Rigor, Young Adult Literature, and Socioeconomics:
An Analysis of High School Literacy Teachers' Text Choices from National Survey Data

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Abstract: Boyd and Darragh report on a national survey administered to secondary English teachers to explore the factors that influenced their text selections and to examine how those factors varied according to socioeconomic considerations. The authors would like to thank Chad Gotch for his contributions to the design of the survey utilized in this research and for his insights into analysis. In addition, they would like to thank Kathleen M. D. Malley for providing statistical consultation and offering insightful feedback on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

Secondary literacy educators are well versed in debates over the English canon. While it was once assumed that a core text base was necessary for all Americans (Hirsch, 1988), trends in multicultural education (Banks, 1989) exposed the exclusivity in such notions and their mismatch with the realities of our society. Although the battle for more inclusive curriculum wages on (Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006), these historic victories opened up the field for broadening to diverse perspectives. In more recent years, young adult literature (YAL) has also become prominent as a valid form for study (Cart, 2010), and film and visuals as texts are increasingly more accepted (Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, & López, 2013). And yet, the approval of the Common Core State Standards nationwide in 2012 has vastly altered this landscape, as the creation of a list of Text Exemplars has led many to fear the return to a standardized, predominately White, curriculum in secondary literacy classrooms (Goering & Connors, 2014). Given this multitude of factors to consider, how, then, do practicing teachers determine what to include in their curriculum?

Such was our purpose in designing and administering a national survey to secondary literacy teachers. We were particularly interested in the following questions: What factors contribute to text selection in the high school English classroom? Do socioeconomic considerations impact teachers' text selection? Are high school teachers using YA literature in their classrooms? Do socioeconomic considerations impact teachers' inclusion or omission of YA literature into their courses? Ultimately, we aimed to analyze teachers' self-reported curricular choices and to provide a snapshot of the current state of the field in literacy education at a time when there are a host of influential forces for teachers to navigate.

Review of Literature

Multiple scholars have researched the topic of text selection in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, focusing on texts most commonly taught and the ways in which those choices have or have not fluctuated over the years (Applebee, 1992; Applebee, 1996; Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006; Stotsky, 2010). Historically, quantitative measures, such as Lexile scores, reading formulas, and standardized levels based on structure, format, content, and illustrations, have been a standard consideration regarding decision making around texts (e.g. Fry, 2002; Lesesne, 2005; Moley, Bandre, & George, 2011). Using such figures, specialists believe teachers can match students to texts based on students' perceived ability and their direct fit with a text that mirrors that capacity. Lexile ranges, assigned to a scope of grade levels, now includes a "stretch band," which reflects the desire for students "In the subsequent grade or grades within a band," to "'stretch' to read a certain proportion of texts from the next higher" band ("Text Complexity," para. 4). There is, therefore, an expectation for growth in students' reading capabilities at each grade level, implying that the teacher should be well-acquainted with their students' reading levels in order to provide texts that not only meet those, but also foster student progress.

To complement these quantitative measures, teachers also use more personal forms of professional knowledge to inform their text selection. Past experience with a book,

student interest and appeal are also considerations, as teachers realize that lexile/reading level is virtually meaningless if students are not interested in the content of the text itself (e.g. Friese, Alvermann, Parkes, & Rezak, 2008; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Rush & Scherff, 2013; Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006). In terms of selecting texts that engage students, teachers have begun to employ YAL for its appeal based on relevancy, its fast-paced plots, and its treatment of social topics that reflect students' lives (Alexie 2011; Gallo, 2001). Discerning the impact that reading YAL can have on students, such as affecting their identities as readers, enhancing their personal relationships with peers and family members, and developing their sense of agency (Ivey & Johnston, 2013), teachers have become more apt to select such texts for their classrooms. Access to texts that promote specific skill development also plays a role in text selection (Friese et al, 2008). Often, teachers are at the mercy of the texts in their book closets or to those works anthologized in textbooks. Finally, teachers' own preference can be a determining factor in classroom inclusion or exclusion (Christenbury, 2006), as teachers themselves need to feel invested in the works with which they engage their young students.

