

Article

“Through the Looking Glass”: The Transformative Power of Reading for Youth Activists

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Abstract: Cases of historical and contemporary social movements suggest that among activists, reading texts together is a valuable learning experience. However, less research exists on the specific texts youth activists seek out in their work and the role these texts play in shaping their understanding of themselves as activists. Drawing on Rudine Sims Bishop’s classic formulation of books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, this study explores the under-appreciated role texts may play in drawing young people to activism and shaping their identities as activists. Coupled with interview data from six youth activists engaged in the climate justice movement, survey data from 237 self-identifying youth activists suggest that the texts youth activists name as influential serve a “through the looking glass” function: they often reflect problematic aspects of the social world and one’s place within it, while also revealing new and aspirational roles readers might take on to address social problems. The texts the youth identified as influential were diverse; there were few commonalities among titles, underscoring the importance of ongoing access to a broad range of reading materials. Ultimately, findings suggest that texts work to bind together the various internal and external, micro, meso, and macro influences that collectively shape youth activists’ narratives of becoming.

Keywords: youth activism; critical literacy; youth development



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1. Introduction

The Columbia University and Barnard College students who met to plan the Gaza Solidarity Encampment on the South Lawn of the campus in April 2024 had many practical items to attend to. They ordered supplies, conducted a power analysis, created a list of demands, and prepared for possible response scenarios, including their arrest. But before and during their protest, they also read, studying the history of student activism at their university, including the Vietnam War protests of 1968 and the South African apartheid protests of 1985. And they “read about the Black Panthers, as well as the words of writer Angela Davis” [1]. This work of reading together embedded them in a long tradition of activist literacy, albeit one that has received relatively scant attention from scholars.

Cases of historical and contemporary social movements suggest that among activists, reading texts together is a valuable learning experience [2]. In particular, there is a rich legacy of Black study and struggle [3]. For instance, in the 1960s, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee “read and discussed classic works by the first prime minister and president of Ghana, the pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah, the scholar and educator Carter G. Woodson, and Harriet Tubman” [4] (p. 25); the Combahee River Collective formed as a Black feminist study group [5]; and more recently, abolitionist study groups have emerged to understand and contest the role of policing in communities and on college campuses [6].

Because of reading’s demonstrated capacity to sharpen analysis and inspire action, literacy has long been targeted by lawmakers and the corporate elite invested in the unequal

status quo. This repression has ranged from anti-literacy laws that forbade reading and writing among enslaved Black people [7] to contemporary book challenges impacting libraries and schools in record numbers [8]. Despite these efforts, texts, both print and online, remain formative for student and youth activists today. Indeed, in three successive waves of data collected from a national summer program for youth activists between 2021 to 2023, “something I read” was the second most commonly selected item, after “my values”, influencing respondents to become activists. “Something I read” was not only more frequently selected but also rated as more impactful than such factors as “my peers/friends”, “other activists”, and “something I watched or listened to” [9].

In light of this finding and recognizing that literacy has been and remains a significant factor in shaping the development of youth activists, we pursue the following research questions:

- How many and which youth activists indicate reading a text as influential in shaping their identities as activists?
- Which texts and/or authors are youth activists identifying as influential and why?
- How are they accessing these texts?
- How, if at all, do named influential titles and authors vary according to youth identity and social location?

Through an exploration of these questions, we hope to better understand the landscape of textual access and literary inspiration, particularly in light of recent efforts to ban books and restrict access to knowledge and opportunities for learning more broadly, so that those of us invested in supporting youth activists might continue to facilitate the conditions for liberatory study and struggle.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Factors That Motivate and Influence Youth to Become Activists*

Since the 1960s, scholars have explored what leads some young people to engage in activism. Some of these researchers focus on the motivation of youth activists—that is, their internal reasoning or sensemaking, the values, emotions, beliefs, interests, and goals or hopes that propel them to take action [10]. Other scholars examine external forces, such as the social, political, and educational factors that shape their experiences and influence youth engagement [11,12]. And some researchers consider the internal and external influences simultaneously, noting the inescapable interplay between the two (e.g., [13–16]). For example, family members (external) may shape one’s values (internal); a class curriculum (external) may inspire interest (internal) in a cause; or an event (e.g., a wildfire, a school shooting, an encounter suffused with racism and/or sexism) may directly impact a young person, motivating them to care about the broader issue represented by the event.

Research on the multifaceted motivations of youth activists has highlighted such themes as goals, identity, solidarity, emotions, and beliefs. While a desire to effect change in an unjust status quo (whether through raised public awareness, pressure on politicians, or revolutionary means) is the animating goal of most youth activists [10,17–19], motivation is a complex and unstable phenomenon. Indeed, the motives that first draw youth to activism may be different than those that keep them engaged over the long haul [14]. Having a personal stake in the issue or cause because it is related to some facet of one’s identity or first-hand experiences has been identified as a key impetus to activism for many young people [16,20,21]. For example, queer youth may be disproportionately drawn to LGBTQIA2S rights campaigns, youth who are immigrants or the children of immigrants may be drawn to the DREAMER movement, and Black youth may be drawn to racial justice activism. These youth may feel compelled to work to dismantle the unjust structures, policies, and practices that condition their daily lives. Connected to the theme of identity, some youth pursue activism as a way to express or even further develop their identities [10,16,22]. Relatedly, “self goals” [14], including a desire to develop certain

competencies, have been identified in some literature as a factor leading youth to become involved in activist communities [13].

