Adolescent literacy is at the forefront of literacy concerns in a nation that sees more and more teenagers either drop out of high school or graduate with low literacy skills. Many students are currently being labeled as struggling and reluctant readers in secondary schools, yet secondary schools continue to mandate traditional literacy curriculums that fail to engage adolescent students as life-long readers. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry explores adolescent perceptions of choice in literacy texts and tasks with the informed guidance of passionate English language arts teachers to introduce books that mirror students’ personal interests and lives. This study posits that the significance of these research findings can likely be transferred to similar secondary English language arts classrooms to encourage struggling and reluctant adolescents to enter the world of literacy.

One of the greatest problems in the American educational system is the fact that many adolescent students lack proficient literacy skills, which will cause them lifelong problems; additionally, educators are not providing what these students need. “Approximately 8 million students in grades 4-12 are reading below grade level, and limited literacy skills cause 3,000 students to drop out of high school every school day” (NCTE, 2012). This finding reported by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) should cause educators and school administrations concern. Many adolescents read below grade level, and this affects their chances for success later. Adolescents who struggle to read see themselves in a negative light concerning literacy, and this too affects their identities as literate individuals. Part of this problem stems from the widespread use of predominantly traditional curricula, which ignores our changing world and students’ identities (Appleman, 2000). The continued, singular use of traditional curricula has not been and will not be effective in improving adolescent literacy rates in the United States. Therefore, it is imperative that educators begin to consider adolescent identity formation in a “new light” (Appleman, 2000) by including popular, contemporary books from the Young Adult (YA) genre into English language arts classrooms, providing informed teacher guidance in reading choices, and giving students choice in what they read.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine how providing struggling and reluctant adolescent readers more student choice in literature materials affects their motivation to engage in classroom reading and then continue reading independently once the assigned literature has been completed. Additionally, this study examines the ways in which informed teacher guidance concerning popular, contemporary series books assists students in choosing texts that engage them in literature and encourages them to become part of what Frank Smith (1987) calls the “Literacy club” (pp. 123-126) where they choose to become independent readers and continue reading past past assigned texts in class.

Research Questions
The following questions guided the research in this study:
1. In what ways, if any, does giving struggling and reluctant adolescent readers choice in their reading materials affect their motivation to read assigned classroom texts?
2. Once adolescents become engaged with a Young Adult series, how does this affect their motivation to continue reading independently and enter into the “Literacy Club?” (Smith, 1987).
3. How does informed teacher guidance concerning popular, contemporary series books affect adolescents’ choices in their independent reading materials?

Literature Review
Hopper (2005) found one way to motivate students was to offer them choice in what they read. She asked the age-old important question, “What are teenagers reading?” Then, she observed and interviewed adolescents in England about their reading choices and habits to help teachers understand what motivated students to read. This was an action research project that was supposed to influence classroom practices. The
background to Hopper’s (2005) problem dealt with the idea that there had been a decline in reading among adolescents due to technology, and there were gender differences in reading methods as well.

In consideration of motivation, Hopper (2005) also asked, “What prompts choice?” (p. 117). She found that adolescents chose books based on previous experience with the book or author, the way the book looked, recommendations, television, and preferred genres. In fact, the term “the Harry Potter effect” (Hopper, 2005, p. 117) was coined to describe how reluctant readers read long books if they were popular, contemporary, and held some meaning for the child. Hopper found that there was not a significant decline in adolescent reading if one considers popular texts, magazines, comics, and electronic texts. She believed that children still read; however, the context was different. Hopper (2005) insisted that if teachers wanted to reach their students, they should become familiar with contemporary texts and make recommendations to students based on student interest and preference.

Ultimately, Hopper (2005) concluded that adolescents read for two main reasons: the search for identity and role experimentation. She also found that what children chose to read was critical to their development as readers. In her research, Hopper (2005) also found that it was important to consider the types of texts, genres, and formats children chose to read on a daily basis. The author cited Benton (1995) who stated that the canon was being replaced by popular, contemporary literature because most adolescents chose to read current texts. At the time of this study, Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings trilogy dominated the list of what students were reading by choice. In fact, many of the books on the popular text list were series books. Hopper (2005) discovered what had changed in the last four decades was the idea of not necessarily reading the same authors but concentrating on similar genres.

