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Selecting Success:
Disconnected Youth's Reading Choices

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Abstract

By examining a sample of books chosen by participants in Brooklyn Public Library's Young Adult Pre-GED program, this article will explore characteristics of reading materials that appeal to out-of-school youth. Authors will share the selection process behind the creation of a special collection targeted to low-literacy young adults (16–24 years old). Using youth participants' independent reading logs, we will compare what we expected students to enjoy reading with what youth chose to read. A discussion will include lessons learned about collection development for out-of-school youth and how libraries can improve access for struggling adolescent readers.

Keywords: disconnected youth, young adult literature, literacy, library instruction, collection development

Introduction

New York City disconnected youth literacy initiative
Approximately 223,000 16- to 24-year-olds in New York City (NYC) are "disconnected" — not working and not in school (Treschan & Molnar, 2008). Of this total, 85,000 disconnected youth in NYC have not attained a high school diploma or GED. The 2008 high school drop out rate was 43% in New York City (New York City Department of Education, 2009). However, it has been noted by youth advocates that this figure may be even higher because Department of Education numbers do not include students discharged into GED programs (Advocates for Children, 2008).

Of the five boroughs, Brooklyn has the largest share (39%) of disconnected youth in New York City. Neighborhoods with significant numbers of disconnected youth correspond to areas of the borough with the highest high school drop out rates. In an analysis of 2007 data, the graduation rates for districts serving the Bushwick, East New York and Brownsville areas of Brooklyn were 34%, 39% and 32% respectively. In comparison, the district in central Brooklyn where competitive Brooklyn Tech High School is located has graduation rates over 70% (Eduwonkette, 2008).

During the past decade, researchers, policy makers and youth advocates have drawn attention to the significant numbers of youth who are out of school and unemployed. Reports exploring the challenges faced by disconnected youth in New York have pointed to a need for access to more educational options and connections between organizations serving disconnected youth (Levitan, 2005; Advocates for Children, 2007; Government Accountability Office, 2008).

Young adults and adults who do not complete high school may take the General Educational Development (GED) exam. The exam is designed to assess reading, critical thinking and problem-solving skills in high school level material and is periodically aligned to the content knowledge and skills of United States graduating high school students. The GED exam covers five content areas: reading, writing, social studies, science and mathematics. Colleges and employers recognize passing the GED exam as equivalent to obtaining a high school diploma (American Council on Education, 2009).

Alternative education and GED programs across the city are filled to capacity with students seeking to take the GED test. In 2007 alone, 27,301 people in New York City sat for the GED exam. In New York City, fewer than half passed the test and obtained the GED credential (Cooke, 2008). In 2009, the American Council of Education released statistics that place New York last in the nation for GED pass rates (Kolodner, 2009).

Most GED preparation programs require a minimum eighth-grade reading level to enroll. Most alternative programs for youth designed by the Department of Education's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation require a sixth-grade minimum reading level. Students with disabilities and students who do not yet read at the eighth-grade level and need basic literacy instruction often encounter a gap in receiving services (Treschan & Molnar, 2008; Government Accountability Office, 2008). In addition, programs designed for adult learners may not provide the support and structured environment necessary to retain young adult students (Hayes, 1999).

In 2008, the New York City Mayor's Office Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO)

launched the Disconnected Youth Literacy Initiative in New York City public libraries and five community-based organizations to serve out-of-school youth who are reading between the fourth- and sixth-grade reading level. Adult literacy educators normally identify these reading levels as Pre-GED.

In partnership with CEO, Brooklyn Public Library's (BPL) Literacy Program embarked on a project to develop a literacy program model to reconnect out-of-school youth in Brooklyn with education and employment. The Young Adult Pre-GED pilot program had three major components: intensive library-based literacy and basic skills instruction, job readiness and social support.

BPL adult literacy programs
BPL staff recognized that disconnected youth were already using the library. Libraries are spaces where youth spend free time and often the first place they seek information about GED preparation. The fifth-largest library system in the country, Brooklyn Public Library's 60 branches are accessible to every neighborhood in Brooklyn.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to reach out-of-school youth. They are resource-rich environments that provide a safe neutral space to students who may have negative associations with formal schooling (Canham-Clyne, 2009). Literacy programs that utilize libraries benefit from access to the extensive print, media and electronic resources. Libraries also offer unique services such as computer skills training, employment information and diverse cultural programming for young adults.

BPL's Literacy Program has operated five Adult Learning Centers serving low-literacy adult learners for over 30 years. Adult Learning Centers offer small group instruction for adults who want to improve their basic literacy skills. BPL uses a balanced literacy approach that emphasizes writing, reading and technology. Reading instruction includes reading for meaning and skill-building. Adult learners select and check out books at their reading level to read in groups with a volunteer tutor and are encouraged to read independently.

