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Slowly shifting out of neutral

Using young adult literature to discuss PSTs' beliefs about racial injustice and police brutality

Racial injustice
and police
brutality

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is twofold: to explore how preservice teachers in a young adult literature course critically conceptualize discussions in school spaces about race and police/community relations; and to understand the constraints and affordances of using the young adult (YA) novel, *All American Boys*, as a critical literacy tool for discussing race and police/community relations.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative exploratory case study (Stake, 1995) investigated 24 pre-service teachers in two university YA literature courses as they read and discussed *All American Boys*. Thematic analysis consisted of open coding through the theoretical lenses of critical literacy and critical race theory.

Findings – Pre-service English language arts teachers largely thought that while race and police relations was important and the YA book was powerful, it was too political. Their fears about what might happen lead to privileging the role of neutrality as the desired goal for teachers when tackling difficult conversations about racial injustice in America. Although students made some shifts in terms of moving from neutral to more critical stances, three sub-themes of neutrality were predominant: a need for both sides of the story, the view that all beliefs are valid and the belief that we are all humans therefore all lives matter equally.

Originality/value – A search at the time of this study yielded few research tackling racial injustice and community/police relations through YA literature in the classroom. This study is important as stories of police brutality and racism are all too common and adolescents are too often the victims.

Keywords Neutrality, Discussion, Political classrooms, Pre-service teachers, Racial violence, Young adult literature

Paper type Research paper

In 1991, four White police officers in Los Angeles were video-recorded repeatedly and excessively kicking, clubbing and tasing Rodney King, an African American taxi driver. The subsequent acquittal of the police officers led to one of the largest civil unrests in US history, the LA riots. Although incidents of racial injustice were not new in the USA, the Rodney King beating was one of the first police brutality videos of its kind, and it forever changed the conversation about police and race in America. Twenty-six years later, reports of police violence against Black and Brown bodies in the USA continue, and with the rise of smartphones, people have taken to documenting those incidents via social media. In 2014, when a White police officer shot and murdered Michael Brown, an unarmed African American adolescent in the streets of Ferguson, MO, demonstrations consumed the city, re-awakened race conversations, and incited activism through the movement #BlackLivesMatter.



Now an international movement, #BlackLivesMatter has spread from the USA to South Africa and Europe where protesters marched in solidarity with protesters in the USA (Winsor, 2016). All too often in countries around the world, marginalized communities are oppressed by, and not protected by, police (Narayan-Parker *et al.*, 2000). The protests started an international discussion regarding criminal justice, race, police and community relations – a discussion that is beginning to occur in formal school spaces.

To give teachers a way to discuss these incidents with their students, several educators created Twitter hashtags #BlackLivesMatterSyllabus and #FergusonSyllabus where they shared discussion questions and readings that would help students process the complexities of racial violence within the USA. Despite these resources, many teachers struggle with how to engage with these tough, often uncomfortable, politically, socially and culturally charged conversations within their classrooms.

As English teacher educators, we felt strongly that prospective English language arts (ELA) teachers must be taught strategies and have opportunities to practice discussing these politically charged topics so they are prepared for these conversations with their future students through reading, writing, speaking and listening activities in their classrooms. According to Sealey-Ruiz (2016, p. 294), ELA teachers are “in a unique position to interrupt the violence, pedagogical injustices, and misrepresentations [. . .]” through the “tools we have at our disposal (writing, visual arts, spoken word, and other modalities [. . .]).” Preparing our preservice teachers (PSTs) for this task was precisely what we hoped to do by continuing the #FergusonSyllabus conversation with our ELA PSTs.

Despite the copious documentation of teachers, specifically PSTs, resisting race talk (Berlak and Moyenda, 2001; Pollock, 2004; Thomas, 2015), we set out to tackle these topics as part of our beliefs in the value of critically-oriented, social justice, and antiracist pedagogies. We were particularly interested in thinking about how diverse young adult literature (YAL) could serve as a tool to facilitate these difficult conversations about racial injustice and police violence with our PSTs.

While there could be numerous approaches for politically charged conversations in the ELA classroom, for the purpose of this article, we examine the potential of YAL as a critical pedagogy tool in both secondary ELA classrooms and in teacher education for tackling topics like racism and police brutality, through using critical literacy and critical race theories as our theoretical lenses. We describe our study with PSTs in which we used a particular multivoiced narrative fiction novel, *All American Boys* by Reynolds and Kiely (2015), to investigate its effectiveness for discussing the deeply divisive and difficult topic of racialized police brutality. Our findings demonstrate an initial reticence in our PSTs to engage in these discussions because taking a stand in the classroom was seen as *too political*. Their fears about what *might* happen lead to PSTs from various racial identities privileging the role of *neutrality* as the desired goal for teachers in conversations about racial injustice in America throughout reading of the novel. However, the novel also prompted shifts in some students’ thinking about neutrality, exhibiting promise for the use of literature as a critical pedagogy tool.

Young adult literature as a critical literacy tool

Literature, in general, creates opportunities to put oneself in another person’s shoes. Nussbaum (1997) argued that literature’s purpose is to cultivate:

[. . .] in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us (p. 85).

Research has shown that narrative fiction has a greater impact toward empathy building and prejudice reduction than real life encounters. Perhaps fiction offers a simplified account compared to the multilayered social, cultural and historical aspects of real life while maintaining personification of the complex emotional and relational aspects of human life (Mar and Oatley, 2008).