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in forty-two states, the District of Columbia, and four territories has brought the focus on text selection and text lists back into the forefront of discussion in the field (Standards, 2016). Appendix B (2010) of the CCSS provides a list of Exemplary Texts to meet the four strands into which English Language Arts has been divided (Reading, Writing, Listening/Speaking, and Language). Appendix B was published as a list of recommendations, a catalogue of suggested texts that exemplify the genres and develop the skills required in the standards. The document itself states, "the choices should serve as useful guideposts. . . . They expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list" (p. 2), and those who provide training on CCSS implementation are quick to explain that the works in Appendix B are not mandates or required (Goering & Connors, 2014).

However, the fact that the list exists at all has given many educators pause. The ELA Grades 9-12 list, for example, is full of suggestions from the traditional canon that one might expect to find on such a list such as *The Odyssey, The Grapes of Wrath*, and poetry by Emily Dickinson (Moss, 2013). There are some works by diverse authors included, such as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,* Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail,* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* The list contains only one YA selection, Zusak's *The Book Thief.* Many worry that this list of exemplars will morph into district mandates on local levels or even self-imposed directives by departments and/or individual teachers. Teachers, worried about their students' achievement on the assessments that accompany the CCSS, may be reluctant to use any texts not mentioned on the list (Goering & Connors, 2014), as familiarity with those texts would seem to indicate better performance on related assessments (Moss, 2013). Watkins and Ostenson's (2015) study on teachers' perceptions of the text exemplar list, for example, found that 60% of teachers surveyed "would be giving these titles (on Appendix B) at least some weight" (p. 261), and more than half (51%) of the respondents indicated that they would be willing to substitute up to half of the texts they currently teach with titles on the CCSS Exemplar Text list. They may be suggestions, but they are being weighed heavily by practitioners in the field.

In addition to perceived pressure to choose texts based on the Exemplar List, teachers might feel burdened by other outside sources as well. Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber (2006) posit that many teachers fear that "parents, colleagues, administrators, students, and the community [will] … disagree with the content of the literature curriculum" (p. 484), and, because of this fear, may make text choices that will likely avoid any type of controversy. This sort of self-censorship, or "voluntarily removing books before they are challenged" (Lent, 2016, para. 2) can occur in both the careers of novice and veteran teachers. It may seem acutely salient for new teachers, who wish to avoid troubling the system early in their careers. Rickman (2010) bolsters this assumption, finding that teachers with 15 or fewer years' experience tended more toward self-censorship. Yet, others have found that veteran teachers also self-censor, wishing to avoid the energy it takes to address and defend themselves when faced with book challenges (Boyd & Bailey, 2009). Thus, anticipating backlash can be a deciding factor in teachers' text

selection. What texts teachers *are* choosing and how, from anticipating students' performance on standardized tests to catering toward their overall motivation and enjoyment, is a topic that will not go away anytime soon, and, as such, warrants ongoing investigation.

Theoretical Framework

This research on texts used in ELA classrooms is grounded in theories of curriculum studies, which take into account the materiality of the classroom as connected to larger sociocultural issues such as politics and history. Pinar (2012) explains that "curriculum theory is the scholarly effort to understand the curriculum, conceived here as 'complicated conversation'" (p. 1). Through curriculum, students are invited into "ongoing cultural conversations about their lives and the world in which they live" (Applebee, 1996, p. 39). Curriculum is never neutral (Dyches & Boyd, 2017), but in fact texts themselves are imbued with political meaning (Segall, 2004; Yoon, Simpson, & Hagood, 2010). The texts employed in classrooms are indicative of the perspectives being explored, including those from privileged or minoritized groups and the narratives and norms being communicated, such as ideals of meritocracy and struggle. They also potentially reflect teachers' comfort levels with social topics relevant to a young adult audience, such as racism, suicide, or gender inequity, as well as a willingness to broach such issues in the classroom. In the English classroom, therefore, the texts under study have great ramifications for the types of learning that occur and the messages conveyed.

