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ARTICLE

Teaching the comic *Yummy* to engage adolescent empathy, critical reflection, and community awareness

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ABSTRACT

For researchers interested in how pedagogy within schools can be used as a catalyst for adolescent moral development, investigating practitioner-based studies of classroom practices that support the growth of prosocial behaviors is crucial. This paper delineates a qualitative study conducted in an ethnically diverse high school language arts classroom where texts were being utilized to promote moral development across multiple domains. Authors describe how the critical reading and discussion of the comic *Yummy* led students to express emotional responses to the text centered in feelings of empathy, gratitude, and community awareness. Findings suggest that these specific emotional reactions demonstrate potential for critical, social consciousness and the development of empathic and prosocial behaviors. Fundamentally, this paper seeks to enrich scholarship in the field of adolescent moral development by arguing that pedagogy within schools can be utilized to promote emotions and cognitions that lead to community action.

KEYWORDS

Comics; empathy; critical literacy; community awareness; adolescent moral development

Understanding the correlates of adolescent morality is a critically important topic because of the implications for developing youth as well as broader society. While there is a plethora of research examining risk factors and negative behaviors among adolescent samples (see Romer et al., 2017), it is also important to understand factors that lead to empathy, critical reflection, and community awareness in order to better understand holistic development, the strengths of adolescents, and to foster a community orientation as opposed to self-focused cognitions and emotions. Examining moral development among ethnic minority and low-income adolescents is particularly important in order to understand resilience and avoid contributing to deficit-based perspectives of ethnic minority youth (Cobb et al., 2019).

Therefore, the goal of the current study was to examine the role of a specific educational practice, using the comic *Yummy*, in a high school classroom as a catalyst for moral development across multiple domains (i.e., empathy, critical reflection, and community awareness). *Yummy* is a nonfiction comic focusing on a young gang member in Chicago. As researchers and educators, we used this text to promote examinations of privilege

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among a low-income, predominantly ethnic minority sample of adolescents and to spark moral emotions and cognitions that the students could channel into understanding their own communities.

Adolescent moral development

Examining factors that support moral emotions and cognitions is important in adolescent populations in order to promote resilience and positive engagement in broader society. Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by increases in complex social cognitions, abstract thinking, and deeper social relationships that directly impact moral development (Bukowski et al., 2011; see Choudhury et al., 2006). Additionally, adolescence is a developmental period where autonomy increases, as young people have more access to decision-making and experiences outside the family unit (Carlo et al., 2012). Therefore, this developmental period is critical for understanding the development of moral cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, as adolescents have opportunities to engage with others in different social contexts. For educators and scholars working with adolescents in school spaces, an understanding of this period is especially relevant to the fostering of specific educational practices that support positive outcomes, including moral developmental outcomes.

There are many factors, including characteristics of the broader community, that predict prosocial tendencies (an individual's tendency to engage in actions intended to benefit others; Carlo & Randall, 2002) and community awareness (see Davis & Carlo., 2019). Community awareness is one important outcome to consider among adolescents, as it represents an orientation toward others' needs in the adolescents' broader social context (i.e., neighborhood) and an understanding of broader social factors outside of the adolescents' own needs (Reinders & Youniss, 2006). Theoretical models have highlighted the role of neighborhoods in shaping prosocial development and community awareness among culturally diverse youth (Hart & Matsuba, 2009; Raffaelli et al., 2005). Scholars have also discussed the discrepancies among neighborhoods in providing opportunities for prosocial awareness and development of moral identity, with urban adolescents and adolescents living in poverty often facing limited opportunities for such experiences relative to their suburban/middle-class counterparts (Hart et al., 1998; Hart & Matsuba, 2009). However, among adolescents living in high poverty communities, there are subgroups of individuals that develop a strong moral identity and become committed to community activism and engagement, often involving altruistic (selfless helping) orientations and behaviors (Hart & Fegley, 1995). There is also increasing evidence suggesting that stressful experiences, including economic stress, are positively linked to prosocial tendencies (Davis & Carlo., 2019; Taylor & Hanna, 2018). Therefore, an important goal in developmental and educational research should be to isolate factors that can contribute to community awareness among culturally diverse youth living in high poverty communities in order to promote engagement among youth.