In addition to the relevance of identity, feeling a sense of solidarity with or a moral obligation to act on behalf of others unjustly impacted by an issue can be a powerful driver for some youth activists [23]. Bruselius-Jensen [24] found these motives were particularly resonant for privileged youth; however, studies have also found a desire to express solidarity to be a prime motivator among marginalized youth in under-resourced societies and social contexts [21,25].

Emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, as well as hopefulness have also been identified as salient motivators [10,18,21,23,26,27]. Comparing the emotional motives of youth to those of adults engaged in the climate marches of 2019, de Moor and colleagues [28] found consistently high levels of worry, anger, and frustration across both groups, but adults reported considerably less fear and anxiety than their youth activist counterparts.

Finally, some research on the internal motives of youth activists calls attention to values and beliefs as key catalysts, including beliefs about the importance of taking action to better one's community or the world [14], beliefs about a lack of other recourse to have their voices heard [29], and social justice values [17,19].

With regard to external influences, the extant literature has identified meso- and macro-level factors that can lead youth to engage in activism. At the meso-level, research has examined the roles of family members and parents [15,19,30,31], schools and teachers [32–34], community-based organizations [17,22], and peer groups [13,15,35,36] in cultivating activist mindsets and dispositions. These “socializing agents” have been found to exert considerable influence on young people's developing world views, interests, concerns, sensibilities, and behaviors. Additionally, the quantity and accessibility of opportunity structures in a young person's environment can have a profound impact not only on their ability to engage but also on their social and political views [37]. At the macro level, in addition to the prevailing sociopolitical and economic conditions of a nation-state, national or global events, such as elections or revolutions, war, and climate disasters, can shape youth engagement in activism [25,38–41]. Social media has also emerged in recent studies as a powerful tool for movement recruitment and information sharing, drawing several young people into activist circles [27,42–47].

In the literature on the factors that motivate or inspire youth activists to take action, little attention has been paid to the influence of books, articles, or other texts, especially those youth might discover on their own. In order to further conceptualize the role of reading in youth activist development, we turn next to a brief overview of critical literacies, a longstanding concept in literacy theory and practice that has articulated a relationship between literacy and political analysis.

2.2. *Reading the Word and the World: The Power of Critical Literacies*

Critical literacies are processes of reading the word and the world [48] rooted in an understanding of literacy as a social practice embedded in specific cultural and political contexts [49,50] wherein people make “their own meanings from the realities of their lives and the literacies around them” [51] (p. 102). Critical literacy as a concept emerged from studies of Paulo Freire's popular education praxis—itsself a process of collectively developing *conscientization*, or critical consciousness, among agricultural laborers in post-colonial Brazil [52,53]. Freire [54] theorized that learning to read was a political act, one that sharpened the emergent reader's capacity for structural analysis and social action. Today, as an umbrella term, critical literacies connotes the wide range of lenses, texts, and tools used to deconstruct and transform hegemonic ideologies and oppressive social structures [52].

Such practices are necessarily diverse, multilingual, multi-genre, and multimodal, given the far-reaching and contextually specific manifestations of oppression. They include, among others, pop-culture remixes [55], youth participatory action research [56], and narrative reclamation [57]. In both formal and informal educational settings with youth, critical literacies are leveraged to contest specific forms of injustice, such as anti-

Black racism [58], misogynoir [59], Indigenous erasure [60], English-only education and appropriateness-based language education [61], anti-immigration policy and practice [62], homophobia and transphobia [63], gun violence and mass shootings [64], and climate change and environmental racism [65].

At the same time, scholars increasingly recognize that youth activists produce and utilize distinctive sets of self-initiated critical literacies that emerge from their particular social contexts and transformative aims. In her study of five youth activists in New York City, E. Bishop [66] highlights the strategies they used, such as mobilization, research and analysis, identification of injustice, designing action, and reflection. Rombalski [67] found that anti-racist youth activists resist hierarchies, uplift multiple perspectives, and ask critical questions. Other studies have examined the activist literacies young people develop in school-based settings [62,68] or community-based education contexts [69]. These studies of critical literacies and youth activism highlight essential practices engaged by youth and educators within and beyond schools as they seek to understand and disrupt unjust systems.

However, less research exists on the specific texts youth activists seek out in their work and the role these texts play in shaping their understanding of themselves as activists. This study sets out to explore the under-appreciated role texts may play in drawing young people to activism and shaping their identities as activists.

3. Theoretical Framework

Our analysis draws on Rudine Sims Bishop's [70] classic theorization that books variously serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Emphasizing the need for a greater diversity of representation in children's books, R. Bishop notes that books can serve as mirrors that allow readers to see themselves, making them feel affirmed and less alone; windows, offering perspective on the experiences of others; and sliding glass doors that enable the reader to enter an unfamiliar world, walk in someone else's shoes, and develop empathy. Many scholars have used and built on this framework (for a discussion, see [71]). For instance, Debbie Reese [60] added the metaphor of "curtain" to account for Native stories that remain hidden and safeguarded within Native communities. Stephanie Toliver [72] proposed the "telescope" as a literary metaphor wherein texts allow racially minoritized children, especially Black children, to see themselves in speculative fiction and fantastical worlds.

Riffing on R. Bishop and her interlocutors, we likewise propose that textual mirrors might, at times, do more than simply reflect the world and our experiences; readers might also step "through the Looking Glass", as Alice famously did in Lewis Carroll's 1872 novel. In Carroll's "Looking-Glass world", ordinary objects and rooms are both reflected and transformed—and, as a result, Alice's conception of who she is and what is possible drastically shifted. Our research suggests that texts named by youth activists as influential seem to simultaneously reflect problematic aspects of the social world and one's place within it, while also revealing new and aspirational roles readers might take on to address social problems. Significantly, literature and nonfiction books provide access to both internal and external motivating factors for youth activists. For instance, readers may encounter descriptions of macro-level events, such as climate disaster and genocide, as well as renderings of micro-level oppressive encounters, such as gender-based violence and racial microaggressions. Readers may identify with characters or authors, strengthening their own political convictions and identities as they witness injustices enacted against people to whom they relate; at the same time, they may also find themselves forging new internal solidarities with unexpected interlocutors or inspirations. While readers may not necessarily fully see themselves yet in the portrait on the page, they may aspire to become like the character or author.

