Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

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Volume 6 | Issue 2

May 2025

Middle Grade Novels in Verse: Examining Stereotypes in Early Adolescent Characters

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https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl

Recommended Citation: Bell, Julie, and Melissa Cast-Brede. "Middle Grade Novels in Verse: Examining Stereotypes in Early Adolescent Characters," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2025.

As college professors who teach undergraduate and graduate courses in young adult literature intended for pre-service and in-service teachers and librarians, we continually seek new titles and formats to share with our students. In the field of pre-service and in-service teacher and librarian education, most people loved reading from an early age, but that is not always the case for the PK-12 students they serve. Jason Reynolds touts novels in verse as a cure for bibliophobia: "With the incredible selection of poetry and novels in verse from past to present, this is an opportune time to use them to chip away at bibliophobia. Less words on the page, more white space, without necessarily sacrificing the narrative elements" ("How Poetry Can Help Kids Turn a Fear of Literature into Love" 00:02:56-00:03:07). Unfortunately, many of our adult students developed an aversion to poetry through their school experiences, which involved dry analysis of structural elements rather than connecting with the affective nature of the verse and the authenticity of emotions and actions in the poems. Instead of bibliophobia, our students seem to suffer from "versophobia," so seeing a book written entirely in poetic form can be intimidating to them.

Due to their own versophobia or unfamiliarity with the format, teachers and librarians may miss opportunities to get their PK-12 students interested in reading verse; worse, they may unwittingly turn their students away from poetry the same ways they were turned away. As poet Nikki Grimes says, "It's important to remember that if you present poetry as if it were castor oil, no one will like it" ("Nikki Grimes" 00:13:00-00:13:06). We must teach teachers and librarians to reach adolescent readers; thus, in our courses, we look for novels in verse and strategies to help teachers and librarians overcome their trepidation so that they may see novels in verse as realistic and accessible portrayals of youth. Many of our students ultimately embrace middle grade novels in verse, happy to have options for elementary students who are thriving readers, a

just-right-fit for middle school students, and options for early high school students who are striving readers (Harvey and Ward 9-10).

As Marshall George noted, believability is key in reaching middle grade readers, so to examine how novels in verse reflect the life experiences of young adolescents, we undertook a literary analysis of two middle grade novels in verse. We analyzed the novels through two lenses: Lesko's confident characterizations and Sarigianides et al.'s youth lens (*Rethinking the "Adolescent"*). We use these two forms of analysis in our classes and in this manuscript because they are accessible for teachers and librarians to take into their own classrooms and libraries to use with their middle grade students. Lesko's confident characterizations help reveal how the novels reflect or eschew commonly held assumptions regarding what it means to be an adolescent through fine-grained, detailed character analysis. Sarigianides et al.'s youth lens (*Rethinking the "Adolescent"*) offers a critical perspective on the relatability of the texts through a holistic analysis of the novels. We conclude with a discussion across the novels and thoughts for pre-service and in-service teachers and librarians utilizing these lenses and middle grade novels in verse in their classrooms and libraries.

Literature Review

Our literary analysis is situated at the intersection of middle grade literature and novels in verse. Understanding novels in verse for young people begins with understanding children and their interaction with literature.

Middle Grade Literature

Middle grade readers are in a place of transition. Middle school readers begin thinking abstractly, moving from seeing themselves as the protagonist to seeing beyond the story to find

meaning and alternative perspectives they can apply to their growth (Crumpler and Wedwick 70; Simpson and Millikan par. 11). They are reading independently but still open to suggestions from adults (Maughan par. 14). Middle grade books often match the transitional state of their readers. These books are meant for independent readers and take steps into issues and questions that are beginning to occur to middle grade readers. Content such as sexuality, power, and social injustice may be introduced but without the explicit exploration found in young adult literature (Crumpler and Wedwick 67). Middle grade readers and middle grade books often explore new formats (Maughan par. 17; Simpson and Millikan par. 6).

As with all children's and young adult literature, adults serve as intermediaries between youth and literature. Adults often focus on form and interpretation in poetry, which can impede youth engagement with novels in verse. Additionally, younger adolescents find little middle ground between what adults believe they should read and juvenile poetry. Liz Rosenberg described the disconnect middle grade students must feel when she wrote, "Yet, many children's anthologies restrict themselves to short, lyric poems about the seasons, furry animals and national holidays—as if children never thought about God, love, death or any of the other great themes of poetry" (par. 6).