Reading student-selected library books rather than skill-and-drill workbooks has been a cornerstone of the BPL Literacy Program's instructional approach for nearly 20 years. Like many reading programs across the country, BPL's program was highly influenced in the 1990s both by Lucy Calkin's work at Columbia Teacher's College Reading and Writing Project and guided reading approaches using leveled texts outlined by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (Calkins, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Traub, 2003; Rich, 2009). The program's approach to adult reading instruction is also informed by the work of Canadian adult literacy educator Pat Campbell and fluency expert Timothy Raskinski (Campbell, 2003; Rasinski & Opitz, 1998).

In 2004, BPL began offering Pre-GED classes to adult students who read between a fourth- and eighth-grade reading level and are transitioning to GED level classes. The Pre-GED program has seen an increase in the number of out-of-school youth seeking literacy services. In 2008 and 2009, one in four patrons attending BPL Pre-GED registrations were between the ages of 16 and 24.

Rather than solely relying on test preparation materials, the library's Pre-GED program places emphasis on reading for enjoyment and curiosity as a basis for building lifelong learning strategies. BPL's Young Adult (YA) Pre-GED Program was built on the foundation of the Literacy program's approaches.

Our experience in BPL library literacy programs taught us that a strong collection was essential in building the YA Pre-GED program. BPL decided to dedicate a portion of planning funds to purchase a special YA Pre-GED collection. This left program staff with challenging questions: What do out-of-school youth reading below a 6th grade reading level want to read? What texts will provide the necessary bridge to higher level reading required on the GED exam and beyond? What can and should we presume about potential participants?

Literature Review

Research has identified program characteristics that contribute significantly to gains in adolescent literacy. In this literature review, we will explore four elements that most relate to collection development:
1) Recreational reading and high interest materials
2) Identity and reading choices
3) Matching readers with books at their reading level
4) Reading in the content areas

Recreational reading and high interest materials
Research indicates that students' motivation to read may decline in the adolescent years. Swan (2004) notes that the focus on intrinsic motivators to read, for personal interest or curiosity, shifts to more extrinsic motivators such as test scores or teacher control of content material in middle and high school. Best practices identified to support motivation, resiliency and self-efficacy in young adults utilizes their interests as a starting point for learning while maintaining high expectations for performance (Benard, 1995; Youth Development Institute, 2008).

Building habits of independent reading, also called leisure, recreational, self-selected or voluntary reading is a common feature of successful adolescent literacy programs (Fischer & Gay, 2006; Allington, 2001). Many studies find a high

correlation between recreational reading and academic achievement across subject areas (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Haynes, 2007).

Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy, a comprehensive review of research and best practices, identifies key elements in programs designed to improve adolescent literacy (Biancarosa &Snow, 2006). The research supports a strong relationship between self-directed learning and student motivation:

> One way that motivation and engagement are instilled and maintained is to provide students with opportunities to select for themselves the materials they read and topics they research. One of the easiest ways to build some choice into the students' school day is to incorporate independent reading time in which they can read whatever they choose (p. 16).

Biancarosa and Snow (2006) indicate that successful literacy programs connect readers with high-interest books early. They emphasize that reluctant readers and students with reading difficulties need access to books that interest them and are appropriate to their reading level.

Reading Next notes that striving adolescent readers enjoy literature that is relevant to their lives and connects to their interests and experiences (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). In a survey of 584 New York City middle school students, Hughes-Hassel and Rodge (2007) found that students like to read about "people or characters like me," "people my age wrestling with tough issues," sports figures and musicians. Pride and Reid (2008) found that most young adults select cover images with characters most like themselves.

Librarians and media specialists provide some guidance for selecting high-interest books that appeal to reluctant readers. Clark (2007) notices that many young adult book lists focus primarily on books for tweens, 10 to 13 year olds. She urges librarians who work with older teenagers to include realistic fiction, horror, fantasy, and "beach reads" that don't necessarily have a lesson.

Some evidence suggests that reluctant readers are attracted to alternative formats with visuals and audiobooks (Lesesne, 2009; Jones, 2007). Snowball (2005) and Crawford (2004) found that graphic novels are very appealing to reluctant readers and may motivate readers who struggle with other texts. In a middle school classroom, Beers (1998) observed that audiobooks engage adolescent readers when they can read along.

The Young Adult Library Service's Association (YALSA) Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers lists are a valuable resource for high-interest accessible texts. YALSA's Quick Picks Committee evaluates books based on subject, cover art, readability, format, style and feedback from teen reluctant readers (Young Adult Service Association, 2009). Jamie Watson, Librarian and former YALSA Quick

Picks for Reluctant Readers Committee member, discusses the challenge of selecting materials for reluctant readers (2009):

> What most makes a book appealing to a reluctant reader? Is it one that is short, easy to read, or written at a low reading level? Is it a good cover? A fast-paced plot? Interesting subject matter? The answer: all and none of these….

The committee defines reluctant readers broadly as youth who do not like to read, for whatever reason. The committee makes a wide variety of selections because reluctant readers are a diverse group but often focuses on thin books in which characters wrestle with big problems. The YALSA Quick Picks committee's focus has broadened over time from youth who have literacy issues to reluctant readers (P. Jones, 1994).