Moje et al. (2008) established that adolescents wanted to read texts where they could identify with the main character, situation, setting, or conflict. The authors stated, “Offering youth high-quality adolescent literature, in addition to canonical texts of English language arts, does appear to make a difference in young people’s reading lives” (p. 146). Additionally, this study reported that students did read, but many times they did not know how to find a book that they liked or that would be relevant to their lives. The authors suggested that teachers should become familiar with their students on a personal level and be able to make suggestions about books that students might find enjoyable. Moje et al. (2008) showed that modern students needed more options in what they read, and they needed to see texts that represented their lives. In short, students read to identify, learn, glean information, and relate to their own lives. “Their reading and writing practices foster communication, relationships, and self-expression among peers and family members; support their economic and psychological health; and allow them to construct subjectivities and enact identities that offer them power in their everyday lives” (Moje et al., 2008, p. 149).

Rosenblatt (1938), a pioneer in literacy research, also maintained that teachers needed to find works of literature that were in some way connected to the reader’s interests and personal experiences. Her theories insisted that teachers had to know their students on a personal level, and they could not merely rely on previously used lesson plans. Murphy (1998) claimed, at times, teachers found it necessary to have students read teacher-chosen texts; however, if educators introduced more contemporary, parallel texts, they could build background knowledge and interest their students in tales of unrequited love and teenage suicide; later, the teacher could introduce the canon by presenting a traditional text such as Romeo and Juliet. The teacher could then expand and stretch the student’s comfort zone, and the students would remain engaged in the more difficult works of literature because a foundation of knowledge had been previously established (Murphy, 1998). The reader had a personal connection to similar literary topics that he had already deemed interesting and important. In fact, Rosenblatt (1956) reminisced about a high school student, who after the attempted assassination of the President in 1950, found Julius Caesar to be an immensely relevant work of literature. At this time, to this particular student, Shakespeare was able to shed light on the current situation in a universal way that no news article could do justice.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study was framed as a narrative inquiry to examine adolescent reading practices using popular and contemporary series books in the Young Adult (YA)
genre to motivate struggling and reluctant adolescent readers. For this narrative inquiry, the researcher used semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2002), formal classroom observations, and a collection of documents and records to guide the study. Through the process of collecting assignments, quizzes, tests, student journals, observations, and interviews, the researcher was able to triangulate the data. Fifteen formal classroom observations were completed in a sophomore English classroom where she took field notes in a researcher’s journal. The researcher conducted three separate 45-minute interviews with each of the six participants as well. The researcher used the data collected to inform her thinking on students’ perspectives concerning reading popular, contemporary series books in the classroom.

Participants
Purposive sampling was employed to identify six students to interview. The participants in this study were very diverse; each came from a different background, socioeconomic status, and four participants identified with minority cultures. The participants included: Antonio—struggling reader, Jessica—struggling reader, George—avid reader, Skyler—reluctant reader, Lola—reluctant reader, and Abiel—struggling reader and second language learner in Ms. Epping’s (all names of people and places are pseudonyms) sophomore English language arts class who were reading The Hunger Games books as a supplemental part of the literacy curriculum.

Data Collection and Analysis
Because the researcher was interested in the students’ stories regarding reading a novel, she used a narrative inquiry design for her data analysis (Connelly and Clancy, 2000). Data analysis began immediately and continued throughout the entire research process. When the researcher transcribed all of the data from the student interviews and classroom observations, this familiarized her with the information, which led to insights and stimulated “analytic thinking” (Rossman and Rallis, 2003, p. 281). To produce valid theory, constant comparative analysis (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was used throughout the research process to code the data.

Recurring trends emerged as the data was coded resulting in themes considered in this study. Student choice, adolescents’ perceptions of reading less once they enter secondary schools, students taking ownership of their learning, continuation of reading once students became engaged in a text suggested by the classroom teacher, and informed teacher guidance were all trends that emerged as the researcher used open coding and constant comparative analysis. It became apparent that choice was an integral part of adolescents’ desire to read a text. Furthermore, teacher-chosen texts were considered less desirable, yet students still recognized the need for informed teacher guidance to help them choose appropriate and interesting literature.

