started to give away her possessions. She even went to her guidance counselor for help, though she was not specific about her needs. As one student wrote in her journal, though, by the time anyone realized she was in trouble, "it was too late to save Hannah."

Still, this story is not only about Hannah. Most of my students identified the protagonist of the story as Clay, the boy who is listening and reacting to Hannah's cassette tapes. In journal entries, my students described Clay as "quiet," "shy," "down to earth," "nice," "innocent," and "a hard worker in school." One student noted that Clay "can't imagine why his name is on the list" because "he had a crush on Hannah and had always been nothing but nice to her." Therefore, Clay is just as clueless about Hannah's reasons for killing herself as the readers are. One student commented that there was an "internal conflict with [Clay] as he struggles to understand the part he played in Hannah Baker's suicide." Another student explained that Clay started to feel badly when he realized what Hannah went through and that he never listened to her or did anything to stop it.

Students disagreed over the reason for Hannah's tapes, some believing she wanted her peers to feel remorse and others believing she wanted her peers to learn to treat others with more consideration. Many of my students observed that it was hard for anyone to help Hannah because she pushed others away. One student mentioned that Hannah's gesture by making the cassette tapes was "antagonistic," and another argued that Hannah was "putting down everyone who listens to the tapes" by "telling them that they are to blame for her suicide." Incensed by Hannah's actions, the student continued: "The characters who listen to the tapes can't really do anything to stop this kind of oppression. Hannah is not around anymore, so they have to learn to deal with [their guilt]."

Other students disagreed, claiming that Clay grew from listening to the tapes. One student wrote, "By the end of the tapes, he realizes that actions can affect people in huge ways, and he chooses to be more wise about his own." This growth is shown at the end of the novel, when Clay reaches out to a girl who was exhibiting warning signs of depression.

Many students suggested awareness as a theme of the book. Hannah displayed various warning signs before her death. One girl contended, “The book helps you understand that if you know someone like Hannah Baker, you could start helping them now.”

Overall, students gave favorable comments regarding this book. They saw that the causes for Hannah’s suicide were peer-related. Even though the book included numerous facts when a teacher described various warning signs of depression and suicide, the students still found the book to be engaging rather than tedious and didactic. The students spoke about how the rest of the characters would have to live with the guilt of knowing they contributed to Hannah’s unhappiness and eventual suicide.

***Twisted* by Laurie Halse Anderson**

Anderson is well known for *Speak*, but she has written numerous young adult novels that treat issues that are important to teens. In *Twisted*, Anderson addresses the issues of popularity, sexual assault, and suicide. While *Speak* often appeals to girls, *Twisted* is written from a convincingly male first person point of view.

Tyler Miller, in his own words, is “a zit on the butt of the student body” with a “screwed-up past and no visible future” (8). Before the story begins, Tyler vandalizes his school in an attempt to gain some attention from his peers who normally ignore him. However, he is found out when the police discover his wallet, which he leaves behind. Later, we find out that he spray-painted the school in lieu of his original plan, planting a bomb. He doesn’t want to hurt anyone; he just wants to make a statement. He can’t go through with his plan, however, because he has nightmares about accidentally hurting someone. Still, we see Tyler’s tendency toward self-destruction from the very beginning.

The summer after this incident, Tyler is completing his mandatory community service. His stunt has gained him some recognition from the rest of the student body, including his crush, Bethany Milbury, the wealthy daughter of his father's boss. Though his social life is improving, he still struggles with problems at home—his workaholic father would much rather spend time in the basement with his computer and model trains than spend time with his family. Tyler's father's expectations are high; he requires that Tyler take only the top classes, even though Tyler cannot handle so many advanced classes at once. His father also wants him to quit his landscaping job, the only activity that gives Tyler any relief from his morbid thoughts.

Tyler spends a lot of time thinking about death. The fixation helps him to escape the problems of real life. Though he believes it is wrong to think about death, he can't help himself:

As soon as it started, I'd go: I'm not going to think about this. No matter what. I am thinking about something different now, thinking, thinking...

And the pictures would flash over and over in my mind like a demented video with no music, just bodies falling off bridges and planes flying into skyscrapers and fires and ropes and guns and driving very fast. Unbuckling my seat belt. Aiming for the cliff at the granite quarry. Stomping the accelerator. Passing ninety when I hit the edge. Flying, then plunging to the bottom, the car bouncing off the slabs of granite, spinning, crumpling. The explosion.

Thinking about death relaxed me, as usual. (30)

These thoughts and visions are clearly not healthy. The visualization of the death is the most frightening.

When Bethany Millbury starts flirting with Tyler, he feels his life is taking a turn for the better. He is in great shape from doing yard work all summer. He even feels confident to

stand up to Bethany's brother, Chip, when he assaults Tyler's best friend, Calvin Hodges. However, as his social status rises, his grades take a nosedive. He also gets called into the principal's office about the incident with Chip. Though he was only defending his friend, the principal chastises him and warns him not to screw up like he did last year. His one act of rebellion follows him around, causing everyone to judge him.

Tyler's previous actions come back to haunt him when he attends a party with Bethany, who gets drunk and comes on to him. After a long struggle between his hormones and his brain, Tyler makes the responsible decision and pulls away from her. This makes Bethany irate; she accuses him of being gay and storms off. An hour later, he finds her passed out on the floor. He begins to walk her home when he spots Bethany's brother, Chip, driving drunkenly down the white line on the side of the road with another popular kid named Parker. Again, Tyler makes the right decision and drives them all home. In the car, Bethany starts kissing Parker, and Tyler pulls over and defends her.

Though Tyler does everything exactly right this evening, turning down alcohol, choosing not to kiss Bethany when she's drunk, driving the other drunk kids home, he ends up in trouble. Someone, while Bethany was drunk and on her own at the party, assaulted her, took naked pictures of her, and then posted them on the internet. Because of Tyler's past actions, everyone is quick to blame him for the crime. The police question him about the evening of the party and seize his computer for evidence.

His classmates treat him like a leper, shoving him, shredding his notebook, and stealing his wallet. The principal tells him he has to avoid regular classes and instead sit in the study hall room all day "to protect him from students who may not yet understand the concept of innocent until proven guilty" (165). His classmates gossip about him, saying that

he was “part of a network of Internet perverts,” “heavily medicated,” and “a piece of garbage” (170). Bethany’s brother and his friends attack Tyler when he’s walking home one day, beating him. His parents discuss sending him away to a military academy.

Somewhere along the way, the blame for this crime affects Tyler’s perception of himself. Arguably, he was depressed before the incident, but now he really believes he is a bad person. His mental dialogue is very negative:

You have screwed up everything. You have a 0.00 GPA in Life. You are a useless fuck, a waste of carbon molecules. You are the spawn of a defective sperm and a reluctant egg. You do not deserve to live.