While several studies have examined the leisure reading choices of urban adolescents, most research has either been conducted with tweens or within a school context. The reading choices of out-of-school youth have yet to be explored.

Identity and reading choices

There are a disproportionate number of low-income and minority youth who are considered disconnected (Government Accountability Office, 2008). In New York City, 43% of disconnected youth are Latino and 39% are African-American (Treschan & Molnar, 2008). Nation-wide, young black males have the highest rates of disconnection with education and employment (Fernandez and Gabe, 2009). Youth at the highest risk for dropping out of school include those in the juvenile justice system, those exiting foster care and young parents (Schuyler Center, 2008).

Zirinsky and Rau (2001) found some gender differences in reading choices among high school students. In their study, girls preferred realistic fiction, mystery and fantasy and boys tended to select adventure and action-oriented books. Other research suggests that, when reading self-selected texts, boys tend to read more books, magazines and Internet sites (Worthy, 1999).

Researcher-educator Alfred Tatum argues that African-American young men need *enabling* texts that reflect their experiences and serve as mentors (Tatum, 2006). In his experience as a teacher, Tatum found that texts that give students "the opportunity to critique society and examine their place within it" and "shape a positive life trajectory" build resilience and a positive self-concept (p. 45).

Researchers have also pointed out that literature used in English classes has historically not represented or included the perspectives of black adolescent girls. Urban fiction and street lit are extremely popular genres that may have a similar mentoring role by providing cautionary tales and helping African American women negotiate stereotypes (Marshall, Staples &Gibson, 2009).

Matching readers with books at their reading level
Educators and research indicate that helping students find the "right" books can be a strong motivator for adolescent learners (Rich, 2009; Howard, 2009; Pitcher et al., 2007). For low-level literacy learners, high interest is only one qualifier of the "right book." Choice and text readability are important to build engagement and promote a positive image as a successful reader.

Adolescent struggling readers often have negative associations with reading (Alverman, 2001; Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). In interviews with GED students, Compton-Lilly (2009) found that, even as their skills improve, GED students continue to see themselves as poor readers or nonreaders. Adolescent boys in particular tend not to see themselves as readers (Smith &Wilhelm, 2002). The type of reading boys do is often not recognized as reading within schools because teachers tend to choose narrative fiction (Taylor 2004; Worthy, 1999).

It is important that recreational reading materials do not frustrate readers due to unfamiliar vocabulary or complexity of the text. Good high/low (high interest, low difficulty) books for older adolescents and adults must avoid being seen as "baby" books (Rog & Kropp, 2008). Readability indices such as Flesch-Kincaid and Lexile Framework for Reading can help teachers, parents and students choose appropriate books.

YALSA's Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers list usually includes thin paperback books under 200 pages. Patrick Jones, who served on the Quick Picks committee, cites several additional characteristics the committee looks for to determine accessibility: short sentences and familiar vocabulary, attractive covers, wide margins, easy typeface and stories with a single point of view, few characters and few subplots (Jones, 1994).

Reading in the content areas
The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) encourages teachers to expose students from an early age to a balance of fiction and nonfiction. Literacy skills that are not developed through reading fiction become more important as the focus of instruction shifts after early elementary school from learning to read to reading to learn.

Research with younger adolescents indicates that some adolescent readers struggle to understand the increasingly complex and varied expository texts in the upper grades. A young adult who is a fluent reader in the elementary grades may not be fluent in the increasingly difficult and diverse texts in the subject areas of upper grades. In addition, older students may encounter problems with unfamiliar vocabulary and insufficient background knowledge (Fang, 2008). Youth who have some ability to decode text but lack other literacy skills that impact reading comprehension are often referred to as struggling or striving.

Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) argue that high school students should have experience with a wide range of nonfiction texts. They encourage content area teachers to provide direct instruction in utilizing the comprehension strategies required to understand texts in each subject. A struggling adolescent reader benefits from explicit instruction in how the scientific method impacts the organization of a science text. Readers who experience reading instruction across content areas can better use strategies that match the structure of the text (National Institute for Literacy, 2007).

It may follow that research-based strategies to improve students' comprehension of high school level texts are similarly useful to GED test-takers. Two of the subjects on the GED exam, social studies and science, exclusively measure reading skills for nonfiction texts.

Seventy percent of youth who drop out of high school are reading below grade level and lack other basic skills (Kleinbard, 2009). Because many high school drop-outs are also struggling readers, one may assume that there is overlap between the struggling readers in adolescent literacy research and young adult Pre-GED students. Content area reading instruction research has not been conducted with out-of-school youth who are studying for the GED exam. More research is necessary to understand how balance of fiction and nonfiction texts and explicit instruction of comprehension strategies in the content areas affect the success of older adolescents in GED programs.

Selection Process

In the BPL YA Pre-GED program, we aimed to match reading material with student interests and to use a curriculum that would be relevant to students' lives. We planned to identify student interests, learning strengths or styles, and goals early in the program. We decided to include independent reading and theme-based instruction in the program's literacy component.