Applebee (1996) emphasizes specifically the dialogue promoted by textual study in his framing: "a curriculum provides domains for conversation, and the conversations that take place within those domains are the primary means of teaching and learning" (p. 37). The ELA classroom, unlike many other discipline areas, is perfectly situated for the exploration of a host of topics with texts as the springboard for such examination. English teachers have the power to guide conversations on controversial issues and to develop students' understandings of a wide variety of themes. Students can engage in "exploratory speech" related to texts in which they "think aloud as they work through

their ideas" (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 11), understanding the classroom to be a space where critical thought is engaged collaboratively rather than pre-determined or provided by the teacher. Now more than ever, this potential of the classroom can be harnessed to engage students in productive, constructive dialogue on the state of our political climate, the rights of individuals in this country and abroad, and shifts in governing policies—to involve youth with topics that facilitate their understandings of democracy and justice (Hess, 2009). As potentially imminent voting citizens with a stake in social policies, this is of vast import. Backed by NCTE's Position Statement on Academic Freedom (2014) which declares, "In academic contexts, students and teachers have the right to express their views on any matter relevant to the curriculum" (p. 1), such conversations therefore have a place in the English classroom. Texts, however, are the pivot point for dynamic dialogue to begin.

From the standpoint of reconstructionist curriculum studies theory, the teacher's role is key, despite efforts for educational reform that might seek to limit or standardize curricular choices. To this end, Pinar (2012) highlights the notion of subjectivity in studying curriculum, which he categorizes as "inseparable from the social" (p. 5). For the purposes of the study here, we translated this into the individual choices of the teacher while realizing that these are likely influenced by external dynamics. Thus we hoped to glean both teachers' sense of agency in curricular choices and the ways in which they connected this to the context of their school and district. Curriculum theory prompts us to move from a concept of "curriculum in terms of coverage to one in terms of a significant set of conversations" where "a real issue of who chooses" must be uncovered and explored (Applebee, 1996, p. 48).

Methods

For this study we used Qualtrics to create a twenty item survey consisting of selected response questions with spaces for comments when appropriate in attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to text selection in the high school English classroom?
2. Do socioeconomic considerations impact teachers' text selection?
3. Are high school teachers using YA literature in their classrooms?
4. Do socioeconomic considerations impact teachers' inclusion or omission of YA literature into their courses?

To distribute the survey, we used a convenience and snowball sampling approach. Survey links were posted on the online NCTE Teaching and Learning Forum and on the Facebook sites of both researchers, each a former high school English teacher and current English Education faculty member at two different universities in different states. Fliers with the survey link were also posted and hand distributed at the NCTE and ALAN annual meetings in Minneapolis in November 2015, and, in all cases, participants were encouraged to forward the survey link to any currently practicing secondary English teachers they knew.

A total of 190 secondary English Language Arts and Reading teachers representing more than 40 states completed the survey. We were particularly interested in the responses from those who teach at the high school level (grades 9-12); therefore, we used Qualtrics to filter the results to focus on those who self-identified as teaching grades 9-12 (n=109). As we were also particularly interested in comparisons between teachers serving in different socioeconomic settings, we filtered and compared responses from teachers at schools where the free and reduced meal percentage (F/R) is less than 25% and those who teach at schools where the F/R meal percentage is more than 50%. This percentage was used as a parameter because the literature suggests that more than 50% F/R meal is a determining factor in a school having the designation of being a "high poverty school." We utilized Qualtrics to produce descriptive statistics from the quantitative survey data

from the identified 109 respondents. We then conducted a qualitative analysis on the responses provided in the comment boxes, applying layers of open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) to construct emergent patterns and themes. We relied on those findings to triangulate the quantitative survey results.

Results

Research Question 1: What factors contribute to text selection in the high school English classroom?

While a variety of factors lead to a teacher's choice of text, respondents of this survey indicated that their department, personal interest, and student interest were the largest factors contributing to their text selections. In fact, 40.49%, 30.06%, and 30.30% respectively indicated each of those *very much influenced* their selection. Those factors that respondents claimed had little to no impact on their text choices were parents, administrators, teacher preparation programs, and school boards (see Table 1).