You should die. (189-190)

Tyler drafts a suicide note, trying to get his last words just right. He has to cross out his words and start over repeatedly. He feels he can’t even get a suicide note right, thinking, “The whole letter sucked, pathetic words that didn’t come close to what I was trying to say” (202).

The scene that follows is the most troubling in the book. Tyler turns his negative self-dialogue into action when he enters his father’s bedroom and finds the gun stashed in his father’s bottom drawer. Anderson builds tension by using short, deliberate sentences that narrate Tyler’s motions: “I unfolded the sweater.” “I reached for it.” “I opened a box of ammunition.” (209) The passage builds up to the moment that Tyler raises the gun to his lips.

Anderson slows down the scene by breaking it into small chunks. She sets off the sentence, “I put my mouth around the end,” by placing a break before and after the sentence (210). She immediately follows this section with the word “no” in italics. Tyler is lost in

confusion as he takes the gun out of his mouth and contemplates his decision. He replaces the gun in his mouth and thinks to himself:

*I will pull this trigger and a bullet will rip through my
skull at eight hundred miles an hour.
I will pull this trigger and my brains will detonate.
I will pull this trigger and fall. (211)*

In a chilling instant, Tyler tries to position himself so he can see himself die in his father's mirror. However, the mirror is positioned too low for him to see himself. He realizes, "I [am] bigger than my father" (211). This is the moment that Tyler makes the decision to live. He puts the gun down and vomits.

In the end, Tyler ends up going to see his best friend, "Yoda," seeking the emotional support that he hasn't been able to get from his father. The two go to Action Sports to hit baseballs in the batting cage. At first the balls are too fast for Tyler. Eventually, though, he gets the hang of it, hitting the balls hard. He visualizes his enemies as he pounds the balls with his bat. Anderson subtly uses this scene to show an alternate way for Tyler to deal with his frustration.

Once the two have finished, they go to the river, where Tyler drops his father's bullets into the water, one by one. He finally disassembles the Beretta he stole from his father's room and drops it into the river, declaring that now the gun "can't hurt anybody" (218). Just as Strasser in *Give a Boy a Gun* teaches that semiautomatic weapons should be banned, Anderson is making a political statement about weapons with this symbolic gesture.

In a shouting match with his father, Tyler ends up confessing that he almost killed himself using his father's gun. He blames his father for these actions, for putting so much pressure on him and for having a gun around in the first place. After standing up to his

father, he goes to Yoda's house to spend the night. He briefly considers staying there until graduation, but the next day he returns to his home, where his father is sitting on the front steps.

A touching moment occurs between Tyler and his father when his father explains that he was beaten as a child and vowed never to do the same to his children; still, not hitting his children was "not enough" (246). Tyler's father apologizes to him, and the two go inside and share breakfast. The fact that an essential truth in their relationship has changed becomes clear when Tyler's father offers to make eggs for Tyler. Instead, Tyler prepares the food. Tyler has taken charge of his life, and his father allows this and even encourages it.

Just as in *Speak*, the final sentence of the story conveys the moral: "I chose wisely" (250). Instead of giving up on life when it was hard, Tyler found the strength to keep on going. He found support in his friendships and devised a constructive way to deal with the stress in his life—through physical activity. He stood up for himself and took responsibility for his life.

Another important theme in *Twisted* is the deception of popularity. One scene presents an interesting view about what it means to be popular. Tyler is eating lunch in the cafeteria with his sister and best friend when his sister, Hannah, tactfully tries to explain why popular girl Bethany will never end up with a guy like Tyler. Yoda points out that being popular isn't all that great: "I've never understood what makes the popular kids popular. It must be a hive activity, a neurochemical message that all hive members receive, but no one understands." Hannah tries to explain: "The popular kids aren't really popular. They're obnoxiously loud, good-looking, and rich. Nobody likes them, but they rule the place" (155).

Anderson is pulling apart social structures here, examining what determines social status in high school. Ultimately, she concludes that popularity is not really a gift; rather, it is a misnomer. While it might be nice to be at the top of the heap, the fact that one is on top doesn't really mean anything. In this way, Anderson eschews the idea of popularity and attempts to expose how ludicrous it really is.

A discussion guide is included at the end of the novel. Teachers might find this helpful for students wishing to study *Twisted*. Many of the questions delve into Tyler's self-perception and mental state. Questions about popularity prompt students to question their own social status and how it helps define who they are (and whether this is right). Another question guides students in thinking of people they might know who seem to have "everything together" but really don't. These types of questions will help students to be more aware of their peers and could possibly help prevent suicidal actions.

Student Reactions to *Twisted*

Only two of my students, a male and a female, opted to read *Twisted*. It is interesting to compare their journal responses side by side, to compare the male and female perspectives. Though their descriptions were usually similar, their outlook differs at times.

The female student described the main character, Tyler, fairly straightforwardly. She said he is "on thin ice" because he has recently gotten in trouble for vandalizing the school. She also said he is "normally a dweeb," but since he has done manual labor over the summer, he has gotten "somewhat buff."

Her male counterpart uses the same language to describe him: "He's kinda the geek in the school, but now he is buff and his crush hangs out with him." Whereas my female

student overlooked the protagonist's mental state, my male student spent some time detailing it:

Every now and then he wants to kill himself or thinks about death. Apparently it pleases him to think about dying. His outlook on everything, except death, is exactly how most teenaged guys think, and I realized that Tyler could be many guys in my school.

These comments confirmed my suspicion that the book, although written by a female author, would be widely accepted by male readers.

The two students saw the conflict in the book differently. My female student focused on one incident in the story, in which Tyler went to a party, refrained from drinking, decided not to make out with a drunk girl, and gave several drunk students a ride home. My female student asserted that Tyler was "in the wrong place at the wrong time," leading him to be accused of taking naked pictures of the drunk girl and posting them on the Internet (which he did not do).

My male student identified the conflict in the story as the relationship between Tyler and his "crush's" brother, Chip. Chip bullied Tyler, but Tyler could not do much in return because he was on parole (for the earlier vandalism). My male student also classified Tyler's fight with his "crush," Bethany, as a major conflict. The students' journal entries showed a gender contrast since the male student focused more on internal feelings in his description of the main character, and the female student concentrated more on Tyler's outward characteristics.

However, in most instances the two students shared similar opinions. For instance, when asked about oppression in the novel, both of my students referred to the popular students' treatment of Tyler, saying that when he was "geeky," Bethany wouldn't give him

the time of day but after he'd earned a reputation of being dangerous and built up his body, she flirted with him. Both students also agreed that the rest of the kids at school, if they did not condone, allowed this oppression to occur.