BPL's YA Pre-GED program, from the beginning, was unique because we had access to the Library's numerous resources. We also had the added advantage of being able to combine the collective knowledge and expertise of librarians and literacy professionals to build our collection. When creating our collection, we attempted to select new and unique materials without duplicating what the library and the literacy program already had in its system. The Library's literacy department and collection development department, especially with the selector of young adult materials, worked closely to build a holistic, diverse and appropriate collection for struggling young adult readers.

Figure 1: Selection Criteria

> ✓ **Accessibility and reading level**
> 4th-6th grade reading level
> Visuals such as photographs, illustrations and captions
> Controlled vocabulary
> Thin books (under 300 pages)
> ✓ **Diversity of topic, format and genre**
> Balance of fiction and nonfiction
> Multicultural literature
> Titles and covers
> ✓ **Popularity and appeal**
> Contemporary realistic fiction
> Nonstandard format
> Popularity within BPL System
> ✓ **Connections to curriculum content**
> Literacy instruction thematic units
> Career exploration and job readiness
> Pre-GED texts in content areas

Accessibility and reading level
When selecting materials there were several criteria used. The main criteria was accessibility and readability of the material for low literacy readers. Ebsco's *NoveListPlus* was heavily used as an initial determinate of accessibility. *NoveListPlus* is a readers' advisory tool that provides Lexile ranges, reviews, curricular connections and read- a-likes for children's and young adult literature.

By looking at the Lexile range in the *NoveListPlus* and *Lexile Find-a-book* databases, we were able to get a general idea of a text's difficulty. Lexile ranges can loosely correlate to graded reading levels as a measure of difficulty. We also used Libretto and Barr's *High/Low Handbook: Best Books and Web Sites for Reluctant Teen Readers (2002)* as a reference for general reading levels and interest levels of some high/low materials.

BPL's YA Pre-GED program targeted students whose reading level grade equivalency was between the fourth and sixth grades as measured by the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). We were able to match these grade equivalency levels with the appropriate Lexile ranges and better make our purchasing decisions. We bought many Young Adult titles because they were at the targeted reading levels.

Other measures of accessibility were the length and format of the book. We perused publisher galleys and samples looking at font size, page margins, and spacing for materials that were not crowded or "busy," as that can be intimidating and overwhelming for struggling readers. We aimed for nonfiction books containing simple text and visuals.

Fortunately, the literacy department's expertise guided us toward publishers specializing in high/low materials. We ordered 27 high/low titles from Orca Books' *Orca Soundings,* which are "short high-interest novels with contemporary themes, written expressly for teens reading below grade level" (Orca Book Publishers, 2009). We also ordered titles with controlled vocabulary from Oxford University Press' *Bookworms* series, published for youth and for adult English language learners.

Popularity and appeal

During our selection process we also considered non-traditional materials. We purchased an impressive collection of manga and comics based on personal experience and research that they appeal to reluctant readers (Snowball, 2005). We looked into building an electronic collection because we thought combining the use of technology and reading activities would appeal to the target students (Beers, 1998). However, since our funds were limited, we decided to use the media resources already at the library: audiobooks, e-books, downloadable media, electronic databases and movies.

Another criteria for selection was popularity based on BPL circulation statistics and librarian experiences. Since research has recorded the academic benefits of students reading high-interest materials, we decided that purchasing popular materials would support our mission of improving student literacy. Working with the collection development department and the young adult materials selector, we looked at circulation statistics and usage to determine which titles circulated, went missing or were requested most often. By talking to staff who worked in branch libraries located in those areas of Brooklyn with the most "disconnected youth," we generated a list of popular titles.

Connections to curriculum content

In the selection of books for the classroom collection, we focused on three main areas: career and life skills, books to support literacy curriculum units, and recreational reading. Since the library already had an Education & Job Information Center, we were able to use its staff's expertise in choosing titles for the collection. The staff shared with us some of the more popular titles as well as the titles from their young adult collection.

We focused on materials that cover resume writing, interviewing, and the job search

process. We purchased the *Career in Focus* series of books from Ferguson Publishing about different career areas with the anticipation that we would include career exploration in the classroom. The education and career databases that the library already subscribed to, such as *Career Cruising* and *Learning Express Library,* were also an important part of our collection.

We reviewed several curricula, including the *America's Choice Ramp-up Curriculum.* We held two focus groups with young people attending BPL Pre-GED classes to focus selection on appealing curriculum topics. We selected topics that were relevant to students' lives and hot topics in the news. The curriculum topics identified for collection development were: Identity/Community, Immigration, The Great Depression, The Environment/Climate Change, Friendship, Justice and Tough Decisions.

For the reading and writing curriculum, we reviewed the literacy program's materials for ideas. Rather than making separate purchases, we relied heavily on materials already in the library system. After attending the International Reading Association Conference in May 2008, we selected *Perfection Learning Literature and Thought Series* of thematic readers that contained short fiction and expository texts.