This theorizing, which seeks to encompass both the range of fictional and nonfictional encounters with people and events young activists may find, as well as the varied internal

responses they might have to these encounters, helps us to categorize and understand the texts youth activists identify as influential to their work and identity as activists.

4. Methods and Data Sources

The findings of this paper are based on two distinct sets of data: a survey with 237 self-identifying college student activists from around the country and in-depth interviews with leaders in a particular youth activist group based in a southern U.S. state and focused on climate justice. Combining these data sources allows us to identify broad trends as well as uncover the nuances explaining why and how certain texts matter in youth activists' developmental trajectories. Although the data sets were not designed to be complementary, the salience of "reading" in both sets offers a sound justification for looking across them to gain more insight into our research questions, satisfying the mixing purposes of expansion and complementarity [73,74].

4.1. Survey Study

Procedure and Methods. An IRB-approved online survey was sent to the leaders of student activist clubs on 120 four-year residential college and university campuses, including every state in the U.S. These leaders were asked to circulate the survey to members of their clubs as well as any other student activists they knew on campus. Only participants who identified as student activists were asked to complete the survey.

The survey contained a mixture of open and close-ended questions. Of particular relevance to this study was the following item: In high school, did you read any texts that shaped your identity as an activist? If respondents answered "yes" to this question, they then received two follow-up questions: "Which text(s)?" and "In which class did you read the text(s)?" Later in the survey, respondents were asked a yes-no question, "In college, did you read a text that shaped your identity as an activist?" Their answer to this question did not trigger any follow-up questions.

Participants. The 237 survey respondents hailed from 47 different states as well as the District of Columbia. Fifty-six percent attended public universities or colleges. Their campuses were located in suburban (35%), urban (32%), and rural (33%) communities. White respondents made up the majority of the sample (66%), with Latiné (6%), Black or African American (8%), Asian (10%), and bi- or multiracial or another racial and ethnic identity (9%) constituting smaller shares. Sixty-seven percent identified as women and 21% as men, while another 12% of respondents rejected the gender binary. Fifty-four percent identified as LGBTQIA. Socioeconomically, 30% described their families or themselves as low-income, 35% as middle-class, and 35% as upper middle or upper class.

Analytic Approach. Our analytic approach involved running frequencies and basic descriptive statistics on the close-ended data and coding the open-ended responses using a coding schema we jointly developed after familiarizing ourselves with the data. These codes included various ways of categorizing the texts that each respondent named. Codes pertained to fiction, nonfiction, or a mix of fiction and nonfiction; author of color (yes/no); female author (yes/no); and non-U.S. setting (yes/no). If a respondent named multiple texts and if any one of those texts merited a "yes" for a particular code, we coded the entire set as "yes" for that code. Both researchers coded the data separately and then compared the results. All discrepancies were discussed and resolved to achieve 100% agreement. Once the data were coded, we ran *t*-test and chi-square analyses to explore patterns in responses related to respondents' identities.

4.2. Interview Study

Method. As part of a larger IRB-approved study, six members from Youth Rising (YR), a climate justice organization based in a southern state, were recruited to participate in one-on-one interviews about their experiences as activists. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews were conducted online over Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately one hour; recordings were transcribed and cleansed. The semi-structured interview pro-

protocol included such questions as “How did you first become involved in YR?” “Why is participating in this movement important to you?”, and “How, if at all, do folks in YR talk about social justice and what it means in the context of your movement?” The protocol did not initially include any questions that asked directly about texts, books, or reading, although follow-up questions were sometimes posed if participants brought up these topics spontaneously.

Participants. YR is a state-wide youth-led organization established in the summer of 2020 in a conservative southern state. Its goals include building its base, electing progressive candidates to local, state, and federal office who are “climate conscious”, and securing a Green New Deal for the state. The core principles of YR are anti-capitalism, community, intersectionality, justice, respect, solidarity, and sustainability. At the time of data collection, the organization included 30 members, aged 13–22, who met regularly on Zoom to organize state-wide campaigns and events and build community.

The six YR respondents [See Table 1], all of whom are identified by pseudonyms, included three leaders and three rank-and-file members of YR. Of the six, one identified as Black and one as South Asian, while the other four identified as white. Two identified as queer. Three identified as men, while the other three identified as women. One was a college student, and one was a middle school student, while the other four were high school students. We did not collect socioeconomic information from these respondents; however, during interviews, some respondents disclosed financial struggles.

Table 1. YR Respondents.

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Race	Sexual Orientation	School-Level
Brady	M	white	Heterosexual	High
Jayla	F	Black	Queer	College
Caroline	F	white	Heterosexual	High
Pooja	F	South Asian	Heterosexual	High
Chris	M	white	Queer	Middle
John	M	white	Heterosexual	High

Analytic Approach. Each interview transcript was coded following an open coding schema. This schema included the codes “reading” and “research” because these ideas emerged as salient in a number of the interviews. Each of the six respondents discussed reading or research, unprompted, during the interview. For four respondents, these sections of the interview occurred in one chunk, varying in length from one to two single-spaced pages. One respondent discussed reading in two separate sections of the interview, while another did so in three separate sections. Excerpts coded as “reading” or “research” were then subjected to a second round of focused coding. These codes pertained to such specific topics as how they encountered the text (e.g., parent recommendation; teacher recommendation), the content and focus of the texts, and how these texts shaped their thinking. The coded data were compared within and across cases and used to develop propositions in memos [75], which form the basis for the findings in this paper.