One important indicator of moral development is empathy. The literature on empathy is complicated, as there are many conceptualizations of this term that have been used in previous theory and research. Generally, empathy refers to an emotional response induced by witnessing others' distress (see Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). In the literature, this broad conceptualization is sometimes used with no further breakdown of the

possible components of empathy (e.g., Anthony & Dan, 2020). Scholars have defined empathy as consisting of two components: perspective taking (i.e., cognitive component that reflects understanding the situation of another) and empathic concern (feeling negative emotions consistent with the experience of another person (Hoffman, 2000). In order to feel an emotional response, youth must understand the situations and experiences of others, which reflects cognitive perspective taking (Hoffman, 2000). It is also important to understand differences in specific emotional responses, as these emotions might differentially predict social behaviors. For example, personal distress is sometimes induced by witnessing distress in others, and this distress can be overwhelming and lead to inhibited behavioral responses (see Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). While personal distress might result from empathy, it is a self-oriented response as opposed to an other-oriented response. Empathic concern, or sympathy, reflects an other-oriented, empathic response that results from witnessing distress in others (see Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). We rely on the conceptualization of empathy used by Eisenberg and colleagues, and there is substantial literature on the role of empathic concern and perspective taking as predictors of prosocial behavioral outcomes among youth (see Carlo, 2014).

Social cognitive perspectives posit that cognitive perspective taking develops as children become aware of themselves and others as social beings and provides the foundation for children gaining the ability to role-take and ultimately feel empathy for another person because of increasing social cognitive skills (see Selman, 1975). There is evidence that experiences in the broader community can promote empathy development in adolescence (see Davis et al., 2018). Previous scholars have also argued that stress experiences might promote consideration and sensitivity to the plight of others (i.e., perspective taking and empathic concern) that ultimately contributes to greater social outreach and prosocial engagement (Staub & Vollhardt, 2008). This concept is called 'altruism born of suffering' and might help explain why some youth facing adverse circumstances tend to engage with the community at higher rates than their more privileged counterparts (in part because of increased awareness).

There is evidence that stressors, including economic stress and traumatic life events, are positively associated with empathic concern for youth who are high in perspective taking (Davis et al., 2018, 2019). These findings suggest that cognitive perspective taking might be one powerful intervention tool that can shift the trajectory for youth experiencing environmental risk because of the promotion of empathy and ultimately prosocial responding. This line of research is especially important to our study, which investigates ways young people engage with a comic that invites such perspective taking and empathic responding. Comics might be a powerful tool to promote moral development, as previous researchers have relied on literature as a tool to promote character development and moral virtues (such as tolerance; e.g., Lintner, 2011). Our study contributes to this research because we focus on a specific medium (comics) to promote multiple indicators of moral development among adolescents.

Comics and moral development

Comics, because of their structure and complex representations, present opportunities for promoting moral development, particularly the ways in which empathy might be experienced by readers (Birge, 2010; Juneau & Sucharov, 2010). We are specifically

interested in how the comics medium and art of comics relates to empathy and emotional understanding (Sinquefield-Kangas, 2019).

Displays of violence are taken up by the medium, including the focus text for this study, *Yummy: The last days of a Southside shorty* (Neri, 2010). *Yummy* tells the true story of Robert 'Yummy' Sandifer, who—at eleven—is gunned down by his fellow Black Disciple gang members after firing a gun that kills his young neighbor, Shavon. Chute (2017) notes that 'this handmade form is able to explore violence without sensationalizing it.' (p. 68). Through the complex relationships between words and images, comics are able to consider unspeakable situations, and in their structure and display, visually represent such complexity (Chute, 2017) and invite readers to experience it. *Yummy* was published in 2010, but considering the ongoing context of police brutality and the disregard for black and brown bodies (males in particular) which was prominent in the media during this unit, the comic rang true as real and relatable to students. Gang violence, racial descrimination, and economic disparity were all themes that spoke to students in this class, therefore making it a clear text choice for us.

Comics also garner empathy through the multiple viewpoints they are able to structurally take up. Layers of structure through line, frame, spatiality, image, and text allow for multiple readings and interpretations (Dallacqua, 2019). Reading a comic, then, invites readers to be participants in the narrative (McCloud, 1993) and opens opportunities to increase readers' perceptions and accounts of human experiences towards understanding and empathy (Chisholm et al., 2017). What's more, the medium encourages readers to consider their own personal histories and experiences to shape and cultivate empathy as a reader (Chisholm et al., 2017).

Scholarship also highlights the ways in which minority and 'othered' voices and identities are taken up in comics (Birge, 2010; Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020; Juneau & Sucharov, 2010). Rather than working towards feeling sympathy around otherness, Birge (2010), argues that 'comics provide a means by which to see into another's life, and therein recognize their own' (para 30). This level of understanding promotes perspective taking and sociocognitive abilities among adolescents and supports an empathic reading experience and invites readers to be part of others' stories (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020).