Multicultural YAL provides opportunities for adolescents to read about issues relevant to their own lives through the eyes of diverse characters of approximate similar age. Multicultural YAL provides a mirror reflecting back on one's own lived experiences, a window that allows one to view others' lived experiences, or a sliding glass door in which one can enter another's cultural, social or racial world (Bishop, 2012). Thus, reading YAL is a powerful tool and resource for teaching social justice (Groenke *et al.*, 2010; Harmon and Henkin, 2016). It can help all students develop empathy and critical thinking that can lead to a sense of social responsibility and social action (Alsup, 2015; Glasgow, 2001; Glenn, 2012; Wolk, 2009).

Besides helping students empathize and take responsibility upon witnessing injustices, YAL also challenges single stories by providing counter-narratives to mainstream stereotypes and generalizations (Glenn, 2012; Hughes-Hassell, 2013). YAL that is written with multiple voices, narrators or perspectives is particularly effective as a critical literacy tool because it broadens and complicates perceptions of the world (Koss, 2009).

Although multicultural and multivoiced YAL helps readers to embody, interrogate and analyze multiple perspectives as a way of telling counter-stories and prompting social action, only a few scholars have written about YAL's potential as a tool for specifically discussing racial injustice and police brutality in secondary classrooms (Johnson *et al.*, 2017; Zwillenberg and Gioia, 2017). A handful of scholars, however, have written more widely about race, incarceration and the criminal justice system through YAL (Engles and Kory, 2013; Oslick, 2010).

YAL has been used by other scholars as a tool with PSTs to talk about controversial sociocultural, racial and politically charged issues to model how to have these discussions in their future classroom (Alsup, 2015; Groenke *et al.*, 2010). A few English teacher educators have written specifically about deconstructing notions of race and diverse populations with their pre-service teachers (PSTs) through the study of YAL (Glenn, 2012; Groenke *et al.*, 2015). Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013) describe urban and multicultural YA texts as "transformative tools" in teacher education courses. For example, in Pytash's (2013) study, using YAL helped PSTs to empathize and think about bullying through the character's perspective while at the same time feeling better prepared to deal with bullying and suicide in their future classrooms. Similarly, Coleman-King and Groenke (2015) found that using multicultural YA fiction provided a "multiplicity of voices and perspectives that are typically absent in teacher preparation" (p. 59), thus widening their understanding of youth of color and how racism operates in the world by "experience[ing] injustice" from the "perspective of marginalized individuals" in the stories (p. 64).

YAL has been described as inherently pedagogical (Alsup, 2015) and is praised for its ability to bring issues of injustice into the homes and classrooms of young adults (Wolk, 2009). Reading YAL with PSTs offers opportunities for "imaginative rehearsals" to consider possible future scenarios or events they may encounter as they become in-service teachers (Gallagher, 2009). This is particularly important as, politically, people's ideologies become more partisan and more heated. As teacher educators, we both believe that social justice and critical pedagogies are important for PSTs to understand and enact, and that based on the research, our YAL courses afforded us an opportunity to model and prepare our students to discuss race-based injustice and institutions of oppression, such as police oversight and abuses of power.

Critical literacy and critical race theory

Our analysis of our PSTs' perceptions of discussing race and police relations using YAL in the classroom was framed by critical literacy and the pedagogies outlined by Freire (1985) who believed that teaching was a political practice and never neutral. Educators, he said, need to "recognize ourselves as politicians" (p. 17) and work toward transforming reality by critically challenging dominant ideologies that seek to oppress.

In the ELA classroom, this can be done through critical literacy. For Freire (1983), critical literacy goes beyond just "decoding the written word" to understanding how reading is:

[...] anticipated by and extended into knowledge of the world. Reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. Language and reality are dynamically intertwined (p. 5).

Here, understanding occurs through the relationship between context and text. But, critical literacy goes beyond just text analysis; reading becomes a "matter of studying reality that is alive, reality that we are living inside of, reality as history being made and also making us" (Freire, 1985, p. 18). Through a critical reading of the world in the word, and vice versa, one is able to bring to light social injustices and inequities, such as racism, and the power of institutions, such as the police, to enforce practices that oppress.

A theory we found particularly apt for building upon Freire's ideas and making sense of the race-based classrooms' discussions around our chosen YA novel, was critical race theory (CRT; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Matsuda *et al.*, 1993; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Specifically, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) discuss how CRT is designed as a "counter" for deficit storytelling" (p. 23), which aligns with the scholarship on using YAL as critical tool to confront challenging topics.

There are several central tenets of CRT that helped inform our study, and the subsequent analysis of data, including the following:

- Racism is pervasive inside and outside of American schools (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).
- Colorblindness, including stances of neutrality and objectivity, is a problematic solution to racism (Matsuda *et al.*, 1993; Ullucci and Battey, 2011).
- Education should promote action for social justice that helps eliminate all forms of oppression (Bolgatz, 2005; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002).

It is also important to note that CRT has served as the foundation for critical whiteness studies and later second-wave whiteness (Jupp *et al.*, 2016). As the context of our study included two predominantly White institutions, predominantly White class compositions and two White researchers, we considered tenets of second-wave whiteness studies, such as analysis of White PSTs' silences as well as their statements, and that White PSTs are not a monolithic group.

Research design and methods

This qualitative exploratory case study (Stake, 1995) investigated PSTs in two university YAL courses as they read and discussed *All American Boys*. The qualitative approach to inquiry looks at *what is the nature* of an issue and *how is it perceived* and is marked by data collection in the field (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The field for this study was the two university classrooms and their online spaces. Because we wanted to see each PST's participation and hear each participant's understanding, we chose to design the study as a case study (Stake, 1995). The case was bound by these two groups of people working at the

same time, on the same text, across two geographical places. The multicultural, multivoiced YA fiction text *All American Boys* was chosen to begin discussion about the death of Michael Brown and other victims of personal and institutionalized incidents of race-based police brutality.