Tyler grew as a character, in my students' eyes, by becoming stronger, mentally as well as physically. The male student explained that Tyler became "more of a man" and "finds himself and learns the real meaning of life." Even though the female student didn't mention Tyler's mental state in any of her previous journal entries, she pointed out that Tyler learned that "suicide is not a good idea" and that "facing his problems is better than running away or killing himself." Both students agreed that the theme of the story had to do with "life being worth living" and "facing your problems instead of taking the easy way out." Both students agreed that, by the end, Tyler grew to be a stronger and more responsible person.

Surprisingly, neither of my students, in their journal entries, mentioned the climactic scene when Tyler put a gun in his mouth, but they did analyze this scene in their final papers. The female student wrote that Tyler just wanted to be appreciated by his father and saw that as a major factor in Tyler's depression. Though Tyler wanted so badly to please his father, his father "treated Tyler and the family like dirt." This sense of worthlessness was compounded by his arrest and other problems, leading him to the moment when he put the gun in his mouth. According to my female student, this is when Tyler changed his mind and decided to face his problems, rather than run away.

The male student also blamed Tyler's father for Tyler's suicidal feelings. He wrote about how Tyler's father spent all of his time in the basement, working: "He never had the time to talk to [Tyler] or understand what he was going through." My student explained how

Tyler's father's coldness, combined with the bullying that was going on at school and his failed relationship with Bethany, led him to stick the gun in his mouth. This student emphasized the fact that Tyler's friend, Yoda, listened to Tyler after the suicide attempt and helped him process his emotions. He reiterated that Tyler made the right decision by "finding himself" and "living the life that was worth living."

Even though the students took opposite viewpoints (internal feelings versus external actions), they did agree on the overall message. While neither gave overly enthusiastic responses about the book, the male student thought he could relate to Tyler, and the female student seemed to have empathy in describing Tyler's circumstance in being in "the wrong place at the wrong time." My students easily identified Tyler's problems as stemming from his peer relationships and his father's pressuring. However, they described his warning signs as being his negative thoughts, not realizing that warning signs need to be actions rather than thoughts. Both acknowledged Tyler's growth as an individual in taking more responsibility for his actions.

Synthesis

On the last day of their project, I asked the students to get into their groups and identify the causes, effects, and warning signs in their books. Then they were to present these for the rest of the class. We had a short discussion following this activity. The table below is replicated from the one the students filled out on the white board.

Table 1

Student Comparison of Six Novels

| Book Title | Type of Violence | Causes of Violence | Effects of Violence | Warning Signs |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|--|---|--|
| <i>Breaking Point</i> | Suicide; depression | Bullying; family problems | Suicide; does bad things | Depression; talks about suicide; grows apart from family |
| <i>Give a Boy a Gun</i> | Gun and hostage | Bullied, abused, ridiculed, smoked and drank | Retaliation; gun violence; Gary-dead; Brendan-almost dead | Interest in guns; home-made bombs; violent in chats |
| <i>Nineteen Minutes</i> | School shooting | Bullied, name calling, dysfunctional family | 10 died; 9 injured; town grieving; people's lives had to change | Interest in guns; made a violent video game; circled victims in yearbook |
| <i>Speak</i> | Rape; self harm | Drinking, groping her at party | Doesn't talk; depressed; self-harm; abandoned by her friends | Bad grades; self-harm; skips school; Andy's reputation |
| <i>Thirteen Reasons Why</i> | Suicide | Rumors, no one would miss her | Suicide; Clay realization; people had to listen to the tapes | Change in appearance; distant; gave away possessions; sought help |
| <i>Twisted</i> | Suicidal thoughts | Bad home; getting bullied; falsely accused | Thinks about killing himself; wants to run away | Always thinks about death; hates himself |

The books *Breaking Point*, *Give a Boy a Gun*, and *Nineteen Minutes* all address violence against peers (though the students do not note it on the table, *Breaking Point* includes a student placing a bomb within a school). Interestingly, readers of all three books

list bullying as a primary cause for the violence. Two of the books, *Breaking Point* and *Nineteen Minutes* also showed poor family dynamics as a cause. In all three of the books, death is an effect of violence. The students who read *Give a Boy a Gun* and *Nineteen Minutes* list the characters' interest in guns or explosives as warning signs that violence was imminent. Though the main character in *Breaking Point* visits websites that show how to make explosives, the readers did not cite that as a warning sign, probably because they were viewing the main element of violence in the book as suicide. Overall, the students' analyses of *Give a Boy a Gun* and *Nineteen Minutes* contained many of the same elements; however, the students who read *Breaking Point* focused on violence other than the bomb, so their answers differed.

Of the three books that featured sexual assault—*Speak*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and *Twisted*—only the students who read *Speak* analyzed the factor of rape within their book. This can be attributed to the fact that *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Twisted* also contain strong elements of suicide and self-harm, so the readers of those two books chose to focus on that violence instead. The readers of *Speak* identified the cause of the sexual assault to be alcohol. The students did not mention the perpetrator, though they did mention his actions, “groping her at a party” as a cause. They essentially overlooked the perpetrator’s culpability in the crime. The students included silence, self-harm, and abandonment by friends as effects of the assault. The only warning sign that the assault was about to occur was “Andy’s reputation,” meaning that Melinda’s friends could have warned her not to be alone with him. The other warning signs, Melinda’s bad grades and self-harm, all developed after the assault. Of the three books that mentioned sexual assault, only the readers of *Speak* analyzed the

causes, effects, and warning signs of the attack, and they tended to focus on the effect of the attack rather than pinpointing what caused it.

The last category of books includes self-harm and suicide. In *Breaking Point*, *Speak*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and *Twisted*, the characters all struggle with some degree of self-harm. Students who read *Breaking Point* and *Twisted* pointed to bullying as a major cause for the suicidal feelings, while students who read *Thirteen Reasons Why* identified rumors as a cause for the protagonist's suicide. In all three of these books, peers had a strong influence over the depressed individual's thoughts and actions. The students who read *Speak* did not highlight peer influence as a cause for violence because they were more concerned with the sexual assault. As an effect of the violence, students listed depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts and actions. The fact that students listed the actual self-harm and suicides as effects of the violence indicates that they might have been thinking of the way the characters were mistreated by their peers as the primary violence. Interestingly, they did not point out in this table how the self-harm and suicides affected families and the community. Finally, students who read these novels about self-harm and suicide listed, depending on their character, a plethora of different warning signs: pulling away from friends and family, falling grades, change in appearance, and constant thoughts or comments about death. The major factor that these novels had in common, as acknowledged by the students, is that peer relationships had a strong impact on the depressed characters, and negative peer interactions caused, to some extent, the characters' self-harm or suicides.