Critical literacy, ethics, and social consciousness

In addition to supporting students in perspective taking and empathic reading, the use of multimodal texts rooted in diverse adolescent experience promotes the development of critical reflection in young adult readers, leading to a growing social, and political awareness (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). How the reading of comics is framed within a classroom environment is integral to the development of social and politicized empathy. Acknowledging this, we are interested in critical perspectives that center literacy as a means of moving adolescents toward hope and well-being for themselves while contributing to the hope and well-being of others (Janks, 2019). Literacy events are the practice of humanity–a practice rooted in the exploration of diverse understandings of the world and consideration of these diverse epistemologies and ethics for critical reflection and personal and social growth (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2019; Morrell, 2008).

Broadly, a critical literacy framework informs any pedagogical practice which seeks to make visible and analyze relations of power in order to reflect on, name, and change individual and social experiences with inequity (Freire, 1970; Vasquez et al., 2019). Scholars note the importance of critical classroom work that allows adolescents to move through their worlds as active participants in examining, analyzing, reflecting, and speaking back to inequitable power dynamics in society (Morrell, 2005; Vasquez, 2014b). The critical reading of and reflection on a variety of traditional and nontraditional texts (i.e., canonical literature, new media, comics and graphic novels) can promote skills to deconstruct and repurpose language for social transformation in marginalized adolescents (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), and ultimately promote perspective taking, empathic concern, and community awareness.

Identifying and questioning institutional inequity is a necessity in the development of adolescent social consciousness. The power of reading texts through the lens of critical literacy enables young individuals to reflect on both the world and the word (Freire, 1983) in relation to power, identity, difference, and access to knowledge and resources. A critical reading of and reflection on both the word and the world is accomplished through the teaching of a variety of texts but often calls for the use of nontraditional texts, specifically young adult literature, comics, and graphic novels—texts rooted in the experiences and thoughts of adolescents (Sheahan, 2016; Worlds & Miller, 2019). Critical perspectives argue that sharing texts with adolescents in which they can see both themselves and their worlds provides a basic framework for critiquing language and structures of power while allowing students to reflect on their own positionality in a larger society (Luke, 2014). As such, this study is rooted in acts of literacy that prompt critical reflection in adolescent readers in order to build personal and social consciousness, empathy for others, and a desire for social transformation.

Methodology

Data for this work was gathered during a single unit of study in a tenth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. This qualitative study was informed by practitioner action research, wherein researchers, including the classroom teacher, investigated classroom practices in order to take action and make change within this ELA classroom space (Anderson et al., 2007; Hubbard & Power, 2003; Shagoury & Power, 2012). We asked, *how does engaging with the comic*, Yummy, *in a tenth-grade ELA class unit impact students' empathic responding, critical reflection, and community awareness?* As educators, our goal was to make change in the ELA curriculum in order to pivot away from conventional teachings of texts from the canon, like Shakespeare, and devote time to texts and topics that were more nontraditional and critical. Using the comic, *Yummy*, with its themes of gang and gun violence, provided opportunities to take up this work. To do this, Annmarie (the classroom teacher and co-researcher in this study) made changes to her Hamlet unit. Instead, this unit became a 'Power and Privilege' unit that invited the comic, *Yummy* into the students' repertoire.

Context

The school and students

This study took place in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse urban public school. The school is located in the United States, in a large city in the southwest. 100% of the student body qualifies for free or reduced lunch. The school is home to a large population of refugee students and students of color, with 28 different languages spoken in the school's community. The tenth-grade English language arts classroom that was the focus of this study included 19 students, 14 identified as female, 5 as male. All 19 students provided personal assent and guardian consent as research participants. Within this class, 11 students identified as Latino/a, 3 as African American, 2 as Asian American, 2 as Native American, and one as Anglo-American.

Researchers

As educators and scholars, each of the authors came to this study with different positionalities and expertise. Ashley is a White female and was a volunteer and researcher in this classroom space. Annmarie is a Latinx/Irish female who was the practicing teacher in this classroom space and an insider in this school and local community. Alexandra is a White female who was not involved in the classroom or data collection. She joined the team once data collection was complete because of her expertise in adolescent moral development.

The unit and focus text

This 6-week unit invited students to consider elements of power and privilege while reading the texts *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, 1994) and *Yummy: The last days of a Southside shorty* (Neri, 2010). As part of this unit, students read both texts in class and engaged in small group and whole-group discussions throughout the unit. The inclusion of the comic *Yummy* was vital, in that it added layers of criticality to the consideration of *Hamlet*. While the unit was originally focused around *Hamlet, Yummy* primarily grabbed students' attention, as noted by the classroom teacher. The students focused on *Yummy* and its impact on their thinking and reflection during this unit and their discussions. The integration of *Yummy* shifted the teaching of this unit and directed our research focus, as practitioner action researchers, to outcomes related to the comic. Although *Hamlet* was important to this study as a counternarative to *Yummy*, it is *Yummy* that serves as the focus text in our data collection.