As middle grade students enter young adulthood, their questions on religion, love, and death grow as well. If, as Louise Rosenblatt suggested, reading is a transaction between author, reader, and a work (qtd. in George 56), then it is logical that middle grade youth need poetry in a format that meets them where their questions are. As George found in a comparison of the reader responses of middle grade teachers and middle grade students to Newbery winning titles, students focus on the believability of characters and their ability to relate the characters to people in their own lives (63).

Novels in Verse

Brenna Friesner found the verse novel format has existed for adults for hundreds of years; however, the format has only existed in young adult literature since the early 1980s (5). The need for students to have relatable poetic texts connects to the growth of young adult and middle grade novels in verse beginning in the mid-1990s (Friesner 6). Novels in verse offer an understandable format that does not overwhelm with text but highlights the relatable voices of the main characters (Farish par. 5; Krok 1-2). The extra white space after each line creates eye-catching shapes and gives young brains time to take in the meaning of a line before moving to the next (Friesner 16). Line breaks create rhythms that help convey the emotional setting or set a passage's pace. Shorter lines also echo a format for contemporary youth familiar with tweets and memes (Farish par. 3). Additionally, first-person voice provides an inclusive reading experience where sophisticated and reluctant readers, as well as youth with reading differences, may draw meaningful connections to texts (Farish par. 3; Krok 13-14).

Joy Alexander argues that the quality of the writing, regardless of the format, is what is most important (281). For the purposes of the current analysis and our courses, we (the authors) concur with Alexander. While neither of us is currently a middle school teacher or librarian, we aim to support the pre-service and in-service teachers and librarians in our courses in focusing their attention on the middle grade readers themselves. What might middle grade readers enjoy? With what might they identify?

Literary Analysis

One way our students respond to the literature is through in-class group analysis using Lesko's confident characterizations and Sarigianides et al.'s youth lens (*Rethinking the*

"Adolescent"). We have deliberately chosen these lenses for a few reasons. First, many of our pre-service and in-service teachers and librarians are already familiar with other critical lenses (e.g., feminism, Marxism, critical race theory), but they have not heard of confident characterizations or the youth lens. Next, it can feel intimidating to bring critical lenses into the classroom, especially the middle school classroom, and confident characterizations paired with the youth lens may prove more approachable for some teachers and librarians.

Additionally, while these lenses may be used on any texts that include young adults (see, for example, Carlin Borsheim-Black's recommendation for using the youth lens to analyze television commercials), they are especially intended for use with middle grade and young adult literature. Finally, as previously noted, we argue that both forms of analysis are necessary because they highlight different textual elements due to their granularity. Lesko suggested applying her four confident characterizations to the various characters in a text, while Sarigianides and colleagues recommended using Lesko's fine-grained analysis to help answer three questions about the text as a whole (*Rethinking the "Adolescent"*).

Though pre-service and in-service teachers and librarians practice using these lenses in our classes, we completed the analysis included here ourselves. At the undergraduate level, students explore the frameworks in pieces across a variety of novels. For example, students have analyzed the confident characterization of coming of age via realistic fiction, while they analyze being ruled by hormones via romance novels. At the graduate level, students work in groups to look for confident characterizations and analyze novels with the youth lens. They have considered both mystery and realistic young adult fiction novels with these frameworks. Consequently, we are sharing our own analysis to highlight the strength of both frameworks to analyze middle grade novels in verse.

Description of Lens #1: Confident Characterizations of Adolescence

The first lens in the literary analysis is Lesko's "confident characterizations of adolescence," or "grounding assumptions that operate in scholarly and popular talk about teenagers" (2). These confident characterizations include that adolescents have a particular coming-of-age experience, an understanding that teenagers are ruled by hormones, a notion that adolescents are peer-oriented, and a belief that teenagers may be understood by knowing their exact age. Taken together, adults believe they understand what it means to be an adolescent based on these commonly accepted characterizations. Youth may feel like they are "abnormal" or "atypical" if their lives do not align with these assumptions that frequently appear in books and other media. However, authors who create characters who live outside of these stereotypical norms are likely appealing to an even broader audience that is more reflective of the multifaceted lives of adolescents today. For a description of Lesko's confident characterizations, see Table 1.