The main research questions included are as follows:

- RQ1. How do PSTs in a YAL course critically conceptualize discussions in school spaces about race and police/community relations?
- RQ2. What are the constraints and affordances of using a YA novel, *All American Boys*, in the ELA classroom as a critical literacy tool for discussing race and police/community relations? The case study was exploratory because research on using *All American Boys* and discussing police violence in the classroom was not available prior to our study.

Participants

Participants included 19 undergraduate and 5 graduate level students in a fall semester YAL course at two universities located in the Southeast USA and the Midwest, respectively. Both universities are large land-grant and primarily White institutions. Participants were selected through convenient purposive sampling of students enrolled in our YAL courses. Of the 24 total participants, 21 were PSTs in initial teacher licensure programs, two were teaching assistants who planned to continue teaching English at the university level and one was a community educator who worked with middle school students. As is common in teacher education courses at predominantly White institutions (Sleeter, 2011), 84 per cent of our participants identified as White and 91 per cent as female.

Although we, Michelle and Shea, are not participants in the study, we feel it is important to recognize our role within this work and our own positionalities as White, cisgendered, heterosexual, female scholars. Although we speak from, and acknowledge, our positions of privilege, both of us have worked to create and champion equitable, diverse and socially just spaces and experiences for students within English classrooms. These beliefs inform our teaching philosophies and pedagogies that we used in our respective YAL courses.

The courses

Both of our YAL courses focused on reading, critically analyzing and discussing a variety of YA texts. Participants engaged in class activities as students of one of our YAL courses. While the *All American Boys*' unit foregrounded in this article represents three-weeks of the courses, social justice, diverse literature and cultural and political themes were central to the courses as a whole.

From the beginning of the semester, students participated in discussions about cultural and political issues using Darwin's (2009) cultural and political vignettes (CPV) framework. The CPV pedagogical approach in teacher education promotes critical literacy instruction as PSTs engage in sensitive social topics and serves as a protocol for PSTs to use in their future secondary classes. Additionally, CPVs were designed with critical literacy in mind, relating to Freire's notions of "the power of dialogue to name the world" and an "emphasis on dialogue leading to transformative action" (Darwin, 2009, p. 35). To engage in dialogue across the two universities, two CPV asynchronous discussions took place using Flipgrid posing two scenarios related to controversial events and issues from *All American Boys*:

- (1) What would you do if you saw a police officer beating up a Black adolescent?
- (2) If you were out to eat with friends and the Black Lives Matter movement came up, what would you say?

In addition to CPVs, PSTs studied critical literacy literature circles where students took one of the following roles when preparing for class discussion:

- disruptor of the commonplace;
- interrogator of multiple viewpoints;
- connector of socio-political issues; and
- advocator of social justice (Lewison *et al.*, 2015).

Throughout the semester, we read and discussed critical theories, and also listened to and discussed TED Talks, such as Young's (2014) "I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much" and Adichie's (2009) "The Danger of a Single Story." A typical weekly format for the courses included reading a YAL novel and literary criticism or ELA methods articles, posting a literary critique blog and replying to classmates' blogs before class, and face-to-face whole class discussions of the novel through the critical literary lens of the week.

Our unit on *All American Boys* lasted three weeks and happened at the same time at both universities. A complete description of all the activities is not possible given space constraints, but the activities and exercises students participated in for this unit included:

- anticipation/reaction guide gauging attitudes about race in the USA;
- analogy exercise capturing PSTs' emotional status;
- establishing groups norms for civil discourse;
- weekly reader reflections and comments on class blog;
- face-to-face whole group discussions; and
- multimodal resources, (documentaries and news articles).

For this study, we used the YA novel *All American Boys* by Reynolds and Kiely (2015), which weaves together the stories of two teenage boys from the same part of town. One of the narrators is African American and one is White, mirroring the two authors' own racial identities. The African American protagonist becomes a victim of police brutality, while the White protagonist witnesses the violent act. Both narrators have to decide whether to be silent or to take a stand. We felt that because *All American Boys* uses dual narrator perspectives, this text has the potential to illuminate the complexities of speaking up and acting out when one witnesses or is a victim of injustice. We felt it could serve as a critical tool for examining how PSTs might use YAL in their future English classrooms to talk about race and police relations within the broader scope of events happening in the country, thereby reading the world and reading the word (Freire, 1983, 1985).

As Boyd and Tochelli (2014) state:

As teachers provide students with varied ways to "read" text – whether it is a book, photograph, or song lyrics – these pedagogical resources permit students to think about topics from multiple vantage points (p. 292).

We hoped that by providing multiple perspectives and multimodalities, students would be able to find paths to enter the discussion and take part of a dialogic learning experience centered on the themes in *All American Boys*.

Data collection

During the three-week unit, all class activities and assignments were collected for data analysis, along with recordings of our class discussions. Additionally, following the novel's completion, eight PSTs were selected for a formal semi-structured, in-person interview. Participants were selected to represent the range of perspectives found in the class while studying the novel. Interviews lasted for about one hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In [Table I](#), data sources and examples of what was collected are described.

Data analysis

Throughout the study, data were analyzed using open coding and constant comparison ([Glaser and Strauss, 1967](#)). Open coding served to identify PSTs' beliefs regarding tough discussions about racial injustice and police violence in *All American Boys*. Data were first open coded by both researchers independently. Keeping the theoretical framework in the foreground, the researchers looked for answers to the first research question by identifying linguistic indicators of colorblindness or critical consciousness. After key statements were identified, the researchers began generating codes. Codes were constantly compared to distill the differing perceptions of participants to form subthemes, and then like subthemes together to form overarching themes. Data on participants' reactions to the novel were initially coded based on indicators of affordances and constraints, to answer *RQ2*. The researchers then met to discuss initial codes and worked through any differences of interpretation until consensus was reached. The researchers then returned to the data and worked to synthesize codes for both research questions.