Yummy is a nonfiction comic that documents the final days in the life of Robert 'Yummy' Sandifer. As an eleven-year-old member of the Black Disciples gang in Chicago, Yummy is gifted a gun and charged to carry out gang business as a minor. His minor status 'protects' him from prison, but ties him more closely to the Black Disciples as chosen guardians. While carrying out gang business in 1994, Yummy accidently shoots and kills a young neighbor, Shavon. This murder garners media attention around the Black Disciples, who ultimatly send members out to locate Yummy, who is in hiding, and kill him.

Students responded with a small group project asking them to consider how both texts were taking up power and privilege. Students created multimodal responses that included images from *Yummy*, words and ideas from both texts, their own illustrations and

analysis, and use of creative and artistic expression, as well as oral presentation, to make their arguments. Students shared their work during class, as well as during small group interviews outside of class with Ashley.

Methods of data collection

Data were collected across 6 days of this unit. Both Ashley and Annmarie (as co-teachers and researchers) were present during those class days and operated as participant observers in class. During those six class days, field notes were collected each day and class was audio and video recorded. Given our interest in the impact of *Yummy*, as groups finished reading it, Ashley also sat down with each small group reading in tables to collect students' initial reactions to the text. These in-class small group discussions were audio-recorded.

Outside of class, following the completion of this unit, Ashley also completed small group interviews with all small groups working together for their final projects. This resulted in six audio and video-recorded interviews. Audio/video files were all transcribed. One student chose to work alone, and therefore was interviewed one-on-one. All other instances of the collection of student voices occurred in small groups, during in-class discussion and outside of class.

Methods of analysis

With our theoretical framings around adolescent moral development, comics, and critical literacy, all three authors engaged in rigorous qualitative analysis by way of thematic coding. We began by completing an initial thematic coding of the small group interview transcripts, which made up the largest portion of data collected (Shagoury & Power, 2012). Each author engaged in open coding individually; we met as a group to exchange and compare codes. Initially, we identified eleven different codes across our initial readings that aligned with our theoretical lenses. These included community, community awareness, empathy, morality, and consequences. Together, we collapsed and reorganized our initial codes for these interviews (Glesne, 2011; Hubbard & Power, 2003). For example, we combined categories like 'community' and 'community awareness' and reconsidered data coded under 'consequences' and 'race' within the community code as well. Gratefulness, a code that was frequently identified, was renamed critical reflection, to better represent the data within that category demonstrating growing student awareness of privilege. We focused on three central codes: empathy, critical reflection, and community awareness. These codes encompassed the bulk of our data that had been coded, while eliminating outlying data around student composing and artwork that did not relate to the research question at hand, nor did they negate data in our current corpus.

We then engaged in another round of coding, this time taking a more specific, deductive approach using our selected codes. Each author approached all sources of data (including fieldnotes and transcriptions for in-class small group discussions and the six small group interview transcripts) with a single code in mind, dividing the three codes between the three of us (see Table 1 for examples of our coding process). Reading and coding across all three data pieces allowed us to triangulate the central themes that make up our results here. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on presenting data from small group discussions and interviews in our findings.

Table 1. Codes relating to adolescent students' responses through empathy, reflection, and community awareness.

Code	Brief Description	Example of Data	Frequency
Empathy	Instances when students reacted emotionally showing indications of perspective taking and/or understanding and concern towards another person (Hoffman, 2000)	"I thought this page was sad where he says, 'nobody never gave me nothin' before.' And the gun was, like, the first gift he ever received."	21 from in-class small group discussion 52 from out-of-class small group interviews **83 Total**
Critical Reflection	Particular moments of students' acknowledgement and investigation of their own lived experiences, positionality, and privilege (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008)	"It also put me in my place to appreciate and be grateful for things that I have like for my parents cause Yummy he didn't have parents to tell him right from wrong and I had parents that did so it kinda put me in my place . . . "	0 from in-class small group discussion 25 from out-of-class small group interviews **28 Total**
Community Awareness	Orientation toward others' needs in the adolescents' broader social context (i.e., neighborhood) and an understanding of broader social factors outside of the adolescents' own needs (Reinders & Youniss, 2006)	"I guess because he was a kid and he really didn't have control over umm, his surroundings . . . He didn't really have as much choice as Hamlet did."	1 from in-class small group discussion 15 from out-of-class small group interviews **23 Total**

It is also important to note that there were several instances where a line of data was coded under multiple categories. These are themes that are interwoven and connected, and we recognize that student reactions are complex. We consider the ways in which these themes interact and build on each other in our Discussion section.