We knew from experience that students building basic literacy skills, regardless of reading level, would be oriented toward passing the GED Exam. We concentrated on Pre-GED math and subject books from *McGraw-Hill/Contemporary*. For these materials we ordered from publishers that marketed to pre-GED and adult literacy programs.

We also ordered class discussion sets and materials that complemented the curriculum unit themes. Discussion sets purchased included: *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang*, Persepoli* and *Persepolis 2* by Marjane Satrapi*, Drown* by Junot Diaz*, Monster* by Walter Dean Myers*, Absolute True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie*, An Inconvenient Truth (YA edition)* by Al Gore*, MySpace/Our Planet* by Jeca Taudte and Tom Anderson*, NightJohn* by Gary Paulsen and *Warriors Don't Cry* by Melba Patillo Beals*.* Other titles related to the themes were purchased in multiple quantities to facilitate small "book clubs" within the class.

Diversity of topic, format and genre
Probably the most difficult selection criteria to meet was whether or not the recreational reading materials would appeal to a diverse target population. This was difficult because we knew the disconnected youth population is diverse. Based on demographics, we had to make assumptions about the youth who would be using the collection.

We assumed the majority of participants would be in minority populations so we chose multicultural texts by minority authors or books that feature minorities as main characters, as well as books in Spanish. We concentrated on poetry written by minorities and teenagers. We purchased books from popular authors such as Walter Dean Myers and Sharon Draper. Also, knowing that young adults often base selection on cover images and characters most like them, we purchased fiction titles that feature African-American and Latino characters (Pride & Reid, 2008).

We assumed—based on demographics—that the majority of program participants would be male. We attempted to select topics that would appeal to young men such as nonfiction, action, technology and sports. In general, we steered clear of classical literature in favor of realistic fiction titles more appropriate to the time, place and interest of the population. We attempted to find titles that did not feature high school to connect to the experiences of out-of-school youth.

We bought books that covered a wide range of topics and reflected a balance of fiction and nonfiction. Our nonfiction selections included self-help books, history, sports, science, art, biographies of famous minorities, and music titles. We chose subjects that connected to contemporary urban youth culture such as books about street art, MySpace and hip-hop.

Analysis of Student Book Choices

The YA Pre-GED special collection was located in the rooms where each class meets. During orientation, students registered for library cards, toured library collections and checked out books. Basic literacy instruction integrated the use of library resources, and information literacy instruction provided opportunities for youth to search the catalog and place holds on materials.

Recreational reading was implemented as a regular routine in class and students were asked to keep book logs of their independent reading. The librarian also periodically noted their selections. The analysis of student book choices represents a sample of book logs collected from the first year of the program and the fall 2009 cohort.

Overall the sample of books represents 149 book titles read by out-of-school youth attending the YA Pre-GED program between October 2008 and October 2009. Because some titles were chosen more than once, the sample consists of 185 selections. While this was not a complete sample of the reading choices of disconnected youth, we were able to use this sample in combination with the librarian's notes to make some inferences about participants' recreational reading choices.
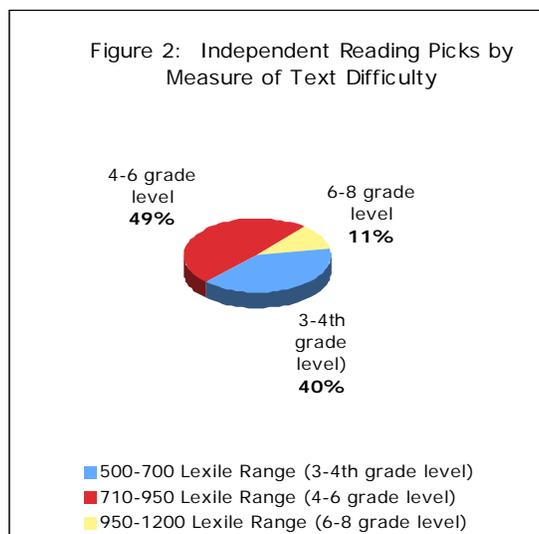
The student participants were even more diverse than we originally anticipated. The race/ethnicity of the 80 students that attended the YA Pre-GED classes between October 2008 and October 2009 was 38% African-American, 23% Latino, 18% Afro-Caribbean, 10% Asian, 5% White and 2% African. As demonstrated in **Figure 2**, the age of participants evenly spanned 16 to 24. There were slightly more male than female students (56%). Some students were heads of households, parents, court-involved, had experienced homelessness or were recovering from drug and alcohol addiction.

Figure 2: BPL YA Pre-GED Participants by Age

Age	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
% of total	2%	12%	21%	17%	9%	10%	12%	14%	4%

The data suggests that students were selecting books that fit within their independent reading level but not always for the reasons we anticipated. **Figure 3** shows that the majority of students selected texts that were within the fourth to sixth grade reading levels. The average Lexile of books read was 750L, which correlates to the fourth- and fifth-grade reading levels. This indicates that students were finding the "right" book below their frustration level for independent reading.