This table is deceiving because it seems that these six books have one type of violence in each of them. However, as is clear from the analysis, many of the books include multiple types of violence. The students usually chose to focus on just one violent act, rather

than several. This can be seen when readers of *Breaking Point* overlooked the bomb that was placed in the school at the end of the book. It can also be seen when readers of *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Twisted* focused on the suicide aspect of the books instead of the sexual assault. It is important to note that students had only about twenty minutes to discuss with their groups before they presented their findings. Still, the students did articulate corresponding causes, effects, and warning signs that led to a fruitful discussion about the dangers of bullying and the warning signs of suicide.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Since literature serves so many functions in American society—pleasure, knowledge, emotional expression—this study questions whether young adult literature can be used to explore and open up dialogue about social issues such as teen violence. The questions addressed within this study are:

1. How is violence depicted in young adult literature from post-Columbine (1999) to the present day (2009)?

This study examined six young adult novels featuring different types of violence, including school shootings, sexual assault, and self-harm such as suicide or cutting: *Breaking Point*, *Give a Boy a Gun*, *Nineteen Minutes*, *Speak*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and *Twisted*.

Give a Boy a Gun and *Nineteen Minutes* explore the topic of school shootings. For these books, the authors did extensive research to craft realistic portrayals of school shootings. Also, both books feature the destruction of human lives (students, faculty, and/or the shooter). In addition, both provide multiple perspectives on this serious issue.

Sexual assault, another popular topic in young adult literature, appears in three books in this study. Melinda in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* faces the repercussions of date rape. In *Twisted*, sexual assault is taken to a new level when a drunk girl is stripped, photographed, and exploited on the Internet. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, a girl witnesses her friend's rape yet feels powerless to stop it. All three books show the serious repercussions of sexual assault.

Four books in this study focus on violence toward the self—self-harm or suicide. In *Speak*, the protagonist tries to escape her pain by chewing her lips raw and scratching herself with paper clips. *Breaking Point*, *Twisted*, and *Thirteen Reasons Why* give insight into

individuals who struggle with suicidal urges, two of whom succumb to their impulses.

Though *Speak* and *Twisted* have positive resolutions for the protagonist, *Breaking Point* and *Thirteen Reasons Why* feature bleak outcomes for the depressed individuals, while other characters grow emotionally and have hopeful futures.

2. How does young adult literature attempt to inform teens about the causes, effects, and warning signs of violence?

While causes, warning signs, and effects of violence vary depending on the type of violence, most of the six books in the study provide specific causes, detailed warning signs, and long-range effects. In both of the books about school shootings, bullying seemed to be the most common element provoking the violence. Many of the shooters were teens who were considered to be on the lowest rung of the social ladder, had endured teasing for years, and wanted to seek revenge on the peers who hurt them.

The shooters often exhibit warning signs, such as interest in guns or violence, before their shootings. For instance, in *Nineteen Minutes*, the shooter shows an obsession with guns from a very young age. He also visits violent websites and designs a video game in which he could shoot up other students at school. In *Give a Boy a Gun*, the shooters make jokes about shooting their classmates and make a practice bomb. Overall, both books outline clear warning signs that the shooters were planning violent actions.

The effects of the school shootings in both books are devastating to families and the community at large. Lives are obviously lost, including the life of one of the shooters in *Give a Boy a Gun*. Even though the shooter in *Nineteen Minutes* survives, the consequence of his actions is a long imprisonment. Just as the parents of the victims are torn apart with

grief, so are the parents of the shooters. In both of the books, the culture of the school changes, leading to an environment that is permeated by fear.

In the novels concerning suicide, the most common cause for the act is depression. Another contributing factor is ostracism from the peer group. In many cases, rumors or accusations mount until the characters feel like there is no other way out. They show signs such as isolating themselves from others, changing their appearances suddenly, giving away their belongings, or thinking obsessively about death and how to kill themselves.

Often, if a character commits suicide, readers see great sadness and confusion among the families and community. In the case of David Blanco in *Breaking Point*, however, his classmates are apathetic after his death. No one besides his mother and father (and the main character, Paul) seem to care much about his demise. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah clears up some of the confusion surrounding her death by leaving behind cassette tapes explaining why she killed herself. Nonetheless, the people left behind feel a sense of helplessness. They were not able to help her when she was alive, much less when she is dead.

Three books in this study addressed sexual assault. The causes of assault are not usually illuminated because the books aren't written from the perpetrator's point of view. For instance, in *Speak*, the rapist (referred to as "It") is drinking prior to the first assault, but no alcohol is consumed before the second assault. No information is given regarding his background or home life. In *Twisted*, the reader learns only that Tyler is innocent of the assault and is unaware of the identity of the perpetrator, so the cause of the attack is not revealed. However, this incident is comparable with the one in *Speak* as it originates at a drinking party. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah witnesses her friend's assault but doesn't

help her due to her intoxication and fear. While no specific cause is given for the assault, alcohol is again a factor. Alcohol is linked with the sexual assaults in all three of these books.

Though the books do not give warning signs that a sexual assault is about to occur, the victims tend to exhibit signs or effects that something traumatic has occurred. In *Speak*, Melinda withdraws from her family and friends, too frightened to tell anyone what happened to her. Her quality of life suffers as her grades plummet, and she begins to harm herself. Readers can see the harmful effects of rape. In *Twisted*, the victim of the Internet incident avoids speaking to Tyler (the protagonist), so few effects are described. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the victim is unconscious during the rape and her perspective is not given, so the effects are unknown. While *Speak* features the victim as the protagonist, the assault victims in the other two books are minor characters, so the effects and resulting warning signs are not apparent.

The four books focusing on suicide or self-harm present specific causes, warning signs, and effects. The causes of self-injury vary in the four books, but the cause is often the result of bullying. In *Speak*, Melinda dabbles in scratching her wrists because of her conflicting emotions following the rape. David Blanco in *Breaking Point* receives extensive teasing from classmates who kill his dog, insult his mother, and vandalize his locker. In *Twisted*, Tyler's father pressures him to take high-level classes and obtain excellent grades, and he verbally abuses Tyler and his mother. His classmates also tease him by calling him names. His breaking point occurs when his parents threaten to send him to military school. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah commits suicide because of vicious rumors, friendship betrayal, and her own guilt over her friend's rape and a classmate's death. In all four books,

specific factors contribute to the protagonist considering or carrying out the self-injury or suicide.