4.3. Researcher Positionality

Aspects of our personal and professional identities predispose us to regard and respond to the data in particular ways. Both authors identify as avid readers, as English majors, and as former high school English teachers. We have seen in our own trajectories as scholar-activists and in our classrooms the power of literature to stimulate self-discovery and awaken new interests and commitments in young people. These experiences inspired our research topic [76] and led us to include questions about reading on the survey and to pose follow-up or probing questions when youth activists raised their experiences with texts, unprompted, in the interviews. Because each of us is socially located in ways that inevitably shape how we interact with the participants and interpret the data [77], below,

we include individual reflections to highlight the role of our positionalities in shaping our investments and approaches.

Karen: I approach these questions as a white, affluent queer person who was provided frequent and generally unmonitored access to a wide range of fiction and nonfiction texts from an early age. My family and I often visited our small town's local library, and my mother was good friends with the librarian. In contrast to the normally unremarkable experiences I had at this library—where I collected a pile of books and took them home without incident—one moment in early adolescence stands out. I had heard of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, somehow, and wanted to read it. But when I tried to check it out, the librarian suggested to my mother that it was not suitable for me. I left without the book. Authored by and featuring a Black, queer woman, detailing sexual violence that echoed news I had heard about then-President Clinton, I read this book secretly as soon as I was able and was left wondering which aspect of the text was inappropriate. This book, which both did and did not reflect my experiences in significant ways, has remained a touchstone text for my understanding of my own sociopolitical awakening.

Jerusha: In my first job after graduating from college, I worked as a college admission officer for an elite university. As a middle-class white woman and the proud graduate of an under-resourced urban high school that served a large population of low-income, Hispanic students, I was struggling with questions of fairness, access to opportunity, and preparedness while weighing applicants from markedly different high school environments. A friend suggested I read Jonathan Kozol's (1990) *Savage Inequalities*. The book helped me understand the broader context for the disparities I was seeing reflected in applicant's files; it set my newly awakened indignation about educational inequity aflame, and with its opening observation that "the voices of children, frankly, had been missing from the whole discussion", it sparked a commitment to student voice that has become a mainstay of my scholarly career. Although how I read and respond to *Savage Inequalities* has changed over time, I credit the book with stimulating my politicization, provoking questions and concerns about our education system that eventually propelled me to graduate school, to a career as an educational researcher, and many years later, to an identity as a scholar-activist.

In addition to our investment in reading, we both have a deep appreciation for and kinship with youth activists, Karen as a current facilitator and scholar of youth participatory action research, and Jerusha as a parent of a young "artist" (artist and activist) and longtime scholar of youth activism. Mindful of these affinities and guided by Peshkin's [78] admonition to remain attuned to warm and cool spots in our data, during data analysis, we regularly checked ourselves to make sure we were not romanticizing our participants or reading their accounts uncritically. Working in partnership to challenge and refine one another's interpretations made for a more robust analytical process. Additionally, practicing reflexivity about our positionality and speaking transparently with one another and with our readers about its influence on our research activities helped us to generate stronger and more credible theorizing.

Our research does have limitations. In both the survey study and the interview study, the samples consisted predominantly of white students. It is possible that different patterns or more statistically significant differences could be found in samples with more balanced representation across racial and ethnic groups. In the survey study, we only asked for the names of texts that shaped respondents' identities as activists during high school, neglecting the titles of works that may have catalyzed their development as activists during college. Whether there is any difference between the types of formative texts youth activists encounter during high school and those they encounter during college, therefore, remains an open question. Additionally, in the interview study, we did not ask respondents directly about the role of reading. Rather, the topic emerged organically as the respondents reflected on how they became activists. A greater understanding of the role of reading and critical literacy in activists' developmental journeys could be gained from pursuing these lines of inquiry more intentionally and systematically.

5. Findings

5.1. Quantitative Data Trends

Turning to our first research question about how many and which youth activists indicate reading as influential, we find from the survey data (see Table 2) that 47% of respondents said they had read a text in high school that shaped their identity as activists (even though only 40% identified as activists before or during high school, meaning that some students retroactively understood a text as formative to their becoming activists). Meanwhile, 63% reported reading such a text in college.

Table 2. Percentage of respondents who read a formative text by social location.

	Read a Text in High School That Shaped Identity as Activist	Read a Text in College That Shaped Identity as Activist
Overall	47.0%	63.6%
Race		
Black	64.3%	85.7%
Latine	58.3%	58.3%
White	47.6%	69.4%
Asian	36.4%	63.6%
Bi- or multiracial	31.3%	43.8%
Gender		
Man	56.0%	60.0%
Woman	43.9%	64.5%
Non-binary or genderqueer	46.4%	67.9%
Sexual Orientation		
LGBQIA	50.5%	76.6% ***
Heterosexual or straight	43.0%	54.5% ***
Socioeconomic Status		
Low-income	48.3%	71.7% *
Middle-income	43.5%	56.5% *
High-income	46.5%	77.5% *
How accessed		
In English class	61.4%	
Outside of class	25%	

Note. * $p < 0.05$ and *** $p < 0.001$.