Figure 3: Book Selection by Measure of Text Difficulty

Figure 2: Independent Reading Picks by Measure of Text Difficulty

4-6 grade level **49%**

6-8 grade level **11%**

3-4th grade level) **40%**

■ 500-700 Lexile Range (3-4th grade level)
■ 710-950 Lexile Range (4-6 grade level)
■ 950-1200 Lexile Range (6-8 grade level)

The Lexile ranges of texts should be interpreted carefully. We were only able to retrieve Lexile levels for 43 of the titles because many nonfiction titles, non-prose text and most adult books are not Lexile leveled. In general, fewer of the *Orca Soundings* titles and other high low books were chosen for recreational reading than we anticipated, making up only 11% of total selections. We observed that lower-level readers also read poetry and juvenile picture books. Very few students

chose to read graphic novels.

While we expected some students to choose their books based on page number and size, a surprising number also chose paperbacks small enough to fit into back pants pockets and purses. It is also worth noting that we observed some students, particularly male students, often leave their books behind after class.

Against our expectations, many of the students selected "thick" books. Approximately 60% of our students were reading texts of between 100 and 300 pages, with only 19% reading texts of fewer than 100 pages. However, while most students chose high-interest "thick" books, many failed to read the books cover-to-cover. This was in part due to the program's philosophy that students read books that they enjoy—in conferences with students, the program librarian encouraged them to find a new book if they lost interest in the current selection.

The diversity of students' independent reading choices mirrored the diversity of student experiences. The most popular genres in order of frequency were: realistic fiction, high/low Fiction, urban fiction, biography, self-help, poetry, romance, comics/graphic Novels, juvenile picture books, mystery, and nonfiction reading about careers, music and sports. In alignment with our predictions, few students read fantasy, science fiction, westerns, classics, myths/fables, fairy tales or historical fiction.

Overall, only 38% of the titles read were from the YA Pre-GED special collection. However, 72% of books read more than once were from the special collection. Students looked outside the special collection for urban fiction, romance, mystery, juvenile picture books, magazines and nonfiction sports reading. Students read an equal amount of young adult and adult materials; however, most adult materials came from outside the classroom collection.
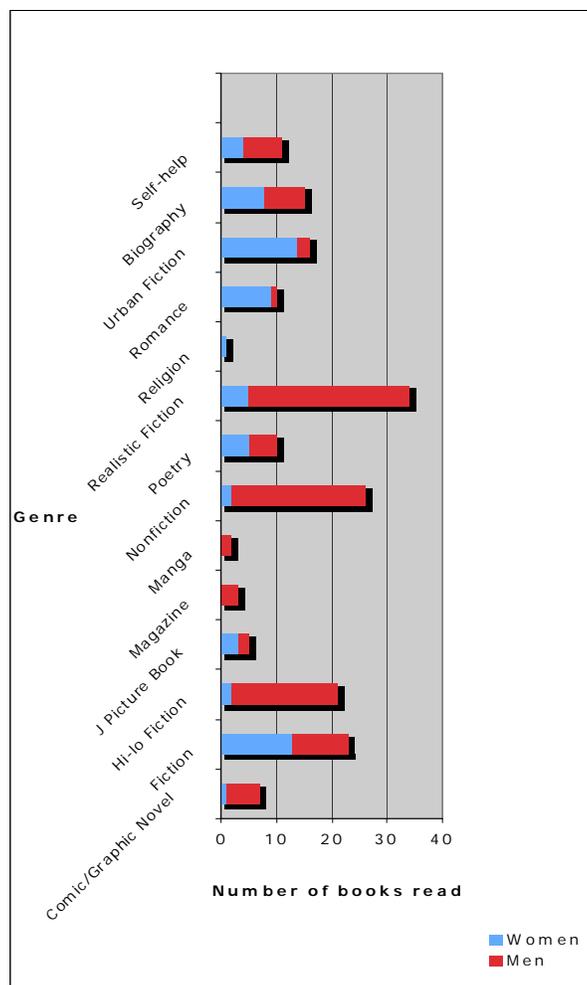
Figure 4 Book Selection by Gender and Genre

Figure 4 gives a breakdown of book selection by gender. Nonfiction titles and realistic fiction were the most popular reading choices for male participants. Urban fiction and romance books were more popular with women than men. Men read the high/low titles more frequently than women. This is in part due to the fact that on average, male participants had lower reading levels than female participants.

Figure 5 is a word/tag cloud of keywords and topics in the books chosen by students. The clouds give greater prominence to words that appear more frequently and are helpful in further analyzing high interest keywords. The tags were chosen from the commonly used keywords in the catalog MARC records. Some also came from Amazon or from words instructors and students repeatedly used to describe books. Most of the keywords relate to fiction set in urban areas and New York City. We

also saw keywords that are common in young adult literature such as "coming-of-age", "relationship", "love", "identity" and "family".