In addition to specific causes, the authors of these four books present a variety of warning signs. In *Speak*, the signs that Melinda was raped coincide with her self-mutilation. In *Breaking Point*, David isolates himself, reads dark poetry, and hints to Paul that he cannot endure the situation. On the other hand, Tyler, in *Twisted*, has had suicidal thoughts since middle school but does not share these thoughts with others, so no warning signs are evident to others. Hannah, in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, demonstrates the traditional warning signs of suicide: she changes her appearance by cutting her hair, gives away some possessions, seeks help from a guidance counselor, and avoids others. Therefore, these four books vary in either providing no warning signs or multiple forewarnings.

The effects of the depressed individual's acts are different in each of the books. In *Speak*, Melinda's social life suffers when she isolates herself, and her self-esteem plunges even lower when she begins hurting herself. The effect of David Blanco's death in *Breaking Point* is horrifying to his parents, but his classmates—the cause of his woe—are apathetic. When Tyler's parents find out about his suicide attempt in *Twisted*, they are devastated. Likewise, Clay in *Thirteen Reasons Why* is ravaged when Hannah kills herself. In all these books, the family seems to be affected most by the depressed character's actions, while other effects include lowered self-esteem and further isolation.

The causes, warning signs, and effects in the books addressing self-harm and suicide are similar in some cases and different in others. The cause of self-harm is usually stress placed on the depressed individual either by their parents or classmates. While some of the

individuals exhibit warning signs, others do not. In almost all the books, however, the families are affected most profoundly by the characters' destructive actions.

3. How do real students respond to the causes, effects, and warning signs of teen violence in young adult literature?

For the most part, students easily identified the causes, effects, and warning signs of violence in their respective books. Because characters other than the protagonist experience the violence in several of the books, it was difficult for my students to observe the causes or warning signs. Still, my students were able to identify the majority of causes and effects, as well as warning signs, within the novels.

The students who read *Give a Boy a Gun* and *Nineteen Minutes* were able to easily recognize the causes leading up to school shootings. They commented on how the shooters in both of the novels are alienated from their peers. One student who read *Give a Boy a Gun* commented on how the “popular” kids bully, isolate, ridicule, and physically abuse the “losers and freaks,” who in turn desire revenge. Students who read *Nineteen Minutes* made similar comments about Peter’s reason for shooting his classmates, pointing to the way he was bullied and called names. Students agreed that, although the shooters are to blame for their actions, bullying is a primary cause for the school shootings in both books.

Just as students were able to articulate the causes for the shootings in *Give a Boy a Gun* and *Nineteen Minutes*, they were able to identify the warning signs without trouble. A student recalled how the shooters in *Give a Boy a Gun* “joked about killing all the people they hated.” She also mentioned how the shooters make a practice bomb and acquire a gun. Students who read *Nineteen Minutes* stated that Peter designs a video game to simulate shooting up his school, lights a dumpster on fire at work, and shows an interest in guns. In

both novels, students agreed that the shooters show an interest in violence and take steps to plan their assaults.

The students pointed out obvious results of violence in both of the books. Readers of both books pointed out the loss of life. Readers of *Give a Boy a Gun* recalled Gary's death, and one student emphasized that security precautions were increased at the high school after the shooting. Students who read *Nineteen Minutes* pointed out that Peter kills ten people on the day of his shooting. One student pointed out that the shootings also make Peter's family feel guilty for not realizing what his plans were, and she also explained that the families of the dead and the community are mourning the loss of life.

Although the books *Speak*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and *Twisted* demonstrate the serious issue of sexual assault, my students found it difficult to identify the causes of sexual assault because the viewpoint of the perpetrators is not shown. My students did acknowledge that alcohol often plays a role in the assaults, as the incidents in all three books take place at beer parties. Still, students were not able to identify the motivating factors that instigated the attackers' actions.

While the students found it difficult to identify causes of sexual assault (because the attackers are not main characters), the students who read *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Twisted* found it challenging to recognize warning signs in the minor characters who are sexually attacked, preferring to focus on the protagonist's suicidal thoughts and actions because these are in the forefront of the story. Students who read *Speak*, however, interpreted "warning signs" to mean the signals that Melinda gives throughout the book to show her distress. They inferred that Melinda's poor grades, disintegrating relationships with family and friends, and tendencies toward self harm all pointed toward the pain that Melinda is feeling inside.

Students were much more likely to find warning signs in the protagonist in *Speak*, rather than the minor characters in *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Twisted*.

Similarly, the students had fewer problems identifying the effects of the sexual assault in Melinda in *Speak*, although they had trouble finding the effects of the secondary characters' actions in *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Twisted*. Students posited that the effects of Melinda's sexual assault are essentially the warning signs that signal the fact that she's been through a traumatic ordeal: Melinda begins failing classes, pulls away from her parents and friends, chews her lips until they bleed, and scratches her wrist with a paperclip. Students did not feel they had enough information about the victims of sexual assault in *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Twisted* to expound upon the effects of the attacks.

Students who read *Speak*, *Breaking Point*, *Twisted*, and *Thirteen Reasons Why* attempted to pinpoint the causes of self-harm and suicide in the books. Students saw Melinda's reasons for hurting herself in *Speak* as related to her rape. Readers of *Twisted* linked Paul's attempt to blow up the school to his desire to fit in with the popular crowd and his unhappiness at his unstable home situation. Similarly, students who read *Twisted* drew a strong correlation between the stress Tyler's father places on him and his near suicide attempt. *Thirteen Reasons Why* readers identified Hannah's frustration at rumors and other actions by her peers as contributors to her decision to kill herself. Interestingly, in all these books, my students saw the driving factors toward self-harm and injury as being caused by other characters and their actions.

The students were able to identify warning signs in characters from all four of these novels addressing suicide. Students noted that Melinda in *Speak* withdraws from her peers, acts quiet and depressed, and sleeps a lot of the time. One student who read *Breaking Point*

said that warning signs should have started going off when the character who killed himself, David Blanco, read depressing poetry and talked about ending his pain. In *Twisted*, my students saw that Tyler was in trouble when he isolated himself and planned on running away. Readers of *Thirteen Reasons Why* found that Hannah exhibited multiple warning signs before her death by changing her appearance, giving away her possessions, and becoming more of a “loner.” All the characters in these books hint at their depression through their actions.

Students who read the four books regarding suicide had difficulty articulating the effects of self-harm and suicide. Readers of *Speak* were more inclined to see Melinda’s self-harm as a result of her rape rather than a separate act of violence; therefore, they did not explain what the consequences of Melinda’s lip-chewing and wrist-scratching were. The students who read *Breaking Point* tended to focus on the violence at the end of the book, when Paul places a bomb in the school, rather than on David Blanco’s suicide. Since Tyler in *Breaking Point* does not end up committing suicide, my students did not explore the fact that, by even contemplating suicide, Tyler was affecting his family and friends. The only book of the four in which my students seemed to find it easier to analyze the directly stated effects of suicide was *Thirteen Reasons Why*. One student stated that Hannah was only making things easy on herself because she left everyone else who was listening to the tapes to wonder and feel guilty about her death. Though the students found it difficult to isolate the effects in many of the books about self-harm either because it was committed by a secondary character or because it was the result of another act of violence, most of were able to determine the effects of suicide in *Thirteen Reasons Why* as a huge strain on the community.