Among the high school readers, there were not any statistically significant demographic differences; however, more Black (64%) and Latiné (58%) students reported having read an influential text in high school than their white (47%), Asian (36%) and mixed race counterparts (31%). More men (56%) reported reading a text in high school than women (44%) and non-binary students (46%), and slightly more queer students (50.5%) reported such a reading than heterosexual students (43%). High school readers comprised similar shares of the socioeconomic strata, with 48% of low-income, 44% of middle-income, and 47% of high-income brackets indicating they had read a book in high school that shaped their identity as activists.

With regard to college reading, two significant differences emerged: lower-income (71.7%) and higher-income respondents (77.5%) were considerably more likely to report having read an influential text than their middle-income peers (56.5%) ($X^2 = 7.511$ [2, 200], $p = 0.023$). Additionally, queer respondents (76.6%) were more likely to have read an influential text than their straight counterparts (54.5%) ($X^2 = 10.76$ [1, 204], $p < 0.001$). Although the difference was not statistically significant, probably due to power constraints, the percentage of Black respondents who reported reading an influential text in college jumped to 85.7%, considerably higher than white (69.4%), Asian (63.6%), Latiné (58.3%), and Mixed race (31.3%) respondents.

Next, to address our second research question about which texts youth activists identify as formative, we examined the titles of the influential books that respondents reported having read during high school. We found a considerable diversity of titles, with only a handful of texts earning repeat mentions. Some of the more commonly named texts included works by Toni Morrison (6); Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (5); works by Karl Marx, such as *The Communist Manifesto* (5); Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (4); and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (4).

Most respondents (65%) who answered the “which text” question named more than one text. For example, one respondent wrote the following: “*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1984, A.E. Housman poetry, Miscellaneous Online Stories”. Another wrote, “Works by Doris Lessing, Angela Davis, Aristotle, news about the LGBT Movement, lots more I can’t remember”. A third shared, “Omi and Winant on racial formation; Foucault on power; Beverly Daniel Tatum; Edward Said; texts on Eugenics (from *Facing History and Ourselves*, I think); *Handmaid’s Tale*.... and many more!” Of those who entered identifiable texts that they had read in high school that shaped their identity as activists, 24% named fictional works only, 47% named nonfictional works only, and 29% reported a mix of fiction and nonfiction. Sixty-three percent identified works written by one or more authors of color, and 62% identified one or more works written by a woman. Nearly half (49%) mentioned a work set in a non-US context.

Our third research question considered how they accessed these texts. In response to the survey question asking, “In which class did you read the texts you named above”, 61% of respondents credited their English class; however, a good number of respondents pointed to such courses as History, Government, and Civics (22%), and some mentioned Religion courses, Women’s Studies courses, Psychology courses, and Environmental Science courses. A full quarter of respondents (25%) challenged the assumption of the question and indicated that they found and read these texts on their own, outside of class. One respondent, for example, wrote, “This book actually wasn’t for a class!” and another explained, “*To Kill a Mockingbird* was required for English, but all other books were chosen and read alone”.

Chi-square tests of independence revealed a strong association between accessing one or more influential texts in English class and naming a title by an author of color and a female author. Seventy-seven percent of respondents who named at least one title by an author of color indicated reading the influential text(s) in English class, compared to 16% who read it in a different class or on their own, $X^2(6, N = 88) = 167.68, p < 0.001$. Similarly, 67% of those who identified one or more texts by a woman author indicated accessing the texts in English class, compared to 27% who read the work in another course or outside of class, $X^2(6, N = 88) = 155.22, p < 0.001$. Unsurprisingly, those who cited only fictional works were also more likely to have accessed the books in an English class (77%) than not (23%), $X^2(9, N = 88) = 250.66, p < 0.001$.

Finally, to explore our fourth research question using the survey data, we ran chi-square tests of independence and found no significant relationships between respondents’ social locations (e.g., gender, racial identity, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation) and their likelihood of naming a certain genre, works by women, works by one or more authors of color, or works set in a non-US context, with one exception. Student activists of color were more likely to cite fictional texts only (46%), while white activists were more likely to cite nonfiction (51%), $X^2(2, N = 85) = 9.26, p < 0.010$.

5.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the interview study allow us to bring a layer of complexity and nuance to our understanding of the survey results and offer greater insight into our second and third research questions, which asked which texts were influential and why and how youth were accessing them.

First, these interviews shed light on the *literacy sponsors* who facilitated the activists’ access to meaningful texts. Deborah Brandt [79] defines such sponsors as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” [79] (p. 166). For several of the youth, school-based structures and individuals supported their access to texts that became springboards for further study. For instance, when Caroline was asked what sparked her political awakening, she ultimately traced this process back to reading *Harry Potter* in school:

Caroline: . . . I live in the South so I remember cheering for Mitt Romney in the 2012 election and I was in first grade, I don’t even know what’s happening. . . And even in fifth grade during the 2016 election, I was like, why am I cheering

for Trump? I don't even know who this dude is and I just started becoming. . . I'm just doing whatever everyone else wants me to do. I want to look into it and see if I do like this dude. And I don't like him, unsurprisingly, so yeah.

Interviewer: What made you kind of come to that 'Wait, I need to do my own homework and really think about what my values are?' What prompted that?

Caroline: Um, it seems to me kind of stupid. It was *Percy Jackson*. Really dumb, but. . .

Interviewer: That's not dumb. That's so cool. I love that.

Caroline: It was, I just was like, he's doing stuff. I want to do stuff and he didn't know anything going into the book series. And I was like, wait, I don't know anything. I want to make change. So, it was just kind of books in general, not just *Percy Jackson*. . . I was an avid reader as a kid, I love to read books, so. . .

Interviewer: That's amazing. I really like that. And were you reading *Percy Jackson* for school or for pleasure?