Results

The emotional responses documented while reading the graphic novel, *Yummy,* were profound and wide ranging. We focus on student reactions connected to empathy, critical reflection, and community awareness. This focus, guided by our theoretical and scholarly framing, allows us to concentrate on specific emotional reactions that we saw demonstrating potential for critical social consciousness. Ultimately, we are interested in how reading and discussing *Yummy*, which we strove to position as socially-just reading, composing, and engaging, impacts how these young people operate in the world. We specifically focus on how students understand their own moral development in relation to experiencing empathy, critical reflection, and community awareness. We argue that reading and discussing the comic *Yummy* within a unit focusing on power and privilege created opportunities for these behaviors to surface.

We do not see these emotional reactions as singular or in isolation from one another. In fact, we see these emotional responses as linked, impacting and building from one another. While we present each one individually, we appreciate some overlap and will explore connections more in our Discussion.

Empathy

As students responded emotionally while reading and working with the comic *Yummy*, we took note of how students were relating to the text and their genuine concern for Yummy and his situation. Reading *Yummy* in this academic space provided opportunities for students to identify and express empathy through acts of concern and perspective taking (Hoffman, 2000).

Students' initial and immediate ways of describing their reactions to *Yummy* were ones of sadness (4 data points across 3 in-class groups and 3 data points across 2 out-of-class interviews). Students shared that the story was sad, particular pages were sad, and that while students enjoyed the dynamics of the story, 'it was really sad.' Part of a broader empathic response is empathic concern, where one is reflecting negative emotionality consistent with another person (Hoffman, 2000). We identified students' statements of sadness as working towards empathy as they shared in these and other negative emotions.

There were numerous class conversations where 'sympathy' was also used to describe the students' concern (5 times across 3 groups during in-class small group discussions). Several small groups confirmed this feeling, using the word 'sympathy' when describing feelings towards Yummy, especially at the end of the book when he is considering turning himself in, and is instead gunned down by his own gang members. Students were working to understand Yummy's situation, while not necessarily navigating emotions similar to his. Here, sympathy can position Yummy as 'other' in this case.

Yet, we also noticed that within their expression of sympathy, students were recognizing complexities. Yummy and his actions were layered; the graphic novel format

supported these readings. One table shared, 'I think because you can *see* the kind of things he did, that kinda added a bit … more sympathy or anger towards Yummy. Because you can actually *see* what he's done, rather than just believing the fact that he torched a car.' For this group, seeing Yummy's actions and life contributed to how they were engaging with him as a person, noting both feelings of anger and sympathy. Yummy could not be seen as one thing, and therefore their emotional reactions were layered and complex as well. Students were engaging with the multiple ideas and contradictions on the page, moving towards empathic reactions through their concern.

As students shifted from their initial reaction in class to their reactions following their complete reading unit using *Yummy*, their thinking also developed over time. Empathic reactions that related particularly to agency and autonomy were significant in our data (5 data points across 4 in-class groups and comes to their environment. Another student reflected 10 data points across 5 out-of-class interviews.). This type of perspective taking highlighted students' understanding of Yummy's situations and experiences. Students expressed empathy as they noted moments when Yummy was lacking in agency and autonomy. We saw these moments as ways students were expressing understanding for Yummy by considering his perspective and relating it to their own. As high school students, Yummy was 'only … a few years younger than us.' This perspective taking and understanding, Hoffman (2000) claims, is a vital component to empathy.

Age and agency are inherently linked, and students regularly commented on and connected to Yummy's age while reading. Students connected Yummy's young age of eleven as central; 'That's kinda what drives the emotion in Yummy's story.' Especially because students were also reading Hamlet, who they positioned as 'an adult,' Yummy being a 'kid' evoked reactions in students. The artist of the comic highlights Yummy's age by drawing him small in stature and having a teddy bear on several pages. One student, reacting to an image of a teddy bear used for their group's final project showed 'he was just a kid,' with this illustration. Yummy is referred to as 'a kid' regularly by these readers, not just as a deficit, but as a way to consider Yummy's (lack of) power in his circumstances.