By observing the students on a daily basis, the researcher became familiar with the students’ personalities. Through the use of interviews, she was able to ascertain what they thought about literature, education, their future aspirations, and how they viewed choice and teacher guidance in their literacy instruction. From the data provided by the participants, Garcia (2013) began to view what the students said and how they acted in class as their own personal stories. From these observations and interviews, the researcher found that choice and teacher guidance affected students’ motivation to read assigned classroom texts and continue reading on an independent level.

Findings
After coding and analyzing the data, two major themes emerged in the research with subthemes contained in each. The first theme concerned student choice and the lack thereof. The researcher found that students had a desire for more choice in the classroom and their reading materials. The three subthemes contained within this theme concerned students’ perceptions of why they read less as adolescents, taking ownership of their learning, and continued reading on an independent level. Over the course of the study, students began to realize that they did not know how to select literary texts that interested them, so even if they were afforded more choice, they were still unable to choose books that motivated them to read. This idea led into the second theme: informed teacher guidance. The participants voiced the need for educators to guide them on how to choose books, but the teachers had to be informed on popular, contemporary books in the young adult genre to provide this direction. Within this theme, the researcher found two related subthemes concerning inattention to student preferences and how to motivate students to continue read-
Student Choice
Imagine the scene, a high school English Language Arts teacher, Ms. Epping, begins handing out The Hunger Games to students as they sit at their desks. The tardy bell just rang, and students are still visiting. The classroom looks like a traditional, utilitarian, square room with white walls and utility grade blue carpet. There are many posters hanging on the walls and even on the ceiling tiles. The students sit in long rows of desks and groan outwardly as the books are passed back to them. Once the books are passed out, the students begin to respond:

**Regan:** “I’ve read this book before” (Garcia, 2013, p. 127).

**Lola:** “We shouldn’t have to read at all; that’s all we ever do in here!” (Garcia, 2013, p. 128). *Rolls her eyes and flips the book onto her desk with disdain* (Garcia, 2013, p. 128).

**Abiel:** “I’ve already seen the movie to this; I’d rather just watch the movie because they always make more sense than these books; they (the books) are too long, and they have too many words” (Garcia, 2013, p. 128).

**Lola:** “I just don’t care” (Garcia, 2013, p. 128).

**Ms. Epping:** “Students, we are going to begin reading one of my favorite books of all times, The Hunger Games. How many of you have read this book before?” (Garcia, 2013, p. 128). *Five hands rise hesitantly.* Ms. Epping looks around and takes note of this (Garcia, 2013, p. 128).

**Jessica:** “How long will it take to get through this book?” (Garcia, 2013, p. 129). *She makes this statement with some annoyance and her words and tone suggest that she wants to complete the task as soon as possible* (Garcia, 2013).

The previous scene is very commonplace in high school classrooms when a new novel is passed out to students. As a former high school ELA teacher, the researcher has witnessed scenes such as this many times during the course of her career. The preceding words were taken verbatim from one of the formal classroom observations conducted during the course of this study.

In contrast to the voices of the participants and a plethora of research indicating that student choice benefits literacy skills (Hopper 2005, Pitcher et al. 2007, Ivey and Broaddus 2001, and Oldfather 1993), current practices at West Texas High School (pseudonym) limits student choice almost entirely. This school requires its teachers to follow a set scope and sequence of curriculum and learning objectives. Much of this curriculum is based on the traditional Western English canon comprised of classic works by authors such as William Shakespeare, Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Milton, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, to name a few. However, reflecting the work of Benton (1995a, 1995b), who stated popular contemporary works were replacing the canon, the students in this study reported that many of these literary texts—none of which they had selected to read themselves—were difficult for them to read due to the archaic language used within the literature.