For the second round of coding, we took [Trainor's \(2008\)](#) advice to avoid the "gotcha" approach where PSTs' contradictions were interpreted as straightforward racism, and instead analyzed the data to examine the purpose of the statements in relation to identity and power. Codes were compared looking for patterns to become subthemes and then themes. See the [Appendix](#) for examples of codes and subthemes for the overarching theme of neutral stances. We reviewed the data together, refining and defining the themes and subthemes until we were confident that all were well-supported and comprehensive yet parsimonious ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)).

Although other themes were found, the most concerning finding was the prevalence of the value of neutrality as an educational practice in our PSTs. It was concerning, given our critical interrogation of the YAL, and our social justice orientation in our courses. As we examined the prevalence of neutrality, we distinguished three subthemes to describe the purposes of neutrality as an ideal pedagogical stance that participants reported. For the third round of data analysis, we identified "rich points" in the data related to shifts from neutrality within each subtheme. [Agar \(2000\)](#) describes rich points as places "the researcher looks for surprising occurrences in language [...] that need to be pursued" (p. 94). These rich points changed our gaze from the most troubling data, or an analysis of critique, to the most hopeful data, or an analysis looking toward possibility ([Giroux, 2009](#)).

To increase trustworthiness, member-checking was done with participations. Additionally, a research assistant who identifies as a person of color conducted a review of the researchers' emergent themes to help bring forward any potential biases. Next, we describe the three subthemes of neutrality and how discussing the novel *All American Boys* helped students begin to shift their thinking toward critical stances.

Findings

The findings presented here are part of a larger study on using the novel *All American Boys* to discuss race and police violence. In this article, we have chosen to focus specifically on

Table 1.
Data sources and
examples

Data source	Research question	Example data
An exploratory visual representation/analogy exercise that attempted to capture participants' initial views of talking about race in the classroom captured on Voice Thread collected at initiation of study	How do PSTs in a YAL course conceptualize discussions in school spaces about race and police/community relations?	"I feel alone when it comes to talking about race in the classroom. Chances are, I will be surrounded by other teachers who don't look like me or who can't relate to my experiences. So when it comes to teaching it to students or talking about it in general, I often times feel like to spokesperson for my race"
A survey in the form of an anticipation guide inquiring about attitudes about race collected at initiation of study	How do PSTs in a YAL course conceptualize race and police/community relations?	I don't think it's fair to generalize the question to all police officers. Some are clearly racist (just as some teachers, administrators, or lawyers are racist), this has been shown in the recent accounts of police shooting unarmed people-especially of the incident in Oklahoma and the autistic man in Florida. However, I don't think it is fair to say all police officers are racist (or not racist), especially with the existence of institutional racism
Participant-generated reflections captured on course blogs after participants had read the novel	What are the constraints and affordances of using a YA novel, <i>All American Boys</i> , in the ELA classroom in discussing race and police/community relations?	I saw the cover and thought, "Oh no. I hope this isn't exploitative." And to some degree, you might argue that it is capitalizing on a current sociocultural climate. However, the sincerity that pervades the prose and the frank discussion s of race and racism lead me to believe that this text is far more than a quick cash-in
Participant-generated video discussions based on the CPV protocol captured using FlipGrip where students interacted across the two courses/universities after participants had read the novel	How do PSTs in a YAL course conceptualize race and police/community relations?	If I saw someone being beaten up by a cop, I probably wouldn't do anything. I know I probably should do something but I know I probably wouldn't
Audio recorded and transcribed class discussion around <i>All American Boys</i> after participants had read the novel	What are the constraints and affordances of using a YA novel, <i>All American Boys</i> , in the ELA classroom in discussing race and police/community relations?	I think that violent protests are ok, especially in light of the government militarizing the police and sending in tanks
Follow-up interviews with 8 participants that represented a range of perspectives from both classes after completion of the course	How do PSTs in a YAL course change their conceptualization about discussions in school spaces about race and police/community relations?	But when I was reading it, I wasn't closed off to anything that was happening. It's a tough issue that's happening constantly, and of you're not open to kind of pulling in every perspective, every point of view, then you're not going to have a well-rounded opinion on the, like, the subject matter. And it kind of just made it more real, I guess. This is real life. This is not something that you can just turn off on the TV. This is happening to people

how participants from different backgrounds, racial identities and levels of education talked about political neutrality as a nonpartisan and preferred stance in relation to discussing racism and police and community relations in the classroom. Participants approached neutrality differently, and after analysis, we were able to see how our choice of YAL or our pedagogical strategies may have contributed to PSTs maintaining neutral stances at the same time that some PSTs shifted away from a neutral stance. The first part of this section is organized by three subthemes:

- (1) needing both sides of the story;
- (2) all beliefs are valid; and
- (3) we are all humans.

In each subtheme, we describe the initial perceptions of PSTs who valued neutrality in the classroom, the shifts that some PSTs made and the pedagogical choices related to the subtheme. Within each subtheme, there was a range of perspectives, including shifts in thinking.