Caroline: For pleasure. I was reading *Harry Potter* for school. And then it just kind of was a rabbit hole, I was just like, oh wait, I like this stuff.

Brady also cited school-based readings but observed the role of a specific teacher in supporting him. He explained that his teacher assigned nonfiction texts in Human Geography class that "encouraged me to do more digging into things"; his teacher "really encouraged me to do my own research and do my own thing". This teacher even connected him with an international organization that allowed him to engage in his own historical research. John, too, referenced his eighth-grade English teacher, who used current political and ethical dilemmas to encourage critical thinking and debate among himself and his classmates. For John, less than a specific reading, his teacher's approach to texts was important to him. Finally, Jayla noted the following:

My mom, she's always harped on reading and things like that. So, she would assign us books because my school didn't. And we were at the book fair, and on the cover, it's three Black girls, and she was like, oh, that looks good, that looks cool, and it was only two dollars, so she bought it for me from the Scholastic Book Fair. And then she made me read it, and that's what happened.

The book fair provided access to a range of texts, and Jayla's mother, attentive to the gaps in Jayla's whitewashed schooling, was drawn to the book that featured three Black girls on the cover. Thus, these young activists were influenced by access to a range of texts, assigned readings from teachers and parents, and vocal encouragement to think critically and pursue individual research.

Young people were not just sponsored, however; they also served as literacy sponsors in their own right. Pooja, for instance, described her use of social media:

A lot of people like my posts. I get a lot of likes; I do get people who disagree, but we sort out our differences. I'm encouraging people to talk about these issues more. I create different stories. I try to educate people by sharing my ideas and I try to get them to get involved. . . I post upcoming protests or events they can go to. I also cite my sources from where I get my information and say, "Hey, you should check this out. These are things I like to watch; read this article, this study".

Pooja noted that one of her strengths is "[b]eing tolerant of people who might disagree, because over time, they might change their mind. I'm so proud that I've gotten to be able to change a few people's mind on certain issues". Pooja provides access to a range of texts that allows for information gathering ("read this article"), debate ("I do get people who disagree, but we sort out our differences"), and action ("I post upcoming protests or events they can go to").

In short, literacy sponsors provided affective and material infrastructures through digital or in-person encouragement to read and think critically. These infrastructures invoke what Wargo and De Costa [80] call *literacy sponsors*, which account for “the mobilities, identities, ideologies, and technologies inherent in learning the particular skills and knowledge of a discipline”. Though the authors theorized sponsors in the context of academic disciplines, this concept is also useful for considering how youth might be apprenticed into activism, as well.

Participants’ discussion of influential texts also suggested the salience of a “Looking-Glass world”—a world that both reflected and extended current versions of realities—for these young readers. The texts that the youth activists specified as meaningful almost always featured a radicalizing figure. We conceptualize this figure following Jayla’s observation that “I read like a lot of Angela Davis, and I just think Angela Davis is like a radicalizing person”. Like Jayla, the other respondents frequently pointed to real-life people who inspired them through their philosophies and advocacy efforts. These role models, or radicalizing figures, were similar to the youth in terms of their race and gender, recalling R. Bishop’s [70] important idea of texts as “mirrors” that reflect the reader.

At the same time, because these figures were notable activists, these reflections were also aspirational. For Jayla, a Black queer woman, Angela Davis, a Black queer female revolutionary, provided this simultaneous reflection and aspiration. Brady, who is white, straight, and male and who was politicized in part through his family’s experiences with economic precarity, noted that he read “a lot of Noam Chomsky [a white male anarchist], people like that”. John, another straight white male, was similarly radicalized through reading articles by and about someone with whom he could identify, Edward Snowden, a white male privacy activist. Will, a queer white male, named Bernie Sanders as an influence:

I guess I had always known in my mind the kind of issues that Bernie campaigned on. But I didn’t really come to terms with these huge issues, and we need something really big to confront them, until I looked into the Bernie campaign, and I was like, oh! Okay, yeah! I think they’re right about this.

These nonfiction readings were significant, as they featured figures who were identifiable to the youth activists in some way (primarily via race and gender identities) as well as aspirational role models who cared about, analyzed, and/or worked on issues the youth hoped to engage with.

Only two people—Jayla and Caroline, both female-identified—mentioned literary fiction as politically significant, with Jayla referencing a book by Rita Williams-Garcia:

When I was in elementary school, I read this book called *One Crazy Summer*. And the book is set in the nineteen-sixties, in Oakland, California. And it talks about the Black Panther Party, but it’s from the perspective of this 11-year-old girl. And that’s how I learned what they were.

This fictional take on the real-life Black Panther Party engaged her with political activism from a young age. For Caroline, the character of Percy Jackson from Rick Riordan’s fantasy series stood out since he was “doing stuff” and learning through his actions. From him, Caroline decided that “I want to make a change” as well. While Percy Jackson is not a real person, he was both relatable to Caroline in his ignorance and aspirational in his decision to take matters into his own hands and learn more.

Through engagement with literacy sponsors and radicalizing figures, the youth activists were inspired to deepen their political self-education, a process of questioning dominant ideologies, engaging in independent research, and then discussing their new ideas and questions with people around them. For instance, Caroline reported her growing recognition that she could question the political ideologies of her conservative hometown, learning that she did not actually support Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. Caroline went on to credit her reading of Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* series with inspiring her to become someone who would look further into candidates and their platforms rather

than simply going along with her family's preferred candidate. John, meanwhile, noted the following:

I argued the fact that just surveilling on us, it doesn't make it right. Doesn't matter how good of a cause it is, the American citizens have the right to privacy in their own homes. I think that was one of those moments where I realized, I have a passion for this political stuff. I like arguing. I like listening to other viewpoints. I understand there's a bunch of research involved. And I was like, okay, well this has affected mainly Black and Brown people, the targeting of people through these surveillance things and 90% of people they surveyed or they spied on, they weren't even on the list. . .