Table 1

Lesko's Confident Characterizations

Confident Characterization	**Description**
Coming of Age	● A force young adults are unable to control ● Socially constructed ● Adults deem when a child has come of age ● Identified by examining how adults treat the main character
Ruled by Hormones	● A force young adults are unable to control ● Linked to sexuality ● Assumed to be a biological fact
Peer-Oriented	● Young adults frequently succumb to peer pressure ● Young adults care more about what their friends think about them than what adults think about them

	● Insinuated that adults grow out of being peer-oriented
Attributed to Exact Age	● Knowing a pre-teen or teenager's exact age will reveal something about them ● Example: Getting a driver's license at the age of 16 = sense of freedom

Text Selection

As college professors, we select reading lists for our young adult literature courses that provide students with choices and are diverse in multiple ways: genre, format, age of intended audience, and length. We also look for diversity in the authors and main characters: race, gender and gender expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, heritage language, religious affiliation, abilities, etc. Through this modeling, we encourage our students to create classroom, school, and public libraries filled with books that will act as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for their readers (Bishop).

In our courses, we focus especially on books that have been published within the last three to five years for at least two reasons: (1) While young adult literature still has issues with representation, more recent publications tend to feature more diverse authors and characters, and (2) We have learned through class discussions of our students' literacy journeys that most of them are familiar with young adult literature published more than five years ago. To illustrate analysis using Lesko's confident characterizations and Sarigianides et al.'s youth lens (*Rethinking the "Adolescent"*), we have selected two middle grade novels in verse (see Table 2).

Table 2

Middle Grade Novels in Verse Under Consideration

Salazar, Aida. *The Moon Within.* Arthur A. Levine Books, 2019.
Celestina "Celi" Rivera narrates this novel about navigating her first crush, puberty, and her best friend's gender fluidity. On the brink of turning 12 years old, Celi's mom insists that she have a traditional Mexica moon ceremony to celebrate her first menstrual period, which Celi finds mortifying. With the support of her best friend and family, Celi discovers the beauty in sharing her triumphs and tribulations with a nurturing community.
Woodson, Jacqueline. *Before the Ever After.* Nancy Paulsen Books, 2020.
ZJ Johnson is the son and only child of football star Zachariah Johnson. At the age of ten, ZJ's life is full of friends and doting parents. He remembers carefree days hanging out with his father playing and making music. As ZJ grows, his father's behavior starts to change, showing signs of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Set in late 1999 and into the early 2000s when CTE was a little-known condition, ZJ's story is of a son watching his father's decline and the uncertainty it brings to his world. While initially struggling with feelings of fear and isolation, ZJ discovers strength from his cadre of friends, his mother's devotion, and the connection music brings to his father.

We deliberately chose these novels for the diversity (in multiple ways) of the protagonists and the realistic portrayals of the characters. The two titles we highlight reflect experiences that many middle school students encounter: getting their first period and facing a parent's serious illness. For specific information about the diversity of the characters, please see the Appendix. By examining texts through confident characterizations and the youth lens, our students can evaluate their authenticity and the likelihood of young teenagers to relate to the characters. As the pre-service and in-service teachers and librarians respond to the books in our courses in a variety of ways, we invite them to consider how they could extend the appreciation and analysis of novels in verse to the middle grade students in their classrooms and libraries.

Analysis Using Lens #1

Coming of Age

In *The Moon Within* by Aida Salazar, Celi overhears her parents arguing about her coming of age late one night. Her father wants the process to slow down and refers to her as "a little girl" (Salazar 40). Her mother, on the other hand, takes the traditional stance that Celi will come of age "*whether we like it or / not. Es la ley de la vida* [It is the law of life]" (39). Mima also refers to Celi as "*BLOSSOMING*" (40), further calling to mind Lesko's reference to "the arrival of spring that swells tree buds" (2). Mima departs from the view of most adults; she wants Celi to be prepared for adulthood and feel powerful instead of feeling like her coming of age is completely out of her control.