#AllStoriesMatter: needing both sides of the story

This theme describes how reading and discussing the novel *All American Boys* helped shift student thinking about racism from monolithic binaries (e.g. police and civilians; white and nonwhite) to more complex views. At the beginning of the unit, the majority of participants talked about needing to hear both sides of the story in response to class discussions of police brutality, much like Mrs Weber, a White teacher in the novel who demands that the class not talk about what happened to Rashad because “we don’t have the full story” (Reynolds and Kiely, 2015, p. 134). The majority of the participants who wanted to hear both sides of the story stated that they felt afraid to talk about race in the classroom because they felt they were not well-informed. Others felt that police officers were being treated unfairly in the media and one participant also felt that police voices – while presented – were not explored enough in the novel.

As the unit progressed, some students described wanting more information because they began to realize that they had grown up only hearing a single story. For example, a White female undergrad stated:

And then when I started coming here, to [college], I was being exposed to more. When we started with CPV’s, and I was like, Wow, like there’s two sides and I’ve always, I’ve only listened to one my entire life.

This statement may show wanting more information as a way to expand current understandings. The participant said that the novel helped her consider the victim’s side of the story, “I never took into consideration the person that was being targeted. I was always like, Well, this person is a police officer. They’re doing whatever they’re supposed to be doing”. In the follow-up interviews, one participant expanded the both-sides-of-the story binary thinking by stating: “There’s three sides to every story. Like, this person’s, this person’s, and then the real truth.” This statement may show that the participant was beginning to complicate the narrative to include more than a dichotomy.

When reading *All American Boys*, participants perceived the multiple narrator approach describing an African American perspective and a White perspective as an affordance of the novel. One participant said, “I think the authors did a great job at bringing in both the perspectives, so no one felt like their opinion was better than the other, or any of that stuff.” Another said:

I don't think it [the novel] was too controversial that someone wouldn't let it be in a classroom, that it would cause too much drama, since it does tell it from both sides.

Participants spoke of both sides and two sides, demonstrating a belief in a binary that may have been maintained by the dual narration.

One student problematized the dual narration that included a White protagonist in a story about police brutality against black and brown bodies. This student, who identified as Black and a graduate student, reflected in a follow-up interview:

Often a White voice is needed to validate the experiences of Black people and makes people feel more "comfortable" to discuss race because the White presence makes the text less threatening.

Rather than empathize with Rashad's situation and accept it as his lived experience, this critique spotlights the problem with readers needing the White characters' observations to validate that racism had been the underlying reason for the police brutality. Relatedly, an African American undergrad explained that part of the book frustrated her because she sees in real life how African American people's beliefs are invalidated by White people:

They [the Galluzzo family] basically wanted to ignore it, and I think that's a problem that I think a lot of White people don't want to talk about race – and "they" is a generalization – but a lot of White people will say that Black people pull the race card a lot and refuse the fact that racism is still a thing.

However, other participants maintained the perception of needing more information even at the end of the unit, perhaps indicating this stance as resistance to politics in the classroom rather than inquiry for more information.

#AllBeliefsMatter: all beliefs are valid

Especially when thinking about their future role as teachers, participants' statements in this subtheme described all beliefs as being acceptable and that there is no such thing as right or wrong beliefs. For example, a White female undergraduate student stated, "You're the one that they're [her future students] looking to. And you can't be biased. You just have to be, like, you know, neutral." An African American undergraduate female student reflected at the end of the unit:

Any further discussion, I feel like would've gotten into people's political views, which I am curious about in the class. But, you know, it's, like, can you really talk about that in class?

A participant shared on the Voicethread:

I just mean that more people are speaking out about it now. I don't see one side being right or wrong, I just see the tension that it creates and that scares me.

A graduate student who identified as a Black American discussed taking a neutral, rather than radical stance when discussing racism in class:

But I do always try to stay more in the middle and neutral about these issues. One, because I like to meet other people where they're at, but also because I do recognize that I become like a spokesperson for, like, Black issues sometimes, in a way that I don't want to impose what I actually think onto other people. I want them to kind of come to it themselves, right?

While some participants defended "free speech" and "multiple perspectives" in a way that allowed for peers or themselves to maintain unchanged perspectives throughout the unit, others demonstrated a shift in thinking about neutrality.

A few White PSTs began to question their own neutrality and begin to complicate the notion that all beliefs are “right” as they were able to reflect during follow-up interviews. One stated:

I’ve always been told to stay out of other people’s business. However, I am torn on the subject of racial inequality because I know that it is wrong, and I personally do not discriminate, yet I do nothing to protest against it either. If I were to personally witness hatred, I would most definitely speak up, but on a more broad or national scale, I do not get involved. Does this make me an oppressor? I don’t know. I hope not.

Some participants also began to question the notion that classrooms are apolitical. During the in-class discussion with graduate students, participants considered how politics would affect their decisions about curriculum and instruction in their future classrooms. A female Black American graduate student articulated the political nature of classrooms several times. She stated:

Because English is also the space to give kids the language, like articulate, describe their experiences and describe what they’re reading, the way they think about the world, right? And I feel like to equip them with the tools that they need, like you need to engage in the more political issues, right? And also, you know, I don’t think any classroom space is like apolitical. Like what you choose to teach or don’t teach is like telling the kid everything they need to know, right?

This quote demonstrates her recognition that if discussing race is a political decision, then in the same way not discussing race is a political decision.

A graduate student articulated:

And it [the class] was like a very primarily White space. I mean, I think people had, you know, interesting things to say, but I think because there was a lack of representation, there was a lot of neutral comments of like, “Well, we have to understand everyone’s point of view.” Which I think is an easier position to come from when your subjectivity isn’t at stake, right?

This participant and the other participant who identified as Black both articulated that being Black in primarily White spaces created a different kind of experience when discussing racism in the classroom. In such a space, neutrality may be a strategy for teachers of color. However, this is neither a problem-free solution nor a strategy that maintains peace; instead, it maintained the status quo.