Though the students did not seem to grasp the causes, warning signs, and effects of some of the violence in their novels because it involved minor characters, the students did identify many primary elements of violence. The most important lesson that they seemed to derive from these books was that all actions have consequences and that people should be careful in the way that they treat others because they did not previously recognize that small acts of mistreatment of an individual (such as name calling) can lead to violence against the self or others.

Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study is that it was done with a relatively small group of twenty-three students. In addition to this small sampling, there was a high ratio of females (17) to males (6). This class is an Honors section of Language Arts 10, so the conclusions to which this group came may differ from those that a grouping of different ability levels might reach.

In this class, there was one student of Asian descent, one of Middle Eastern descent, and one African American. The rest of the students were Caucasian. Since only 13% of my students fall into the minority category, this group may reflect cultural attitudes that could differ from groups in more diverse settings.

Another major limitation in this study was time. I conducted the study during the time I had a student teacher working with the students full-time, so I had to negotiate any time I had with the students. Although it was not a problem for me to pull individual students out for interviews, I was only able to give three short class journal assignments. The journaling time was about ten minutes per week, while I would have preferred at least thirty minutes per week.

While the study was small, had few students of diverse ethnicities, and a limited time, these were non-negotiable factors.

Proposed Changes to the Study

One of my superintendent's concerns was that he preferred a continuing project in the curriculum, rather than a one-year project. However, it is my intention to continue this book project at the Language Arts 10 level. I plan to rotate the social issue we focus on every year. In future years, I would like to study other issues such as drugs and alcohol or teen pregnancy and parenthood. I believe these topics could stimulate a productive dialogue among my students and require them to think more deeply about issues that affect them.

In the future, however, I intend to make a few changes to the unit. As mentioned previously, there was not enough time for students to journal about all of the elements I wanted them to consider. I will have the students journal more often and focus on just one topic per journal entry. I will also increase their journaling time to ten or fifteen minutes every other day.

In the future, I will eliminate the interviews I conducted with select students. I did not garner as much helpful information from the interviews as I would have liked; the students tended to do a lot of summarizing. I believe that the students felt rushed in providing their answers to my questions during the interviews. Likewise, the students did not provide enough information in their journal entries. The most valuable information, I found, was in the papers that the students spent several days writing. Since they had more time, they were able to pre-write and organize their thoughts before committing them to paper.

If I were to do this study again, I would make sure to choose four students from four different literature circles. During this study, I chose two girls that were both reading

Thirteen Reasons Why. Although that makes sense statistically, since seven of my twenty-three students were reading that novel, I would rather hear about different books.

Another disadvantage was that we had uneven literature circles. During discussions, not all of the students in the group of seven received a chance to speak, and there were not enough differing opinions in the group of two. I attempted to assign the students to books they wanted to read, but in the future, I will assign them to more even groups for more beneficial discussions. Perhaps that will mean that a student won't get his or her number one choice, but they will still get one of their top three choices.

The final change I will make to this project is to invite a counselor to be a guest speaker. Particularly with issues such as rape or suicide, students may have had experiences that cause them discomfort. It would be beneficial for students to have a professional to talk with about their feelings if they feel overwhelmed by the subject matter.

Overall, my students enjoyed this project and encouraged me to continue using it in future years. Though there are some changes I will make, including the rotation of different social issues, an increase of journaling time, elimination of interviews, regulation of literature circle group size, and invitation to a counselor as a guest speaker, I am generally happy with the way the project went and am glad to make it a permanent part of the curriculum.

Future Research Recommendations

For other teachers who might be interested in conducting a study on exploring social issues through young adult literature, I have a few suggestions on topic ideas. Teen pregnancy and parenthood is an important issue that could be explored. Likewise, drugs and alcohol are another matter that teens have to deal with every day. I believe that both of these would be worthy research topics.

An additional aspect of young adult literature to be studied is the breakdown of different genders, races, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses. It would be interesting to examine how characters in young adult novels fit into these groupings. For instance, my students observed that a character's socioeconomic level often dictated whether that character was considered "cool."

The role of the media in young adult novels is one more area for possible study. In books such as *Big Mouth*, *Ugly Girl*, the media plays a crucial role in the plot. When a boy jokes that he is going to blow up the school, rumors rampage until the boy's "threat" is mentioned on the news. The media broadcasts the boy's words and creates panic within the community.

Finally, another item that could be studied is the role of parents and other adults in young adult literature. Often, the parents in young adult books create conflict for the teenage characters, rather than helping to resolve it. It would be interesting to examine just how adults work as a device within young adult novels.

Many topics and avenues of research remain open in this area of study. Just a few issues to explore include other social issues; the breakdown of genders, races, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses; the role of the media; and the role of parents and adults in young adult literature. Young adult literature provides an intriguing subject with many opportunities for discovery.

Implications for Education

Literature has many uses in education, but I believe it can be used beyond the traditional teaching methods of characterizing literary periods or identifying literary devices. Teachers can use literature to open a much-needed dialogue with their students about social

issues that are relevant to teens today. Like C.J. Bott, I believe that young adult literature “translate[s] right off the page and into the lives of most students” (xvii).

One of the most pressing social issues facing teens today is violence. The number of school shootings in the past ten years illustrates that students are discontent and are not sure how to deal with their emotions without resorting to violence. It is important that we, as teachers, open up a dialogue about the appropriate ways to deal with anger and frustration.

In addition to school shootings, students must also face the reality of date rape, and girls should learn about reporting the rape and coping with it in a healthy way rather than internalizing it. Also, self-harm and suicide are common in adolescents who are experiencing an onslaught of hormones and intense feelings. By vicariously experiencing these issues in YA novels, students can see how the characters in the books manage to overcome the obstacles in their lives.

Through this study, I have introduced students to young adult literature that addresses all of these types of teen violence. My students gave positive comments about encountering such fresh, engaging literature and were excited to connect with their novels and relate them to their own lives. The element of choice allowed the students to select a novel that was appealing to them for their own reasons and focus their study in a unique way.

By asking students to concentrate on three specific elements of the violence—the cause, effect, and warning signs—the students were able to come together to discuss the similarities and differences of their books with a common language. They ultimately constructed a table showing common causes, effects, and warning signs for different types of violence. From this, they were able to see that social stress often contributes to violent acts and that the consequences of those actions have a serious impact on families and community.