The focus on Yummy's age and 'kid' status also reflected how students were thinking about agency in this text. They knew what it meant to be young, showing a level of perspective taking and understanding for Yummy's (and often their own) positioning. One student reflected, 'because he was a kid … he really didn't have control over his surroundings.' Students recognized and connected with how little a young person can control, especially when it comes to their environment. Another student reflected, 'I don't think that he was genuinely just a bad kid.' Using the phrase, 'just a bad kid' and taking on Yummy's perspective as a kid in a rough situation also continues the trend of students working to see the complexity of Yummy as a person, as more than one thing. He was complex, and his (lack of) control and agency factored into how they were working to empathically understand him and his life.

One group of students described the tensions that come with empathic reactions. This group discussed page 88, which shows young Yummy lying in his coffin as mourners lay candy in it. As we talked about the page together, students shared their internal conflict over Yummy killing another young person. 'It was his fault' one student shared. Yet, they also recognized that mourners 'felt bad, like, they knew what he was going through and they kinda know it wasn't his fault entirely.' When students were asked about these

conflicting thoughts, one shared, 'I understand why that happened to him . . . I think it was his fault for [accidently killing Shavon], but I understand why he did it.' We identified empathy here, both the perspective taking required to comprehend Yummy's behavior and the empathic concern for 'what he was going through.'

Critical reflection

As they read and discussed *Yummy*, students engaged in ongoing critical reflection, considering their own privilege and positionality in juxtaposition with that of the comic's characters. Many students expressed a growing critical awareness as they comparatively reflected on their own experiences while reading about Yummy's life (18 data points across 5 out-of-class interview groups). As students developed complex understandings of the ways in which power (and the lack of it) disadvantaged Yummy, they began to critically examine and reflect on their own positionality and privilege (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), using the content of the comic as a way to explore their own lived experiences. Across all student groups, this examination prompted instances of critical reflection that manifested in two ways: acknowledgment of situational privilege (9 data points across 5 out-of-class interviews) and gratitude for parental involvement (6 data points across 4 out-of-class interviews).

After students had critically and collaboratively read Yummy, we asked them to consider whether the comic impacted the way they viewed themselves in small group interviews. When thinking about how a reading of *Yummy* catalyzed a deeper understanding of self, one student shared that reflecting on Yummy's life made them 'feel a little spoiled like [. . .] privileged.' A student from another group expressed a similar sentiment, stating, 'I guess it put into perspective like how much, umm, I don't know. I guess privilege I actually have.' These two students demonstrated a growing awareness of their own privilege that was directly influenced by a critical reflection on their own situation in comparison with that of Yummy.

The critical framing and reading of *Yummy* in relationship to larger themes of power and privilege–a tenet of critical literacy work–led students to conscientiously reflect on their own lived experiences in complex ways, building understanding of how privilege operates in larger social contexts (Luke, 2014). Even for students who didn't express explicit connections between their childhood lived experiences and those of Yummy, a reading of and reflection on the comic prompted an understanding of how situational privilege operated in their own lives (9 data points across 5 out-of-class interviews). Considering Yummy's situation during their group's out-of-class interview, one student reflected that 'it [reading Yummy] made me a little bit more grateful for what I have and even as harsh as it sounds at least it's not as bad as a situation [as Yummy's].' In a different group interview, a student simply and powerfully mentioned that their reading of the comic allowed them to feel 'thankful for my situation and where I stand.' Across multiple student groups, comments expressing gratefulness for the privileges they felt fortunate to have in their daily lives were recurring and were directly prompted by both a critical reading of and reflection on *Yummy*.

In addition to sharing feelings of gratefulness regarding their own situational privilege, students also used their reading of *Yummy* to examine and critically reflect on emerging reactions of gratitude for the strong family support they felt privileged to have. Students

discussed Yummy's lack of privilege due to the limited amount of parental involvement he had in his childhood (4 data points across 3 out-of-class interviews), particularly problematizing the absence of support from his mother, who was described in the book as physically abusive and in and out of jail for drugs and prostitution. One student in particular shared their feelings of anger towards Yummy's mother while their group was interviewed, mentioning their wish that 'his mother would've realized like before it was too late, like that's my son' and going on to point out that they 'really didn't feel sympathy for her.' Interrogating Yummy's decision to join a gang and his subsequent violent actions, a student from another group argued that Yummy 'didn't know any better cause he didn't have a mother or father to teach him right, like, from wrong so he just sat on the streets by himself.'