Figure 5: Recurring Keywords/Tags
*size correlates to high recurrences

Works by popular YA authors such as Walter Dean Myers and Sharon Draper were selected often. YA authors Alan Lawrence Sitomer, Kalisha Buckhanon and Coe Booth were also popular. Participants also selected adult fiction authors from the general collection, including Carl Weber, Sistah Souljah and Zane. All the most popular authors write realistic fiction, set in an urban area, about characters that are African-American or Latino. **Figure 6** lists some of the most popular nonfiction and fiction titles as well as the most popular authors.

Figure 6: Books Selected by Pre-GED Students

*Indicates books chosen 2+ times by BPL YA Pre-GED students between 10/2008-11/2009.
All books are from the BPL YA literacy collection.

POPULAR NONFICTION	Author	Key words
*A Child Called It	Dave Pelzer	memoir, abuse
*The Greatest: Muhammad Ali	Walter Dean Myers	biography, photography, sports
*We Beat the Street: How a Friendship Pact Led to Success	Sampson Davis, George Jenkins and Rameck Hunt with Sharon Draper	biography/memoir, inspirational book, urban, Newark, NJ
*Yo Little Brother: Volume II....Basic Rules of Survival for Young African American Males	Anthony Davis and Jeffrey Jackson	self-help, African-American men
Quiz Life	Marina Khedekel	self-help, Q/A Format
POPULAR FICTION	**Author/Editor**	**Key words**
*The Coldest Winter Ever	Sister Souljah	Brooklyn, hip hop, African-American character, urban fiction/street fiction, realistic fiction
*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian	Sherman Alexie	illustrations, basketball, male character, Native American character
*Tyrell	Coe Booth	NYC, relationships, realistic fiction, African-American character, YA slang
*Monster	Walter Dean Myers	NYC, African-American character, prison, YA slang, movie script format
*Hip Hop High School	Alan Lawrence Sitomer	urban setting, YA slang, African-American characters
*Upstate	Kalisha Buckhanon	NY, prison, male/female voices, letter format
POETRY SELECTIONS	**Author/Editor**	**Text Features**
*The Dream Keeper	Langston Hughes Illustrated by Brian Pickney	illustrations, African-American interest
*The Rose that Grew from Concrete	Tupac Shakur Forward by Nikki Giovanni	Shakur's handwriting accompanied by typed text, hip hop, rap
The Pain Tree: And Other Teenage Angst-Ridden Poetry	Edited by Mark Todd Illustrated by Esther Watson	teenage authors, illustrations
You Hear Me?: Poems and Writing by Teenage Boys	Edited by Betsy Franco	teenage authors, Photographs
Street Love	Walter Dean Myers	short novel in free verse
Frida: Viva la Vida! Long Live Life!	Carmen Bernier	biographical poems with artwork of Frida Khalo
Love Poems	Pablo Neruda	bilingual English/Spanish

Lessons Learned

This data offers a snapshot of reading interests and habits in the BPL YA Pre-GED Program. Some of the trends that come out of the data we collected about student book choices are supported in previous literature; others surprised us. We believe we built a strong appropriate collection, but we learned some lessons during the first year of the program.

Students' reading interests were as diverse as their experiences. One Jewish young man read a 300+ page history of the use of drugs in modern history and a young Latina woman read every vampire book she could find. A Haitian-American young woman read a small book on etiquette and an African-American young man liked love stories and read the memoir of a former music video dancer.

A significant number of students who attended the initial YA Pre-GED registrations tested below the fourth grade reading level. Because we used the TABE test as only one of several guides for placement, we accepted several students in the first year cohort who read at the second- and third-grade reading levels.

When the range of students' reading levels became apparent mid-year, we purchased and borrowed lower level reading materials. We borrowed New Readers Press' *Hopes and Dreams* series, by Tana Reiff, from the BPL Adult Learning Centers. We also purchased *News for You*, an accessible adult learner newspaper from New Readers Press, and *The Change Agent,* a thematic social justice newspaper for adult learners.

Another lesson learned was that materials with photographs and illustrations were popular, and visual images affected students' selection of texts. Throughout the program, no matter how often we discussed the process of selecting a book, the young adults would often base their choice solely on the book art (Jones, 2007). Manga and comic books were not as popular as we had anticipated. If any graphic novels did circulate few of them were manga. However, when making our initial purchases, we should have considered book covers, size, and hardcover versus soft-cover.

Disconnected youth, 16-24 years old, do not fit easily into young adult and adult services categories (Degyansky, 2009). The youth gravitated toward "real stories," including realistic fiction, urban fiction, biographies and self-help books. Students sought out what Alfred Tatum calls enabling texts that provided guidance and inspiration (Tatum, 2006). Some of the nonfiction titles, particularly career titles, can also be considered enabling texts. Students selected nonfiction texts around topics connected to their prior knowledge and career goals.

The YA realistic fiction books that were so popular depicted problems with which youth were grappling. We overlooked urban fiction and street lit titles, which were popular among youth participants, because they are designated as "adult" material. Examining the reading choices of disconnected youth in our program prompted us to further explore street lit for the classroom collections. In the spring of 2009 we purchased more paperback urban fiction and street lit.