A recurring theme shared by the participants in this study was their mutual stance that they should be given choices when it came to the readings and assignments that would be used in their instruction. According to Ivey and Broaddus (2001) and Oldfather (1993), adolescents identified the importance of making choices in their literacy instruction. Echoing these studies, all of the participants in this research project discussed the lack of choice they had when it came to choosing reading materials and assignments. When questioned in the student interviews, five of the six participants stated that they did not voluntarily choose to read in high school; however, all six of the participants discussed avid reading habits in grades 3-5. In the interviews, each participant was asked about his or her current and past reading habits. George, the devoted reader included in the study, admitted that he did not read what was assigned if he deemed it to be boring, and he usually read self-chosen texts instead of doing assigned class work or reading (Garcia, 2013). However, each of the six participants passionately discussed reading and remembered books they enjoyed in the 3rd-5th grades. When questioned about what the participants remembered reading in the past, Antonio mentioned reading Dr. Seuss books and the Bones series (Garcia, 2013). George too discussed reading the Bones books along with The Magic Tree House series, Goosebumps, and the Eragon series (Garcia, 2013). Jessica read Amelia Bedilia and Junie B. Jones (Garcia, 2013). Lola discussed reading the Captain Underpants books, and Skyler remembered reading the R. L. Stein series, Goosebumps (Garcia, 2013). Each student specifically discussed reading series books in the past and
reading for pleasure, so the question educators must ask, is what changes? How do these students go from passionate readers with favorite books to adolescents who immediately balk at any new book handed out in English class?

Why Adolescents Read Less
In an ironic paradox, the adolescents in this study perceived that the expectation for them to read was lessened once they entered secondary school, so they chose not to read as much as they did in elementary schools. The adolescents in this study initially struggled with reading required texts in high school, so they neglected to do so. Lola revealed, “I usually don’t read the books cuz I don’t understand them. Then the teacher wants me to do questions over the book, but how do you answer questions over something you don’t even get in the first place?” (Garcia, 2013, p.135). Several of the other participants voiced similar concerns. They felt that the required reading curriculum in high school was not only difficult but also boring, so they simply chose not to do the assigned readings. Once this happened, their teachers lessened their literacy expectations, so the students followed suit and read less, which resulted in a negative cycle of non-reading.

The students realized that they read less in high school than in previous grades. When asked why, they provided meaningful insight into this issue. Lola described a new world as an adolescent where homework and extra curricular activities “piled up” (Garcia, 2013, p. 136) on her. These were issues she did not experience in younger grades such as playing sports, being in the band, and cheerleading. All of the participants emphasized that they believed students read less today than in years or generations past. Skyler stated, “I think back in the younger days, we read more because we were actually forced to. Like in 6th grade, we had to read a book a week, but now, we don’t have to, so people don’t as much” (Garcia, 2013, p.136). Besides the lack of expectation, the participants felt that technology hindered their reading habits more today than in years past.

When asked about the reasons students read less today than in younger grades, Antonio stated, “Because of technology. People are too busy on computers, phones, and games” (Garcia, 2013, p. 136). Then the students were asked, “What would make students read more today?” (Garcia, 2013, p. 136). George responded, “I would find what they like to read and take away some of the things that don’t let them read almost like making them read it” (Garcia, 2013, p. 136). Skyler stated, “I think if it was encouraged by the school like it was encouraged back then we would read more” (Garcia, 2013, p. 136). After these statements, the interviewer questioned the students in more depth by asking, “You would take away their (other students’) choice?” (Garcia, 2013, p. 137) Where George responded, “Just on the things that stop them from reading. I would let them choose what kinds of things to read. I mean like schools give stuff that is traditional that they give every year, and that is fine for those who want to read those things, but for those who go to the library if they don’t find an actual book that they will read, then there is no point” (Garcia, 2013, p. 137). This illustrates the need for secondary educators to encourage and expect adolescents to read consistently.