#AllLivesMatter: we are all human

Throughout the study, there were three direct mentions of the hashtag #AllLivesMatter before we brought it up in discussion. Additionally, there were many other mentions of concepts related to the hashtag, such as emphasizing that we are all human and minimizing race. One undergraduate White participant posted on Voicethread at the beginning of the unit, “I will not jump on any bandwagon of #blacklivesmatter or #bluelivesmatter because both forget that there are minority police officers. Let’s focus on the world and that #alllivesmatter.” One participant stated how she appreciated that one police officer did not stand in for all police officers in the story, “I liked that the novel touched on the fact that not all cops are bad, just like not all people are bad.” Rather than see the novel as positive in showing multiple perspectives, a graduate student said that the novel did a good job of debunking All Lives Matter:

The text does a really wonderful job tackling difficult subjects in a way that considers common arguments against the issues raised by organizations like Black Lives Matter and, more often than not, deftly refutes the logic of white supremacy and “All Lives Matter” rhetoric.

Some participants felt that discussing racism – whether on the media or in the classroom – would cause tension, and that this uneasiness should be avoided to prevent students from becoming offended or to protect students of color. One White female graduate student participant stated before reading the novel:

While discussing something as polarizing as race there is always the risk that the whole thing will collapse - someone will say something offensive, or feelings will be hurt. Even if you are guiding the discussion and trying to keep it positive, you never know what will offend someone, and there is no way to entirely prevent that possibility.

An interesting point in this quotation is the undercurrent of fear that is not based on ambivalence but on the knowledge that talking about race in the classroom can be traumatic for youth of color.

For example, a Black American student posted in her blog that the violence in the novel was hard for her to read. After reading her post, a graduate student said:

Alicia posted about having difficulty reading it [*All American Boys*], just the content being extremely sensitive and the potential for it to be extremely upsetting for certain individuals and it's not something that I as a white male often have to consider when I open a text because everything is mostly written for me. I think it's good to be reminded that my experience reading this book is not necessarily the experience someone else is having.

This shows a shift from focusing on similarities to an ability to see difference in a way that is necessary before engaging in critical conversations in the class.

Students were able to hold contradictory views in their minds at the same time, that we need to talk about racial violence in class, but talking about racial violence could hurt the students we wanted to protect. One student articulated the tension:

They [students of color] shouldn't have to take precautions to live their lives the way they want to live them. That's just not fair. And by talking about it in class and by bringing these issues up and saying something, and acknowledging the fact, like, we need to do that. But it kind of totally ends their childhood.

The novel talks to this complicated point: “The only people who said, ‘Don't talk about it' were white” (Reynolds and Kiely, 2015, p. 292). Two undergrads pointed to the teachers who would not let the students talk about Rashad as a lesson in what not to do in their future class.

Participants who used statements such as “we are all human” perceived that focusing on similarities rather than differences/racism would alleviate tension and keep the peace. An undergraduate participant stated on the anticipation guide, “Racism exists today due to society and them constantly bringing it up.” One participant related this directly to the classroom and stated that the role of the teacher in such discussions is to be a “peacekeeper.” An affordance of the novel is that it shows different educators and how they respond to what happened to Rashad. As already mentioned, Ms Weber, chose to silence the discussion. Additionally, one coach tells the basketball players not to talk about it, which does not rid the tension on the team and results in the players getting into a fight during practice. Another teacher has the class read *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and when the administration shuts down this teacher's discussion of race in the classroom, the students take it upon themselves to keep the discussion going. This focus on how silence operates in the novel through the role of the teacher in discussion of race and police and community relations promotes this peacekeeping mentality.

A White graduate student reflected at the end of the unit on how her literature methods course and reading this novel had made her start to see the world differently:

And the way I best described it was I kind of had race blinders, where I didn't really see race and I just interacted with all my students on the same level. Which worked, but at the same time, it didn't help all that much.

These participants began to see that neutrality could result in inaction or in colorblindness and that neither of these were effective solutions.

Two students of color problematized the color blindness they saw other students adopt in the name of neutrality. One graduate student used the CPV scenario about the #AllLivesMatter movement to challenge the neutral stances she heard from the undergraduate class:

I don't think I'd be so neutral to the all lives matter person and I would say okay all lives matter but the reality is that tends to be in principle only and not in practice, right, so all lives matter people aren't doing anything they just say it as a response to black lives matter.

One African-American undergraduate student stated:

I think that ignoring race, not seeing color, is harmful. And I don't really think you can understand the world without understanding races and the differences in how people are treated based on theories and, like, it's just that same living in a bubble-type thing. The false sense of the world.

Discussion and implications

Like Paolo Freire, historian, educator and social activist, Zinn (1994) tells us in his memoir, "you can't be neutral on a moving train," which suggests that all acts, whether passive or active, are political. As we waded through our data, we realized that despite multiple intentional scaffolds, and creating a dialogic classroom space for difficult conversations, most of our participants were resistant to taking a stand as they read and discussed the novel *All American Boys*. Our PSTs were not averse to talking about race, but most were definitely attempting to keep their feet planted firmly on the tumultuous train ride. Being politically neutral, in this way, may be seen as a rejection of, or, at the very least, reticence toward social justice, restorative and critical English Education (Morrell, 2005; Winn, 2013).