The majority of students, by the end of the unit, expressed that they had learned a great deal about teen violence. They are now able to see that teasing someone can have serious consequences. They also can tell the warning signs if someone around them is feeling depressed or suicidal. Finally, they have seen the results of violence so that they understand the impact it has on the community and society as a whole. In C.J. Bott's conclusion of *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom*, she argues that young adult literature "is one of the best anti-bullying programs around" (xviii).

Originally, I hoped to show students through this project the causes and effects of violence. I, perhaps naively, wished that I would be able to reach a student who was struggling with depression or anger and prevent them from making any rash decisions. I do not know if I achieved that goal, and I probably never will, but in the end, it was enough for me to broach these topics with my students. My students expressed surprise when they learned that little actions, such as name calling, can lead to plummeting self-esteem and depression. My students and I also learned that, in the cycle of violence, there often are not tidy causes, warning signs, and effects. Often, one act of violence is the cause of another, and so on.

I am thankful for the awareness that this project has raised. As one student noted, "[*Thirteen Reasons Why*] helps you understand that if you know someone like Hannah Baker, you could start helping them now." Just as she realized that she could identify warning signs in her peers who might be experiencing depression, all of my students have learned that they have a great impact on their classmates, and they all seemed to take that responsibility seriously.

This project has shown that literature and teaching can make a difference in students' lives. My students enjoyed selecting recent YA books and discussing them with their classmates. Most importantly, they learned to be kinder to one another. This project has cemented my belief that teachers can and should use young adult literature to engage students, teach critical thinking skills, and explore and discuss social issues.

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Appendix A: Student Letter and Permission Form

February 2, 2009

Dear Honors Language Arts 10 Students:

As you may know, this is the first year of Honors Language Arts 10. The aim is to follow the same curriculum as the other classes but explore issues in greater depth and challenge you to use higher level thinking skills.

All tenth graders, at some point, complete a fiction book project. During this project, you will independently read a self-selected novel (roughly 200 pages in length) and complete an assignment from a list of possible choices. Then you will present your work to your classmates during a short book talk. The purpose of this project is to encourage you to explore and enjoy reading on your own. It also helps to build reading skills such as comprehension and summary.

This year, I would like to challenge you, my Honors students, by introducing books within a particular category in order to make connections to real life and synthesize information through discussions and interviews. I'm currently studying the issue of violence in young adult literature – in particular: cutting, abuse in dating relationships, date rape, school shootings, suicide, and other types of violence. It is my belief that, through literature, students can learn about warning signs of distressed individuals, the dangers of bullying, and the consequences of any type of violence directed toward the self or others. If you choose to participate in the study, you will examine cause and effect in great detail and analyze the author's intentions in broaching such serious topics.

I am interested in having you journal about these books and discussing what you've learned. I will videotape our class discussions. Ultimately, I will use this information in my thesis on violence in young adult literature. If you would prefer I do not use your coursework in my thesis, please let me know. You will need to complete the class requirements to earn a grade in the class, but allowing use of this information for my thesis is completely voluntary.

I've compiled a list of popular young adult books exploring these issues. Although the books fall under the young adult category, some of the books contain other issues, such as drugs, sex, swearing, etc. I know that these are sensitive issues, and for this reason, I ask that you only choose a book that you would feel comfortable reading. If, for any reason, you feel uncomfortable with your selection, please let me know so that we can find an alternate book for you to read.

I must stress that you are under no obligation to partake in my study on violence in young adult literature. You may choose a fiction book from another genre to read, and that will have no impact on your grade whatsoever. If you do choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any point you so wish.

Thank you very much for your help, and please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Jill E. Wheeler

February 2, 2009

Dear Student:

Thank you for participating in the study I am conducting on the causes and effects of teen violence in young adult literature. I am asking for your permission to include you as a case study participant.

This means that, in addition to including you in all regular class activities, I will interview you individually four times about the book you are reading. These interviews will take approximately 5-10 minutes, and you may refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. I will make audio tapes of our conversations so that I may analyze the information later. At the end of my study, I will destroy these audio tapes. You may choose to end your role as a case study participant at any point during the study.

Your role as a case study participant is completely voluntary. If you decide at any time you would not like to participate, your grade will not be affected.

Your identity will be protected. I will refer to you only by an assigned code to which only I will have access. This code and all data gathered in the interviews will be stored in a locked file cabinet and/or password-protected files. Also, I will destroy all personal information after I've finished with my study.

If you are willing to be a case study participant, please sign this form and return it to me.

Sincerely,

Jill Wheeler

I understand the above information and willingly give my permission to be a case study participant in Jill Wheeler's study on violence in young adult literature.

Student Signature

Appendix B: Parent Letter and Permission Form

February 2, 2009

Dear Parents and Guardians of Honors Language Arts 10 Students:

As you may know, this is the first year we've offered Honors Language Arts 10. The aim is to follow the same curriculum as the other classes but explore issues in greater depth and challenge the students to use higher level thinking skills.

A staple project in the tenth grade is the fiction book project. During this project, students independently read a self-selected novel (roughly 200 pages in length) and complete an assignment from a list of possible choices. They then present their work to their classmates during a short book talk. The purpose of this project is to encourage students to explore and enjoy reading on their own. Students also build reading skills such as comprehension and summary.

This year, I would like to challenge my Honors students by introducing books that explore a particular topic in order to make connections to real life and synthesize information through discussions and interviews. I'm currently studying the issue of violence in young adult literature – in particular: cutting, abuse in dating relationships, date rape, school shootings, suicide, and other types of violence. It is my belief that, through literature, students can learn about warning signs of distressed individuals, the dangers of bullying, and the consequences of any type of violence directed toward the self or others. Students will examine the causes and effects of violence in great detail and analyze the authorial intentions in broaching such serious topics. I've spoken with both Mr. Anthony and Dr. Lane in detail about this project, and they are excited about this opportunity for students to think more critically about issues facing today's teens.

I am interested in having the class journal before, during, and after reading books that deal with these issues. I will also videotape class discussions for further analysis. Ultimately, I will use this information in my thesis on the causes and effects of teen violence in young adult literature. If you would prefer I do not use your child's coursework in my thesis, please let me know. Your child will need to complete the class requirements to earn a grade in the class, but allowing use of this information for my thesis is completely voluntary.

Attached you will find a list of popular young adult books exploring these issues. Although the books fall under the young adult category, some of the books have controversial content such as drugs, sex, swearing, etc. For this reason, I ask that you talk to your student about the book he or she has selected and communicate with your child as he or she is reading. If, for any reason, you feel uncomfortable with this project, please let me know so that we can find an alternate book for your child to read.

Thank you very much for your help, and please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. You can contact me at jill.wheeler@carlisle.k12.ia.us.