Student Ownership of Learning
The participants did not feel as if they took ownership or responsibility for their own learning and literacy habits due to the lack of choice. All of the students mentioned the fact that they hated reading The Odyssey the previous school year. One student in particular stated multiple times throughout the study that he did not finish this book, and it was a negative literacy experience for him. “I saw no point in reading The Odyssey; I hated it” (Garcia, 2013, p. 137), and the rest of the participants agreed with this statement. Even the classroom teacher admitted, “That book is required curriculum by the state; it is not really a choice for any of us” (Garcia, 2013, p. 137). The students discussed becoming hung up on names and places that were difficult to pronounce and having difficulty understanding the storyline due to archaic language (Garcia, 2013, p. 229). Conversely, the participants found that contemporary books like the Percy Jackson series helped to build background knowledge from one book to the next. Even if the names or settings were difficult or uncommon words, once the background knowledge was established, the students were able to read with more fluency and automaticity. In conjunction to this idea, Jessica stated, “I have a hard time understanding what I read sometimes like when the names or places have made up words or they are hard to pronounce, but when we read the second book, I already know the
names and places, so I don’t have to think about them so much and can get more into the story” (Garcia, 2013, p. 220).

Continued Literacy
Once the students were presented with a text that they found engaging, they voiced sentiments of wanting the ability to be able to choose similar books for future assignments. When discussing The Hunger Games book after becoming engaged in the storyline, one student in class stated, “I like this book. Do you think we will read all of them in class?” (Garcia, 2013, p. 137). One of his peers responded, “I don’t know, but I hope so. I want to read them to see what will happen” (Garcia, 2013, p. 137). These are much different attitudes than the opening scene where students complained and fought having to read at all. However, when asked how they would get peers to read more, the participants were a bit more cautious about offering full student choice because they thought that peers their age were too engrossed in computers, video games, and technology in general. When asked if the students would continue to read after they completed The Hunger Games book in class, all of the participants responded that they did want to continue reading. Five of the six students completed all three books in the series even though the classroom teacher only required reading the first book. When asked what they would read after the series, Lola stated, “I really don’t know what else I would read yet. I would like other books by Suzanne Collins or books in a similar genre because I like the way that they (authors in the YA genre) write about everything. She (Suzanne Collins) explains everything and gives a lot of detail; I like her storyline” (Garcia, 2013, p. 139). Skyler stated, “I don’t know either; I am going to try to find some more books like this one (indicating The Hunger Games), but I don’t know what to read next” (Garcia, 2013, p. 139).

This contradiction suggests that the students realized at some level that they wanted and needed guidance when engaging in literacy tasks and choosing texts to read, but that they wanted their personal preferences to be considered as well. The students’ emerging awareness of their need for some guidance, rather than full responsibility for book selections, added a new twist or layer to earlier research on students’ preference for individual choice in school literacy tasks. Therefore, the classroom teacher suggested other texts to the students because she was well read in the YA genre, and she was able to provide insight into other books the students might like. She stated to the questioning students, “Suzanne Collins wrote Gregor the Overlander series as well. It is really good, a little bit younger, but a great story. It has five books in it, and the characters are well developed. You might also like the Divergent series or the Maze Runner series” (Garcia, 2013, p. 140).

Teacher Guidance
Even though the adolescents in this study cried out for more choice in literacy, they still recognized the need for informed teacher guidance. This is reminiscent of the work of Hopper (2005), the 1995 SCAA report, and OFSTED (2003), this study revealed how vastly important it is for teachers to become well acquainted with contemporary, YA literature because of the potential it holds to develop adolescent students’ reading interests. As a result of being required to read works with a literary style far removed from their life experiences, students remained disengaged with school literacy. The opportunity to choose readings with stylistics more suited to their tastes and experiences was not ordinarily provided to them. What is so important about this finding is that it indicates that due to their strict adherence to “the canon,” teachers inadvertently limited their students’ choices, which, in turn, created unnecessary obstacles to students’ literacy growth and engagement. A narrowly traditional curriculum, which by its very nature limited student choice, appeared to stifle participants’ motivation in more than one way.