Finally, Jayla, whose mother had assigned her to read *One Crazy Summer*, explained:

And as I grew up, I heard white people telling me that the Black Panthers were this radicalized group and they were terrorists, and I was like, "What?!" And so, as I researched, I was a freshman in high school, it seems like everything happened when I was a freshman. And we had to do this project on something for Black History, and so I was just looking through members of the Black Panther Party, and I just found Angela Davis, and I was like, "Oh, that seems cool". And from there, I've just loved her, and that's how it happened.

For each of these youth, reading and research took on a dialectical relationship to their conditions and the dominant ideologies reflected around them. For Brady, whose family struggled with bills and access to healthcare, nonfiction texts in his Human Geography class "encouraged me to do more digging into things and then just realizing how there's a lot of things that go on in the world that we don't hear about, especially in the US public education system". His reading particularly drew him to social media: "And then most important, the two most important places on the internet that I found I guess were reading Reddit and Twitter. . . if you know where to go. And I double check everything. There's a lot of good resources out there. And so I'd say Twitter, especially led me to a lot of wonderful streamers, and other sources". Pooja, too, explained her online educational approach:

I sometimes debate with people every few days. They might say, "You're dumb, you're stupid; that's not how you should think". But I try to challenge their views, not their character, and I say: "Why do you believe this? Give me sources". Sometimes, I'll change my mind; sometimes, they change theirs.

Chris similarly talked about "doing my own research online". Caroline's reading remained primarily fictional, noting that *Harry Potter* and then *Percy Jackson* led her down a "rabbit hole" and inspired her to reconsider her own intellectual and political engagement with the world. For the youth in this study, such "rabbit holes" were an important part of the politicizing process: the more they questioned, the more they read, and the more they read, the more they were able to question.

6. Discussion

Responding to gaps in the extant literature on the factors that draw youth to activism and the critical literacies of youth activists, and to the ongoing need to support youth access to texts in light of censorship efforts, this study set out to explore the role of reading in the development of youth activists. Examining two separate but complementary datasets, we found that many youth activists credit texts with inspiring their work and shaping their identities as activists. The texts that survey respondents identified as influential were diverse. There were few commonalities among titles—for some respondents, only fiction resonated (24 percent); for others, only nonfiction (47 percent); and for some, both (29 percent)—underscoring the importance of ongoing access to a broad range of reading materials. As the interviews suggest, even books such as *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* that lack overt political themes may, in some hands, provide an unexpected journey "through the looking-glass" into an alternative aspirational world. In the quantitative data, these

books did not necessarily “mirror” the identities of the readers: a majority of youth activists named works by authors of color (63%) and works by women (62%). White youth activists were no more or less likely than youth activists of color to name works by authors of color, and female-identifying activists were no more or less likely than their non-female-identifying counterparts to name works by women authors.

However, the qualitative data did suggest that sharing one or more dimensions of identity (typically race and gender) with the protagonist of a fictional work or with the author or subject of a nonfiction work can inspire initial investment in political analysis and social change. Many of the interview respondents named catalyzing works in which they found such reflections, even as the work opened them up to new understandings, perspectives, or possibilities in the world around them. These texts and the figures within them served as the vehicle through which readers were able to see themselves and their worlds magnified and transformed “through the looking-glass”: ignorance could be productively turned to learning and action, a group dismissed in as “terrorist” was revealed for its humanizing work, and an individual struggle was illuminated and clarified through its place in history. While the idea of growing and expanding awareness has been identified as a trope of youth activists’ own “becoming activist” narratives [36], our research finds an additional leitmotif present in many of these accounts: the formative role of texts.

Our findings, therefore, contribute to the literature on the motivation and development of youth activists. Prior work has identified parents, teachers, and peers as key “socializing agents” who shape the worldviews and influence the commitments and behaviors of youth activists [13,15,19,30,34,35]. Our data likewise suggest the important role these agents may play in supporting youth activists’ sociopolitical development, including when they act as literacy sponsors who recommend texts and encourage research and critical thinking. The survey data suggest that while English classes were the most common site for encountering influential texts (61 percent), other courses, such as religion and social studies, proved to serve as access points for other texts. Other survey respondents located influential titles outside of school all together (25 percent). The interview data provide a glimpse into the complex interactions between schools, teachers, parents, peers, social media, and libraries that produce interest in and access to texts that youth activists might find influential. These results suggest that adults may provide an affective and material infrastructure—through recommendations, assigned readings, or encouragement—for critical interest in activism to flourish, even as youth engage the tools provided to their own ends. While studies of critical literacies have importantly emphasized the productive power of youth in deconstructing hegemonic ideologies [51,52], this research suggests that access to a range of texts via literacy sponsorships [80] plays an important role in initiating such critical engagement—what E. Bishop [66] calls mobilization.

While direct contact and exchange with other social actors remain important, indirect contact through words on a page can also stimulate sociopolitical development. Political education—the work of developing critical consciousness—is not confined to interactive workshops or dialogic, problem-posing exchanges [54,81–83]; it can also transpire during the quiet intimacy of reading. We find that the authors and protagonists of texts serve as socializing agents in their own right. As radicalizing figures, authors and characters can exert a powerful influence on young people, provoking a reconsideration of assumptions or a revision of one’s worldview, prompting further inquiry, and even inspiring youth to embrace activist sensibilities. This finding suggests the need for more research to broaden our understanding of both who can serve as socializing agents and how the politicization process unfolds.