The novel *All American Boys* is a fictional account of real events, but the story has a clear and pointed moral imperative that asks the readers to take a stand on the side of the victim. Students' desire to hear more perspectives even after the novel provides a victim's, a bystander's, family members', teachers', friends', classmates' and police officers' perspectives, and favoring mantras that argue #AllStoriesMatter, #AllBeliefsMatter and #AllLivesMatter is troubling because neutrality poses as a moral, ethical, responsible action, yet it supports oppression by default because it normalizes dominance. It creates a passive or spectator-oriented citizenry, accepts the existing distribution of power and keeps the status quo intact (Agostinone-Wilson, 2005; Jensen, 2004/2005).

Our research confirms what both Kelly and Brandes (2001) and Miller-Lane *et al.* (2006) found when studying prospective and current English and social studies teachers. Similar to the PSTs in Kelly's (1986) class, most of our PSTs across race and level valued not just neutrality, but neutral impartiality as the ideal stance. This is where teachers do not disclose their own political perspectives on controversial issues and instead ask students to discuss and critically examine a myriad of diverse issues and multiple perspectives without seeking a right answer.

Throughout all of our subthemes, an undercurrent of fear was found as an explanation of their neutrality. For example, Dávila and Barnes' (2017) study on discussions of political texts with PSTs, disclosing was seen as risky, particularly within these politically polarized times. It is also not aligned with historical conceptions of what a "good" or "nice" teacher is (Journell, 2016). The findings of this study have implications for teacher educators related to

expanding personal experiences of their PSTs and moving them from neutral stances to critical stances through literature.

All American Boys as critical literacy tool

One of the affordances of reading *All American Boys* is the direct problematization of neutral stances by quoting Desmond Tutu, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor” and having the White protagonist Quinn ask himself:

How many times I'd been a dick without knowing it, and it made me wonder how many times I'd remained neutral in the past too [...] I couldn't duck now, just because I was scared and finally deciding to “take responsibility” and join a protest. (Reynolds and Kiely, 2015, p. 291)

During the course of the *All American Boys* unit, some PSTs problematized the neutrality that they recognized, either in their own prior views or in their peers' views. During the follow-up interviews, an undergraduate White student credited class discussion with clear expectations and being able to hear the perspective of classmates of color helped her to learn “a lot”.

In general, participants felt that the book was successful in showing the systematic nature of racism and a useful tool to initiate classroom discussion. One participant stated on the blog, “I found this book to be incredibly timely and a useful text for opening discussions of current events, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement.” Another participant agreed:

This book is doing important work and gives a starting point for kids to talk about the issues that surround Black Lives Matter. It also allows students to see themselves as activists, as allies, as full members of their community that can advocate on behalf of justice.

However, half of the graduate students added the caveat that the book would only be a useful tool for work with White students, while all undergraduates believed that the book would be a useful tool for all students.

Overall, *All American Boys* did offer vignettes and language to use as tools for critical literacy and critical race work. While some research, such as Glenn (2012) and Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013), has found that the use of multicultural YA fiction did not disrupt deficit perspectives toward youth of color and may even reify dominant stereotypes about youth of color when working with PSTs, *All American Boys* offered a counter-narrative and help PSTs to question racial profiling in and out of the classroom. The text was also seemingly good at allowing for readers to see the change from a neutral stance, to an inquiry stance, to taking action for social justice through both protagonists. For Quinn, readers see his shift from ignorance of racism, to a neutral stance, to social action. With Rashad, we see his internal struggle after a racist encounter of wanting to move past the victimization and returning to his normal life to his final decision of social action. Yet, these two perspectives were problematic, perhaps setting up a binary, which may have justified students' beliefs that real life reports of police brutality against people of color are one-sided and therefore biased. When relating the text to the world, students remain in a place of doubt about racist encounters or what Fine (1997) calls “protective pillows of [...] benefits of the doubt” (p. 57).

Additionally, although research talks about the benefits of multi-voiced narration in providing multiple perspectives, and most of our participants reported that they found the dual narration effective, it can also lead to needing mirror perspectives (i.e. White character when the reader is White). Specifically in this case, the need of a White voice to validate encounters of racism rather than learning to empathize with Black voices. Muzzillo (2010), argued that “perspective readings,” (i.e. those that ask the reader to either take on another

perspective other than their own) are very complex, and if teacher educators want to use them, we must first ask “can a reader be compelled to take the perspective of another?” (p. 178). As our study demonstrates, and as the old axiom attests, you can lead a PST to antiracist pedagogies and strategies, but you cannot make them enact those strategies until they are ready. As Bacon and Byfield (2018) found, “majoritarian narratives” are deeply engrained and demonstrate the pervasiveness of “racism and color-blind sameness” in American society (n. p.).

Although most of the participants did not display significant shifts in their stance on racism and police/community relations through the use of the novel, some did, as our findings indicate. To exemplify this further, we narrow in on two of our PSTs. At the beginning of our units, students watched “The Danger of a Single Story” (Adichie, 2009). One undergraduate broke down crying, asking aloud “Why is everybody against White people?” However, as the unit progressed, she went from this defensive stance that sought to polarize, to being able to articulate her understanding of why we need to consider minority perspectives and acceptance of the idea that racism is pervasive. Similarly, a graduate student also shifted from a defensive stance where she would not consider teaching the novel in her future class because she did not want to ruffle feathers and cause tension, to a listening stance where she considered her classmates’ views and considered how she could teach the novel in the future. Through critical reflective activities related to *All American Boys*, slight shifts did begin occurring for many of our students. Some were even able to take steps toward Freire’s notion of conscientization.