Mirroring recent statements on student motivation made by the 2010 NCTE Policy Research Brief on Adolescent Literacy, the students in this study not only resented having all of the texts chosen for them to read, but they were also disenchanted by the lack of diversity afforded by teacher (or canon) selected readings. Five of the participants stated that when teachers told them about books or stated that they would like the book they were reading, they became very suspicious of the text. The reason for this stemmed from past experiences and educators not knowing about their personal interests. The students related countless stories of having to read archaic texts in class when they really wanted to read diversified texts that represented who they were as adolescents. Similar to Owen’s (2003) research that stated adolescents desired to see a representation of themselves in the literature, the students ech-
oed this sentiment when they voiced their frustrations over a limited, homogenous reading curriculum based on the traditional Western canon. Abiel stated, “The other books the teachers chose, I never paid attention, but this (The Hunger Games) is a book that I like, so I wanted to read it” (Garcia, 2013, p. 138). “When the teacher chooses for me, she doesn’t make it fun. They (teachers) usually pick boring books. Last year, we read boring books” (Garcia, 2013, p. 131). Antonio agreed, “Right, usually when a teacher tells you a book is going to be good or you are going to like it, you don’t” (Garcia, 2013, p. 131).

**Inattention to Adolescent Preferences**
Moving beyond what past research has indicated, the student participants indicated that inattention to student choice created personal barriers between students and teachers that could potentially inform students’ attention to even future teachers’ literacy guidance in negative ways. Due to the inattention given to their preferences and choices, the participants felt that teachers were out of touch and did not know about students’ personal interests. When teachers made book recommendations, the students immediately assumed that they would not like the book due to these past experiences.

This inattention to their preferences and choices left them feeling unknown, their identities unacknowledged. This finding was compounded by data revealing that the majority of the participants admitted to reading at least a little each week, but that they were more influenced on what to choose by observing what their peers were reading and by popular books posted on social media. Following suit with established habits of resistance, the students did not initially choose or want to read The Hunger Games; however, once they were introduced to the text, they made the conscious effort to fully engage in the book. This conscious effort made by the students was due to style, subject matter, and diversity that won the majority of the students over in the end. Then, many of the students in the class and all of the participants chose to read subsequent books in the series of their own volition. Additionally, an unexpected finding occurred when the students found that the relaxed teaching environment and style positively contributed to their desire and choice in reading the book.

**Turning the Tables**
In an interesting turn of events, the students began to enjoy reading each day. In formal observations, it was noted that students verbally complained on days that reading was not part of the daily agenda. On a non-reading day, Skyler stated, “I want to read some more. I am absolutely not doing any questions” (Garcia, 2013, p. 140). While Abiel stated, “If we don’t read today, it’s just gunna go bad up in here” (Garcia, 2013, p. 129). All of the participants discussed doing well on the tests and study guide questions concerning The Hunger Games, and their grades reflected this change over the course of the grading period (Garcia, 2013). “Several students in the classroom voiced sentiments of not minding answering questions and doing assignments on The Hunger Games book because they felt more confident about knowing the answers. However, a few students in the class still griped about having to stop the reading process to look things up” (Garcia, 2013, p. 141). At the beginning of The Hunger Games unit, the majority of the students in the class did not want to do activities or answer questions on the text and complained about the amount of questions being given as guided notes; however, once they read farther in the book and started to see success in answering the questions, most of the complaints ceased” (Garcia, 2013, p. 141).

**Conclusions**
Even though students want choice in the books they read, many adolescents are out of practice when it comes to choosing books that are appropriate for them and will interest them. Classroom teachers need to help guide students in what to read, but the only way to do this is to become very familiar with popular, contemporary YA books. After gaining student interest, then students are able to have more choice in what they read in and out of class. A key factor for educators is to find captivating texts such as The Hunger Games before the movie comes out, engage students with one book, and then allow students to choose other texts after interest and motivation to read have been established. Once this occurs, even struggling and reluctant adolescent readers are more apt to continue reading if they see their interests are taken into consideration. It takes a passionate teacher willing to work even harder than necessary to delve into a new genre and find texts that mirror adolescents’ lives, but it is exactly this passion that can introduce struggling and reluc-
tant adolescent readers to the world of literacy.

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About the Author:

*Dr. Beth Garcia is an Assistant Professor at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas where she currently teaches ESL and reading classes in the teacher preparatory program. She received her PhD in Curriculum and Instruction, Language and Literacy with a minor in Bilingual/ESL studies from Texas Tech University.*