Sincerely,

Jill E. Wheeler

February 2, 2009

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Thank you for allowing your son or daughter to participate in the study I am conducting on the causes and effects of teen violence in young adult literature. I am asking for your permission to include your student as a case study participant.

This means that, in addition to including your child in all regular class activities, I will interview him or her individually four times about the book he or she is reading. These interviews will take approximately 5-10 minutes, and your child may refuse to answer any question that he or she does not wish to answer. I will make audio tapes of these conversations so that I may analyze them later, but I will destroy the tapes upon the completion of my project this summer. Your child may choose to end his or her role as a case study at any point during the study. Your student's role as a case study participant is completely voluntary. If your child decides at any time he or she would not like to participate, his or her grade will not be affected.

Your child's identity will be protected. I will refer to him or her only by an assigned code to which only I will have access. This code and all data gathered in the interviews will be stored in a locked file cabinet and/or password-protected files. Also, I will destroy all personal information after I've finished with my study.

If you are willing to allow your child to be a case study, please sign this form and return it to me.

Sincerely,

Jill Wheeler

I understand the above information and willingly give my permission for my child to be a case study participant in Jill Wheeler's study on violence in young adult literature.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Appendix C: Annotated Book List

1. *Shooter* by Walter Dean Meyers (author of Michael L. Printz Award-winning *Monster*) – This story is told from multiple perspectives and explores a high school shooting that occurred as the result of bullying.
2. *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult (New York Times bestseller and 2008-2009 Iowa High School Book Award Nominee) – This story of a high school shooting explores the connection between bullying and violence. It also addresses suicide and dating violence.
3. *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher – In this story of suicide, a girl sends tapes to people who, in some way, contributed to her death. This book also explores issues such as rape and alcohol abuse.
4. *Breaking Point* by Alex Flinn – The new boy thinks he is fitting in by hanging out with the popular boys until he is unwillingly pressured into committing a crime. Suicide is also addressed.
5. *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser – Two boys, after years of being tormented, plan revenge on their peers. Bullying and suicide are major themes.
6. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (Michael L. Printz Award for Literature) – After Melinda is date raped, she withdraws into herself until she finally has the courage to stand up to her abuser.
7. *What Happened to Cass McBride* by Gail Giles – After Kyle's brother, David, commits suicide, Kyle seeks revenge on the girl who he thinks was Kyle's tormentor. This book addresses psychological issues and dysfunctional families.
8. *Twisted* by Laurie Halse Anderson – A socially outcast boy makes a place for himself by painting graffiti, but he is then implicated in a serious crime. This book asks questions about the nature of identity and personal responsibility.
9. *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher is the story of a group of misfit students who find acceptance through common ground, swimming. It explores the clique-ish nature of high schools and explores verbal abuse, substance abuse, and physical abuse.

*This list is missing option number 10, which was *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. I decided to omit this option because an older man perpetrated the violence, rather than a teenager.

Appendix D: Student Interview Questions

First interview:

1. What made you choose your book for this project? What drew you to it?
2. What are your expectations for this book after looking at the cover and reading the back?
3. Is the book living up to your expectations so far? Please elaborate.
4. Describe the protagonist.
5. Describe the antagonist.

Second interview:

6. What is the central conflict of the book?
7. How are males and females portrayed in your book?
8. How are people of different races portrayed in your book?
9. How are people of different ages portrayed in the book?
10. How are people of different sexual orientations portrayed in the book?

Third interview:

11. What are the causes of violence in your book?
12. What are the impacts of violence in your book?
13. Are any warning signs apparent before the violence occurs? If so, what are they?
14. What are the major themes in your book?
15. Did this book change how you look at the world? How?

Appendix E: Journal Questions

*Several of these journal questions are similar to those that Jacqueline Glasgow used in her YA literature unit.

Journal #1:

- Describe the protagonist and initial situation.

Journal #2:

- Describe the conflict(s) in your book.
- Does oppression occur in your book? How so?
- Do the characters in your book condone or accept the actions of others?
- What (if any) events cause the characters to resist the actions or opinions of others?

Journal #3:

- How does the protagonist grow or change?
- Describe a major theme in the book.
- Could any secondary characters have acted differently? How could you advise the character to handle the situation?
- What warning signs (if any) were evident?

Appendix F: Honors LA 10 3rd Quarter Book Project

Directions – For the past few weeks, you have been reading a book that has some element of violence in it. Your final assignment will be to examine, in a 1-3 page paper, the causes, effects, and warning signs of violence in your book. You will have the entire period on Thursday, February 26 to write your essay. On Friday, February 27, you will meet with the other people who read your book and come up with a common list of causes, effects and warning signs to share with the class.

MLA Format – Your paper heading should be on the left side and include the following, in order: your name, your teacher’s name, the name of the class, and date (26 February 2009). You should have a title of some sort. Each page should have your last name and page number in the upper right hand corner. Since you are only talking about one book, just include a short works cited note at the end of your paper including the author name, title, place the book was published, the name of the publisher, and the year it was published:

Works Cited

Schuller, Gunther. *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development*. New York: Oxford UP, 1968.

Quotes – Any time you use a quote from the book (and I will be looking for at least one relevant quote), use quotation marks and put the page number in parentheses before the period, like this:

Clay feels regret when he describes finding out about how Hannah felt: “My eyes sting. Not from the salt in my eyes but because I haven’t closed them since learning Hannah cried when I left the room” (218).

Elements to be addressed –

- Causes of violence – What led to the violence in the book? Was it a dysfunctional family, mental issues, bullying, revenge? List and explain as many as you can. Dig deep. What *really* caused this violence?
- Effects of violence – What occurred as a result of the violence? Severe injury or death? Mental issues? Sadness and worry for the family and community? Again, really think hard about how the violence affected the lives of the people involved.
- Warning signs – Did the perpetrator exhibit any warning signs before he or she committed the violent act? Did they warn friends? Act depressed? Threaten people? Finally, explain how the violence could have ultimately been avoided.

See the back of this page for the rubric I will use to grade your papers.

Each of these categories will be worth 25 points, for a total of 100 points.

1. Format – Did you follow the MLA format given on the front of the page? Did you include a heading with all necessary information? Did you number pages correctly? Is everything uniformly double spaced? Did you cite quotes correctly?

/25 points

2. Organization – Your paper should have an introduction, body paragraphs answering (each question should be a body paragraph), and conclusion.

/25 points

3. Thoroughness of answers – Did you fully explore each of the three questions? Did you find quotes that supported your claims?

/25 points

4. Group presentation – This part will be graded on Friday. After you meet with your group, you will present (together) your answers to the three questions. I will be looking for everyone to participate and to demonstrate good speech basics (loud volume, eye contact, no fidgeting).

/25 points

Total = /100 points