Students' empathic reactions for Yummy's lack of parental support led to reflections on feeling grateful for parental guidance in their own lives (6 data points across 4 out-of-class interviews). In thinking about Yummy's moral compass in relation to their own, a student mentioned that reading the comic 'put me in my place to appreciate and be grateful for things that I have like for my parents 'cause Yummy [. . .] he didn't have parents to tell him right from wrong and I had parents that did.' Students also considered the negative influences Yummy was constantly exposed to, critically reflecting on how their parents' choices helped them avoid making poor decisions in regards to drugs and gangs. In their small group out-of-class interview, a student expressed gratitude for how they grew up, saying, 'My family always pushed me away from those kinds of things and you know that's what [. . .] what's kept me, you know safe.' Another student felt similarly, sharing, 'I feel lucky that my parents [. . .] they made me go to school and all that and they didn't let me get to this point that Yummy was at.'

Students were viewing Yummy's decisions through a critical and contextual lens as they reflected on the ways in which the privilege of having parental support impacts moral understanding and an awareness of the crucial role of socialization agents. This critical lens allowed for an acknowledgment of the lack of situational privileges in Yummy's life while simultaneously allowing students to feel deep gratitude for their own parents and their lives as they reflected on their own privileges. Examining Yummy's lack of privilege through reading and discussing the comic allowed students to investigate, acknowledge, and express gratefulness for their own situational privilege.

Community awareness

Students also discussed contextual factors surrounding the characters in the comic, *Yummy*, as drivers of behaviors, and also demonstrated an awareness of the broader community and the role of social factors in individuals' behaviors. These types of discussions were present in five of the group conversations. Students expressed an awareness of the power of neighborhoods (14 data points across the 5 out-of-class interviews) and contexts in shaping their own perspectives and the need to connect with their communities in a positive way. Students also discussed the role of broader social relationships in shaping Yummy's behaviors, but also in shaping the behaviors of other people in their own communities (4 data points across 2 out-of-class interviews). One group shared that once Yummy started engaging in maladaptive behaviors, gang members started recruiting him. The group continued, saying, 'They [the gang members]

saw him as an opportunity and to shape [Yummy] into something that he really shouldn't be.' This group, as they engaged with the comic, made connections between sets of relationships in Yummy's life. They seemed to understand that Yummy's relationship with the Black Disciples ultimately led to the killing of Shavon and the death of Yummy.

Students (6 datapoint across 2 out-of-class interviews) also discussed the role of neighborhoods as salient for whole families. One group said:

> Where I live, it isn't that dangerous over there. It's, like, more calm. But I did live, like, at the center of the hood . . . But at the same time you look back and you get out of there, but you also know there's still kids there, seeing how kids are gonna be raised or how kids will live in the streets and everything without a dad and mom.

This comment highlights the understanding that important influences, including communities, might be driving the behaviors of youth in different neighborhoods, which demonstrates a level of understanding regarding context as influential in development. For several other students, reading about Yummy's childhood in a violent, gang-ridden Chicago neighborhood triggered memories of times in their lives when they had also lived in rough communities (5 data points across 3 out-of-class interviews). For example, one student shared with us their childhood experiences of living in and eventually moving out of 'the hood.' When prompted to think about how a reading of *Yummy* impacted understanding of self within a larger community, this student critically reflected on their current situation, saying, '[the comic] made me see myself a little bit more fortunate because, again, I was able to get out of there [. . .] and it did make me see myself more fortunate and like I'm able to get out of there and hopefully have a better life.' This student seemed to recognize the role of broader neighborhoods in shaping opportunities and realities.

Students noted how opportunities differ across communities and neighborhoods, and these opportunities and exposures shape behaviors of youth (11 data points across 3 out-of-class interviews). For example, one student said, 'getting out [of the neighborhood] does make us realize how lucky we are to get out of there and that makes me really fortunate.' Another student described growing up in what was known as 'the war zones' and watching young people around them growing up playing with guns. For them, *Yummy* could have been about a young person from their neighborhood, sharing, 'it was really realistic cause like that's a lot of what you see around here, especially in the hood.' Another student also recognized the limited opportunities associated with specific neighborhoods, similar to where they lived, 'cause I also lived where [Shavon] lived . . . It's scary to even go outside . . . at night you just hear gunshots all random.' Students were making personal connections here that also influenced how they were understanding neighborhoods and the ways in which they were shaping them as young people.

Students also understood the inherent differences in circumstances and the lack of resources for certain groups of youth depending on their neighborhood contexts (9 data points across 4 out-of-class interviews). In class work, students were reading both *Yummy* and *Hamlet*, providing very different literary contexts to think through. One student said, 'Yummy was in a bad situation, and, you know, maybe he lived in a bad neighborhood, and had a worse situation from the start . . . . Hamlet was born into a royal family, so he had some power.' Another group also discussed privilege by saying,

> I think the largest differences in privileges [was] the start … Yummy was abused and exposed to, like, drugs and gang violence … Whereas Hamlet was sheltered and, you know, royalty so he didn't have to grow up with any of this sort of bad stuff in society.