Overall, the students read more adult books than we expected. In retrospect, perhaps we should not have limited ourselves to materials and titles designated as young adult, because our results support the view that by the late teens, young adults may be more likely read adult books. We would suggest that librarians and teachers looking for quick picks or designing collections for disconnected youth should draw from both young adult and adult literature.

In the future we would order more urban fiction with male protagonists, particularly books by Carl Weber, who was popular with both male and female readers. Since three students read series books set in high school, we may want to revisit titles read by students from *Kimani Tru* or Scholastic's *Bluford High* series that focus on African-American youth characters.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Because students often returned a book before completion, we were not able to consistently gauge favorite titles. Although students read "thicker" books, we observed that what is attractive initially is not always necessarily what will keep them reading to completion.

Because our students did not often identify themselves as good readers, they often did not demonstrate familiarity with different genres, formats, and topics and had a difficult time expressing their own reading likes and dislikes. Despite our best attempts at anticipating reading interest, only a small portion of the special collection was used. We still have much to learn about how to better engage out-of-school youth who have limited reading experience. In the first year of the project we did not survey students systematically about how and why they selected books. Further research should be done about the reading habits and reading choices of older urban adolescents and out–of- school youth.

We observed that male students often selected small titles that fit in their back pockets and left books behind in class. Some literature discusses gender differences in reading choices and theorizes how cultural and gender identity affect academic achievement. Future research might explore how young men who have dropped out of school identify as readers. We think the topic of young adults' identity as learners and readers requires further inquiry. Researchers and practitioners in the literacy field should further examine how masculinity affects older youth's reading choices.

There is a need to examine best practices in engaging out- of -school youth with books and improving access to high/low materials. Categories set to delineate age and interest do not relate to the difficulty of a text. Adult and young adult are not reliable determinates of reading levels. We would encourage libraries and youth-service organizations to conduct student interviews and regularly solicit input from youth. More tools should be available to assist teachers and librarians in determining the levels of nonfiction and adult books.

We hope the information shared here will help inform the design of other library and literacy programs serving adolescent struggling readers and disconnected youth. Our data and experiences demonstrate how libraries can be a valuable resource to entertain, inform and inspire disconnected youth by building on their strengths and interests.

Resources

Resources and Selection Tools
Alfred Tatum's Texts for African American Men
http://alfredtatum.com/
America's Choice Ramp-up Curriculum
www.americaschoice.org/rampupliteracy
Booklist Magazine
International Reading Association Young Adult
Choices http://www.reading.org/Resources/Booklists/YoungAdultsChoices.aspx
Lexile Bookfinder
http://www.lexile.com/search/filters/results/
NovelistPlusAmazon.com
Eureeka!
literacy.kent.edu/eureka/tradebooks/thematic_coll.html
YALSA Booklists & Book Awards (Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers, Young Adult
Choices and Best Books for Yong Adults, Alex
Awards) http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/yalsa.cfm

Publishers Cited
Ferguson Publishing: www.ferguson.infobasepublishing.com/
Grassroots Press: http://www.grassrootsbooks.net/us/
McGraw-Hill/Contemporary: www.glencoe.com/catalog/index.php/contemporary/179
New Readers Press: http://www.newreaderspress.com/
Orca Books: http://www.orcabook.com
Oxford University Press Bookworms: http://www.oup-bookworms.com/index.cfm
Perfection Learning: www.perfectionlearning.com
New England Literacy Resource Center (The Change
Agent): http://www.nelrc.org/changeagent/

Organizations Cited
NYC Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO)

The Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) supported youth literacy initiatives in the three NYC library systems of Brooklyn Public Library, Queensborough Public Library and New York Public Library. CEO was established by Mayor Bloomberg in 2006 to implement innovative ways to reduce poverty in New York City. Led by Executive Director Veronica M. White and supported by a combination of public and private funds, the Center for Economic Opportunity works with City agencies to design and implement evidence-based initiatives aimed at poverty reduction. For more information about all of CEOs initiatives, go to www.nyc.gov/ceo

NYC Department of Education Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG)
The Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation was established in 2005 with the goal of significantly increasing the graduation rates and expanding connections to

college and career opportunities for over-age and under-credited high school students. This office works to support the development of new and enhanced schools and programs that are designed specifically for older students who may be truant, are thinking about dropping out, or are looking for another educational option. http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/AlternativesHS/default.htm

The Youth Development Institute (YDI)

In partnership with the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development and America's Choice, YDI developed CEPS (Community Education Pathways for Success). YDI provides technical assistance and training to libraries and other organizations participating in the Young Adult Literacy Initiative. The Youth Development Institute supports the growth and development of young people by strengthening the quality and increasing the availability of experiences offered by the organizations that serve them. YDI partners with community organizations, schools, colleges, policy makers, funders, and others to create programs, train staff, and develop policies that encourage and enable young people to transition successfully to adulthood. http://www.ydinstitute.org

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