Table 1

Factors Influencing Text Selection

Factor	Extremely Influences	Very Much Influences	Somewhat Influences	Slightly Influences	Does Not Influence
Students	22.42%	30.30%	29.09%	9.70%	8.48%
Self Interest/Choice	19.02%	30.06%	34.36%	9.20%	7.36%

Department	14.11%	40.49%	22.09%	9.20%	14.11%
Administration	6.79%	10.49%	25.31%	27.78%	29.63%
School Board	6.13%	7.98%	17.79%	24.54%	43.56%
Parents	1.22%	4.27%	15.24%	31.10%	48.17%

The qualitative comments supported these findings. With reference to department choices, one teacher shared, "As a new teacher, there's great pressure to conform to existing curriculum," and another stated that her department was "set on curriculum." Still others, however, felt that their personal interests were supported. Some spoke of texts they wished "to avoid," while others discussed literature they "care for," and another simply stated, "Teachers should choose what and how they want to teach." Reflecting the predominant number who noted the importance of students, many mentioned specifically providing students with choice. Within this category, descriptors such as "free choice reading unit," "self-select," "independent reading," "autonomy of choice," and "student chosen sets" were indicative of an emphasis on the learners themselves in text selection. One teacher advocated using "titles that students are truly interested in and will read," reflecting that anticipating student interest indeed guides many teachers' selection processes.

Research Question 2: Do socioeconomic considerations impact teachers' text selection?
When comparing responses regarding factors that contribute to text selection based on the schools' free and reduced meal percentages, some variance occurred. For schools with less than 25% F/R meals, relevance to students' interests (87.5%), relevance to unit of study (62.5%), and teacher personal preference (56.3%) emerged as the most impactful. For schools with more than 50% F/R meals, relevance to students' interests (82%), relevance to unit of study (82%), and availability (81.3%) emerged as the factors with the most impact (see Table 2).

Table 2

A Socioeconomic Comparison of Factors Influencing Text Selection

>25% F/R meal	<50% F/R meal
Relevance to students' interests (87.5%)	Relevance to students' interests (82%)
Relevance to unit of study (62.5%)	Relevance to unit of study (82%)
Teacher personal preference (56.3%)	Availability (81.3%)

Again, teachers' open comment responses bolstered this finding. Especially in the population of teachers at schools with higher percentages of free and reduced meals, availability of texts arose frequently in their responses. One teacher, for instance, shared, "I am extremely limited with what resources I have. I currently have 160 students and I'm getting 30 more at semester . . . Students don't even have their own book most of the time. We have to use class sets." Similarly, a different participant noted that "resources are extremely limited. We often only have class sets of books and students have to complete all the reading in class. We should be allowed to teach what students are interested in." This teacher indicated that availability of texts impacts their selection, even at the risk of perhaps what they feel would best engage their students.

Another teacher referenced the "limited amount of funds" in their school for accessing alternative material she desired to teach.

Research Question 3: Are high school teachers using YA literature in their classrooms? Nearly half of the respondents (46%) indicated that they use YA literature in their classrooms and in a variety of ways, including as whole class novels, in literature circles, and as individual choice reads. However, overwhelmingly, YA literature is not the emphasis in these classrooms. 67% of respondents who use YA literature indicated that it comprises less than 25% of the literature used in their course; 21% said that YA literature comprises 25-50% of literature used; and 12% indicated that YA literature contributes to more than 50% of the texts used in their English classes.

Of those teachers who do incorporate YAL in their classrooms, reasons provided were that it motivated both them and their students. For instance, one teacher shared that "YA Lit continues to fuel the electricity that lights my students' desires to read! Without it, my job would not be nearly as much fun!" and another stated, "I encourage the use of YA literature for my students as it is one way they can begin to see themselves in stories." The potential of YAL to "teach empathy and the importance of individuality" was also recounted. Mirroring the majority of respondents who use YAL infrequently, however, one teacher expressed concern for it as a valid resource, explaining, "I think too much of it lacks the longevity to make the investment worth the purchase for schools." Another shared, "Young adult texts can be a tad too elementary," while still another replied that "It lacks so much depth and quality." Not all reasons for excluding YAL were based on its merit, however. Some desired to include more but highlighted time and access as limiting factors, overlapping with their responses on the structures that influenced text selection generally.

Research Question 4: Do socioeconomic considerations impact teachers' inclusion or omission of YA literature?