Along those lines, students recognized developmental factors and demographic factors as contributing to community awareness (9 data points across 5 out-of-class interviews).

Race was another topic that students mentioned as a factor that shaped Yummy's trajectory. One group noted that this unit showed 'there are people who can get away with things, others can't.' In class, students discussed the fact that Yummy was on the run after accidentally killing Shavon, while Hamlet had options after accidentally killing Polonius (see also Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020; Sheahan & Dallacqua, 2020). The students noted the ways race positioned the two characters differently, even across the different time periods and places being represented in both texts. One student shared,

> [Hamet] was, like, a white guy, so he definitely had more privileges, like, especially in that time period … People of his color, and especially his race, had much more umm, opportunities and much … status in those societies. And even though umm, Yummy grew up in a place where that kinda of skin color is common … it just still shows how much you can be pushed down regardless of what you are surrounded by.

These statements demonstrate the awareness of students regarding the important role of broader social contexts in shaping the social realities of youth and their behavioral trajectories. Whether in the past or present, in a location where White or Black skin is common, students used these texts to think about community, neighborhoods, race and their influences on one's position and options.

Discussion

As ideas around empathy, critical reflection, and community awareness were explored in the data, it was clear the ways in which these concepts were connected. Empathy supported exploration between students and Yummy; critical reflection supported students in considering themselves and their own lives; community awareness helped students make connections between their contexts and lives. The expression and experience of each opened opportunity for others. We are interested in the cyclical nature around these emotions and expression, especially in a school space interacting with texts that support such work.

One significant thread we noted across the data was the personal connections students made; they saw themselves, their friends, and their families in *Yummy*. To that end, we acknowledge how important choosing texts and pedagogical practices are to supporting adolescent moral development in schools. Choosing texts that not only challenge students' thinking, but also operate as a way for them to see pieces of their own identities matters in this work. Using a comic, in particular, created spaces for students to see versions of themselves, their neighborhoods, their friends, their city. The form, here, mattered in connecting the reader to the text and the narrative (Birge, 2010; Chute, 2010; Juneau & Sucharov, 2010).

Another connecting thread among all three of our foci was emotion. When considering the place for moral development in schools, we see making time and space for

emotional response as invaluable to this process. Students in this study had opportunities to react emotionally to *Yummy*, and therein, were able to react in ways that impacted how they critically see themselves and the world (Vasquez et al., 2019).

Emotional reactions opened space for empathic reactions. As students experienced and expressed empathy for people and situations in the book, they also reflected on their own lives and communities. Empathy created opportunities for students to appreciate their own privileges of family, community and situation; empathy led to critical reflections and gratefulness. Empathy also created space for students to consider other contextual factors more deeply and critically. While connecting with Yummy's situation, students also realized, beyond being grateful for their families or neighborhoods, that these factors influence developmental trajectories of young people (Hart et al., 1998).

We saw critical reflection building from expressions of empathy, and community awareness building from empathy and critical reflection. But, as noted above, this work was cyclical in nature. As students became more aware of external factors in their lives, there were more opportunities for them to react and live with empathy outside of their reading. For instance, students thought about race within the texts, but also how race, place, and privilege are linked to their own experiences and communities. Students also thought deeply about the importance of family across their responses of empathy, critical reflections on gratefulness, and community awareness. They felt sad and a sense of understanding towards Yummy because of his upbringing, felt an appreciation for their own family situations, and took note of the lasting influence that one's community and context have on one's life and what choices one does or does not have. As these three concepts interact, there is space for students to not only continue to reflect, but to take action in their own lives and communities.

Conclusion

The findings of this study hold implications for both researchers in the field of adolescent moral development and for practitioners engaging youth in classroom spaces. This work contributes directly to examinations of moral development among ethnic minority and low-income students, adding to gaps in the research regarding how pedagogy within schools can be used as a catalyst for moral emotions and cognitions as well as community awareness. For practitioners seeking to create pedagogy that supports students in critically reflecting on their situational privilege and localized communities, our findings suggest that opportunities for cognitive perspective taking with carefully-selected texts is crucial.

Furthermore, this study illustrates the importance of emotional response in student development of empathic responding and broader awareness. Through critically reading and discussing the comic *Yummy*, students used emotional response as a means of understanding how power, privilege, and environment shape not only their own lives but the lives of those around them. We are left to consider next steps, namely how the critical positioning of texts promoting empathic concern, understanding of situational privilege, and community awareness might lead to a greater involvement in community action. It is our hope that future research continues to embrace emotional responses to critical literature, just as the students within this study did.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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