Finally, texts reflect the internal and external influences that have been found to matter in young people’s development as activists. Depending on their subject matter, they may span the macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors that motivate activism. Whether fictional or nonfictional, when readings offer social and political commentary, they address macro-level conditions; when the reader develops an affinity for the protagonist or the author, they may forge a meso-level relationship; and when the text becomes emblematic or representative of

the reader's values, beliefs, and aspirations, it may become integrated into the individual's micro-level identity.

7. Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

Our survey data reveal that youth activists named a broad range of texts as influential. At the same time, it is noteworthy that 63% of survey respondents who named an influential text referenced at least one text by an author of color. This finding is particularly striking given that school curricula are dominated by white authors (62), especially as conservative political actors seek to censor books about LGBTQIA+ topics and/or racism in schools and libraries [84]. Our findings underscore the need for *all* youth to have access to a range of texts. Furthermore, our finding of a strong association between naming an influential work by one or more women and authors of color and accessing these texts in English class points to the English curriculum as a particularly important site in which to expose students to texts by a diverse array of authors. In addition, at the policy level, our findings suggest the need for ongoing advocacy efforts to institutionalize the freedom to read, as modeled at the state level, for instance, by Illinois lawmakers, who have outlawed book bans. More locally, school and library boards have long been and continue to serve as important sites of struggle, and advocates can actively run as and vote for candidates who support access to a wide range of books in these public arenas.

Given how youth activists also named online reading as significant to their research and development, it is equally important to understand and contest recent policies that target social media. For instance, the governor of Florida has signed a law banning social media access for all children under age 14; nationally, TikTok is under threat of a full ban if Chinese stakeholders do not divest from the company. These efforts should be understood as related to the 2024 presidential election, especially since youth activists notoriously utilize digital technologies in their electoral politics [85]. It is also instructive to look at the case of X (formerly Twitter), once a haven for the robust #BlackTwitter community and other radical constituencies. After the notoriously conservative Elon Musk purchased the company and fired many of its workers, hollowing the platform's infrastructure, there has been some evidence that leftist accounts have been blocked and hate speech provided the freedom to proliferate [86]. Whether through legal or corporate measures, in short, social media is facing a crisis of censorship and repression that may impact youth activists' capacity to follow the "rabbit holes" of research that play a key role in their political development.

In the classroom, meanwhile, teachers serve as key socializing agents and literacy sponsors. This is interesting to consider in light of the intergenerational dimension of critical literacy practices, as scholars increasingly explore how conscientization emerges through a relational process across age cohorts [87–89]. There is some evidence from our qualitative data that strong teacher–student relationships support youth activist development, as teachers with deep knowledge of their students can recommend relevant texts and authors and provide access to formative opportunities at key developmental moments, as Brady's teacher did. Notably, Brady had the same teacher for three years. Schools must protect and invest in conditions that facilitate sustained, meaningful contact between teachers and students, including but not limited to robust extracurricular offerings, looping instructors, and small class sizes. The qualitative data also suggested that time and access to materials for sustained independent research—the outcomes of which may or may not always align with a formulaic set of academic standards—is meaningful for youth activists developing their capacity to think critically and follow their emerging political interests. Such opportunities to diverge from standardized curricula are particularly significant given the recent emphasis on the "Science of Reading" and related movements in literacy education; teachers must be supported to create curriculum outside of these stultifying efforts [90,91].

Finally, our findings surface implications for future scholarship. Although we did not ask interview respondents directly about the role of reading in their development as activists, the prevalence of this theme of reading speaks to the need to study it more

systematically. More intentional research is needed to understand why and how reading matters to youth activists and how their encounters with specific texts may differ from those of their peers who do not become engaged in activism. What specifically do youth activists say they learn or gain from these influential readings? Are they learning more about specific issues, critical social analysis, how to be an activist, or something else? How do texts and reading figure in their own narratives of their development as activists? How do identity and social location impact the titles students access and find influential? This last question is particularly important to explore in more depth, given our finding that students of color were more likely to name only fiction as influential, whereas white students were more likely to include nonfiction titles in their selections.

While a text's power to influence may be alchemical rather than formulaic, it is important to understand why these texts are meaningful and how young people access them. Scholars can also build on the findings of this study by using different samples to explore which types of texts are named, by whom, and how they are discovered and shared. More information about the roles played by parents and caregivers, teachers, peers, social media, and libraries in facilitating access to texts can advance our understanding of how these literacy sponsors and sponsorscares work, especially in this moment of book bans and efforts to restrict information-sharing. Indeed, research with these sponsors may prove instructive in illuminating the decisions they make to recommend certain texts for certain individuals at certain moments in time. How do they read both the individual young person and the political moment as they negotiate such recommendations? Finally, we wonder about the role of texts across the activist lifecycle. Which literary radicalizing agents stay with the youth as they mature, which do they return to as touchpoints, which do they recommend to others, and which do they reconsider and even abandon? These questions suggest productive new directions for future research.

8. Conclusions

This research demonstrates that reading is a salient factor in the development of activist identities among young people. Moreover, a wide range of genres, authors, and topics compelled youth in these studies to think critically about and mobilize against injustice, and youth accessed these texts in a variety of ways. However, the role of reading remains under-studied and under-theorized in the extant literature related to youth activist development. In the midst of a particularly acute moment in our nation's long history of literacy suppression, those of us invested in maintaining the availability of radicalizing texts might more closely examine how youth activists encounter and why they are inspired by such books. In doing so, we may better support youth to enter a "looking-glass" world in which they see themselves and their capacities for change highlighted and magnified—their very selves transformed.

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