Socioeconomics as determined through self-reported percentage of students receiving F/R meal services did not seem to impact whether or not teachers use YA literature. There was a nearly even split, with 47% of respondents who teach at schools with less than 25% F/R meal rates indicating that they use YAL, and 49% of respondents who teach at schools with more than 50% F/R meal percentages using YAL in their classrooms. For schools with less than 25% F/R meal services, the top reasons for *not* using YAL were the course (62.5%), concerns about text complexity (43.8%), and perceived curricular mandates (43.8%). For schools with a greater than 50% F/R meal services, the top reasons identified for *not* using YAL were perceived curricular mandates (78.9%), lack of resources (57.9%), and the course (57.9%) (see Table 3).

Table 3

A Socioeconomic Comparison of Factors for Exclusion of YAL

>25% F/R meal	<50% F/R meal
The course (62.5%)	Perceived curricular mandates (78.9%)
Concerns about text complexity (43.8%)	Lack of resources (57.9%)
Perceived curricular mandates (43.8%)	The course (57.9%)

Patterns supporting the quantitative survey results emerged in analysis of the qualitative comments specific to socioeconomic demographics regarding the inclusion or omission of YAL. Teachers in schools that have fewer students with socioeconomic challenges indicated that they do not use YAL because they are concerned about college readiness and text complexity. For example, one teacher explained, "95% of our students go to college, many to competitive schools, so YA literature, though it has a rich heritage, is not really what many of the colleges want for a shared literary experience." Another said, "Because we are a college-prep school, the texts used are geared toward early college learners." A third explained, "Students already read what is popular, and exposure to the canon is important." Similarly, one teacher responded, "We tend to opt for the 'classic canon' choices to maintain rigor."

Conversely, teachers serving in schools with more students struggling financially frequently indicated that lack of resources was the greatest barrier to their being able to teach YA literature. Said one teacher, "It seems like I'm stretched so thin and there are too many additional things that administration is wanting me to devote attention to. This makes it difficult to justify YA lit, both as far as time and money go." Another explained, "I would love to use young adult lit, but we do not have the funds to order books, and we are barred from asking students to buy their own books." A third respondent lamented, "I would love to do more including choice books, but my school does not even have a library yet."

Limitations

While this study garnered responses from 190 teachers across 40 states, given the ways in which the survey was disseminated (through social media and through NCTE and ALAN pathways), it is possible that this sample is skewed toward those teachers who value the inclusion of YAL and who feel supported by their professional communities in their text selection. A larger sample would reveal more robust results. In addition, comment sections were largely open-ended, and while most respondents did include comments to support their Likert scale choices, some did not. Including follow-up

interviews with survey respondents would provide more detailed information and help clarify any questions regarding responses. Despite its limitations, we feel the results of this study are compelling enough to make it worthy of consideration for currently practicing teachers, administrators, and teacher educators alike.

Discussion

This study contributes to existing research regarding what texts teachers are using in their English classrooms and why. Results illustrate that teachers are largely making text selections based on their department, self and student interests. Many teachers are using YA literature in their high school classes, and they are using this literature in a variety of ways. Our work builds on previous studies to show that, overall, teachers share common goals with regard to their literature choices—to relate to students' interests and to create a strong unit of study—regardless of the socioeconomic status of the learners in their classrooms. Findings also suggest that, while not the focus of most secondary English classrooms, YAL is being included in many classrooms across the country.

In addition, results of this study also indicate that, for teachers in high-needs schools, lack of access to resources may create a barrier to teacher autonomy from text selection that may transcend students' unique learning needs and interests. Teachers in schools with large percentages of students in need indicated that one of the greatest considerations in their text selection was connected to access—an issue that did not come up at all among teachers in schools serving lower percentages of students in financial need. Limited access to resources often confines curriculum to adopted textbooks or antiquated material. Research has shown that textbooks often present biased, monolithic, and distorted depictions of history (e.g. Shear, 2015). Resources, therefore, play a significant part in students' learning. Moreover, how can teachers feel empowered as professionals to teach that which they know to be appropriate, applicable, interesting and relevant to their students' lives if they are constrained financially to have any choice in materials?