As Muzzillo (2010) warns, it is possible that “pre-service teachers will construct potentially unreasonable notions of teacher conduct” (p. 178) through such perspective readings. Although it is not unreasonable to remain neutral when thinking about tackling racialized police brutality in their future classrooms, it does, however, demonstrate that using a multivoiced multicultural YA novel alone cannot suffice in creating or shifting to a critical and socially just mindset. Groenke *et al.* (2010) and Coleman-King and Groenke (2015) all found that using YA fiction alone could actually be counterproductive to antiracist goals. Therefore, an implication of this study for others who wish to use a text like *All American Boys* is that one may need to pair the text with many more nonfiction texts so that the world and the word are even more intricately interwoven (Freire, 1985).

Conclusion

We have attempted to show how PSTs perceive discussing racial violence and police brutality through reading a YA novel, *All American Boys*. What we uncovered is that many of our students, although making progress by beginning to question and interrogate their beliefs, found political neutrality to be their default position when faced with controversial and difficult topics in YAL.

While our major English and literacy organizations continue to forge a path forward by advocating for addressing issues of oppression against Black and Brown youth, and stating clearly that #BlackLivesMatter (LRA, 2016; NCTE and CCCC Black Caucus, 2015), it seems, however, that at least in our two universities, that the students entering the English teaching profession are struggling to hold those same critical dispositions. Is YAL like *All American Boys* the answer to shifting our PSTs out of neutral stances toward topics of injustice? Our study indicates that there is still more work to be done; using young adult literature can only open the door to these discussions, but PSTs *also* need to critically and openly interrogating neutrality as their default positions, or they risk perpetuating further violence on Black and Brown bodies in schools.

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Appendix: Coding examples

Racial injustice
and police
brutality

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Subthemes	Codes	Key statements
#AllStoriesMatter: Need Both Sides of the Story	Both sides in novel	"I think the authors did a great job at bringing in both the perspectives, so no one felt like their opinion was better than the other, or any of that stuff." "I don't think it was too controversial that someone wouldn't let it be in a classroom, that it would cause too much drama, since it does tell it from both sides."
	Both sides in life Political binary	"I knew it [police brutality] was wrong, but at the same time, I'm the type of person where I want to know both sides to it." "I am a very neutral grounds kind of person. I come from a conservative background, as well entering into a liberal future, and I honestly see where both sides are coming from, and I know the pros and cons to all sides of a situation. While I do almost always lean more liberal, also understand where conservatives are coming from."
	New perspective	"And then when I started coming here, to [college cite], I was being exposed to more. When we started with CPV's, and I was like, Wow, like there's two sides & And I've always, I've only listened to one my entire life."
	Freedom of speech	As an advocate for the right to free speech and fair trial, I am dedicated to hearing both sides of a perspective and not choosing a side simply because a vocal majority tells me to do so. All American Boys is a story where we know who is exactly right and who is wrong. Real life is far more complicated and it is my hope that we can fight for equal rights while still holding to these freedoms, lest we repeat history's mistakes."
Problematising #AllStoriesMatter	Gray area	"You've got to pull it back. I know you've been taught that you need to take the utmost stance on something and sort of die on that hill or fall on that sword, but it's okay to say there's something in between. And I think there is value in doing that in a high school setting, as well, when I don't think necessarily it's the focus. We're so busy sort of worrying about the ability to build an argument, that using polarized options are the easiest way to do that, when in reality, there's much more value in getting messy in the gray area, I think. And maybe not having a perfect, airtight argument." "Students were coming back and saying, "I don't think this is holistic enough. Like we're not getting all sides of it." And at what point you say, "Not all sides are right." And can you do that, at that level, when everything does stay so black and white for the most part, or so polarized in such a way that it's either one side or the other side, and there's nothing in between?"
	#AllLivesMatter: We're All Human	Color blindness Minimization of race Focus on similarities Avoiding tension Media to blame

(continued)

Table AI.
Coding examples

Subthemes	Codes	Key statements
Problematizing #AllLivesMatter	Race blinders	"I think that ignoring race, not seeing color is harmful. And I don't really think you can understand the world without understanding races and the differences in how people are treated based on theories and, like, it's just that same living in a bubble-type thing. The false sense of the world." "I realize that race blinders are not really the answer."
#AllBeliefsMatter: No Right or Wrong Beliefs	Apolitical classroom	"Any further discussion, I feel like would've gotten into people's political views, which I am curious about in the class. But, you know, it's, like, can you really talk about that in class?"
	No right or wrong	"I just mean that more people are speaking out about it now. I don't see one side being right or wrong, I just see the tension that it creates and that scares me."
	Happy medium	"Scrolling through [Facebook] and being like, "Okay, here's one opinion, here's one opinion; they're totally opposite. How are we totally opposite of everything now?" Like, there never seems to be, like, this happy medium anymore, of just actually trying to figure problems out."
	Safe space for all opinions	"Without a safe space white people feel like they can't have an opinion, and people of color don't want to separate themselves even further from the majority. However, by providing a clear focus for these issues [re: the book] and creating a safe environment for all opinions in our classroom, we can strive to overcome the awkwardness of discussing these issue."
Problematizing #AllBeliefsMatter	Teacher's role	"I don't think anyone should ever tell you that you're wrong; especially a teacher." "Because with how I felt with addressing my students, because you, like, you're the one that they're looking to. And you can't be biased. You just have to be, like, you know neutral."
	Not politically correct	"And maybe it won't be politically correct, but I think to pretend that there is always neutrality in education or teaching is false. I think to the English and History teacher in <i>All American Boys</i> who took a side and attended the march. My favorite English teacher from high school was the advisor for our LGBTQ organization and would often voice her strong opinions about homophobia and correct as well as educate those who said disturbing things in class and in passing. I would argue that these teachers can be far more effective than neutral ones."

Table AI.

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