Furthermore, from the perspective of curriculum studies, restricted curriculum may also preclude the presence of critical conversations and dialogue in ELA classrooms. When texts are the basis of discussion, how can we expect students to engage in lively conversation about current events and the political milieu if the material they have is outdated, sanitized, or, worse, exclusionary? Not only is YAL more contemporary, but it also provides those critical topics for discussion that relate to students and engage them with their worlds (Gallo, 2001).

Also of concern, the results of this study suggest that there may be a disparity in expectations for students connected to socioeconomic status. In response to why teachers did not use YAL in their classrooms, those in schools with higher SES tended to show deeper concern about text complexity and college preparation, expressing beliefs that YAL cannot meet those demands in ways the traditional canon does. Their counterparts at schools that serve more students in financial need did not express this as their reasoning in the lack of YAL in their classrooms. Further research needs to be conducted to unpack this potential deficit mindset as well as what it means for students with limited finances. While access to curriculum has been documented to vary by students' track placement (Oakes, 1985), and expectations for students seen to differ according to socioeconomic status (Lareau & Horvat, 1999), it is possible that this similar finding in our study illustrates a specific manifestation in ELA of this larger phenomenon. There is value in having students read both works from the traditional canon and young adult literature, and we do not purport to pit the two against each other. However, it is essential to unpack the constraints and barriers, self-imposed or not, that teachers perceive in their text selection so they can feel empowered to put their students' needs first. In this case, teachers more acutely felt restrictions regarding the use of YAL in their classrooms.

Implications and Conclusions

This study has implications for both teacher educators and classroom teachers. Those of us who work in teacher education must continue to work with our students to dispel deficit notions that might affect the way they treat students and families. We must foster our teacher candidates' critical consciousness (Hinchey, 2004) or their dissection of both their own socialization and ideologies as well as the world around them. Such work also includes having teacher candidates hypothesize how their beliefs might infiltrate their teaching (Boyd, 2017) and help them to recognize the vast impacts their dispositions will have on text selection and implementation. If curriculum can be indicative of the conversations teachers are having with students, and if teachers are continuing to rely on canonical texts, we must also prepare pre-service teachers to cultivate critical conversations around traditional curriculum (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone, 2014). Shakespeare, for instance, can lend itself to discussions of gender, sexual assault, or social class (Butler & Boyd, in press). The teacher's role in facilitating such conversations is key, and it is the role of the teacher educator to model such pedagogies with their students. Finally, teacher educators should expose candidates to a variety of texts, including YAL, and encourage their students to develop rationales for teaching *any* text in their classroom (Smagorinsky, 2007). Thinking through this ahead of time will empower teachers because their choices will based on solid, theoretical foundations. Practicing teachers can research how YAL actually fulfills the requirements of text complexity (Glaus, 2013), obviating concerns about rigor and college-preparedness. Educators in economically disadvantaged areas who experience a lack of resources might explore external grants or funding sources that would allow for the purchase of new classroom materials, or they may consider using excerpts of young adult novels to accomplish their standards and goals. While we understand that YAL cannot be the only type of text that students encounter, we do feel its role in the classroom should be more prominent based on its relevancy and ability to incite both student interest and conversations on real-world topics.

In general, further research is needed to get a more robust understanding of how text selection plays out in different states and districts across the country, and ways in which teacher preparation programs, mentoring programs, and curriculum committees and leaders inform and support teachers in making appropriate text selections to meet the diverse learning needs of their students. Specific to this study, more research is needed to determine how teachers who serve the economically challenged are constricted by lack of finances as well as ways in which to bridge the economic gap in order to provide equal educational opportunities for all students.

It is our conviction that it is not the particular type of text or title that is most important; rather, it is the issue of access, agency, and equity. All teachers, regardless of the demographics in which they teach, should have the opportunity to select texts that meet the diverse and unique learning needs of their students and represent a breadth of historic and contemporary contexts. Without access to these sorts of texts, the dialogue that exists in classrooms will also be confined. If and when teachers are constrained in their curricular choices, the situation becomes an issue of social justice and an issue worthy of attention by all who care about teaching and learning.

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Appendix B: Text exemplars and sample performance tasks. Common core state standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science and technical subjects. (2010). Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/assets/ Appendix_B.pdf.

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