While Jacqueline Woodson's *Before the Ever After* focuses on ZJ, much of the attention of those around him is on his father, a renowned professional football player who readers learn is suffering from Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Consequently, there are few obvious moments of ZJ's transition to his young adult years. He has grown up with his father being the center of attention, where his father's shadow enters the classroom ahead of him, "I mean, not *him,* but / his shadow. And me almost invisible / inside it" (10). Despite this possible area of stereotypical tension between father and son, ZJ and his father are close, celebrating each other's gifts. A significant memory before his father's decline is their annual race day competition where ZJ races his father to see if this is the year ZJ finally wins. "I keep running fast and hard, / just a little bit behind, already / thinking *I'm gonna win this race* / *next year*" (31). The event of a son surpassing his father is often seen as a rite of passage, a young man coming into his own.

Ruled by Hormones

Celi frequently appears governed by her hormones in the typical way Lesko described. For example, she has stereotypical mood swings: she cuts up a family picture in frustration after her mother calls attention to her new bra (16), she laughs with a boy who bullied her best friend (141), and she cries frequently throughout the novel. The way Salazar diverges from this portrayal is to emphasize the moon and lunar cycle instead of hormones—nature instead of biology. One example is when Celi's mom speaks to her about the ceremony she wants to hold to celebrate Celi's first menstrual period:

> Our indigenous ancestors
>
> were in tune with natural cycles
>
> held our bleeding to be powerful.
>
> And that during our moon time
>
> women gathered in special huts
>
> to nurture, create, and be in
>
> sacred space with their cycle. (Salazar 86)

Ultimately, Salazar calls more attention to the spiritual element of Celi's biological development as opposed to the hormonal element.

Much of *Before the Ever After* concentrates not on the biological changes of ZJ as a young adult, but on the emotions raised by the unknown nature of his father's condition. However, physical changes indicate ZJ's growth. ZJ is tall and developing broad shoulders. He is aware that his physical stature brings comparisons to his father, "I'm Zachariah Johnson Jr. ZJ.

I'm the one / whose daddy plays pro ball. I'm the tall kid / with my daddy's same broad shoulders. I'm the one who doesn't dream of going pro" (Woodson 10). Another hint to his physical growth refers to his healthy appetite. ZJ describes the voraciousness of his hunger as he eats numerous cookies, drinks several glasses of milk and water in one sitting, and still heads back "to the kitchen and microwave a beef patty. So hungry" (Woodson 48). However, the traumatic events of his father's mental decline soon distract ZJ, and his hunger disappears as quickly as it arrived. Woodson frees ZJ from conventional expectations of preteen boys and depicts a thoughtful young man more concerned with his father's physical and mental changes than his own.

Peer-Oriented

One of Celi's most significant friendships is with Marco (formerly Magda), the child of one of her mother's friends. In the middle of the novel, Marco's parents hold a ceremony including Celi and her mother in which they reveal that Marco is a *xochihuah*, or person "*who danced between / or to other energies / than what they were assigned at birth*" (Salazar 127). Celi struggles only briefly with this shift, adjusting to her friend's new name and pronouns. As Marco's mother tells her, "*There will be those who will judge. / We need everyone's support and no / one more than yours, Celi*" (129). Celi and Marco quickly settle on the word *amifriend* to describe their friendship, explaining their self-proclaimed "Spanglish" word "has both / the warm sound of *amor* in *am* / and *friend*, the sweetest word English can muster" (130). Celi and Marco spend time together alongside their families, making them less peer-oriented than the way adolescents are typically depicted in the media.

Besides his mother, ZJ's one constant source of stability is his circle of friends, "my boys" (Woodson 2). The power of friendship is the thread holding ZJ's life together. While the

youth experience is often depicted as a struggle to fit in with a group, Woodson presents friendship as supportive and respectful of what each person brings to the relationship. Daniel, Ollie, and Darry are each presented in terms of their individual personalities and defining characteristics (14-15). At first, they back away from ZJ, as his once friendly and fun father has more frequent angry outbursts, leaving ZJ isolated (39); but one by one, ZJ's friends find their way back to his house, offering him unspoken comfort. As his father's condition worsens, his friends are there to bring normalcy and belonging. Showing up unannounced at ZJ's doorstep under the guise of making grilled cheese, his friends provide a much-needed distraction,

> We sit in the kitchen, eating and talking
>
> about everything, except my daddy, and it's like
>
> my boys know that all I need right now
>
> is for them to be around me, stretching. (94)

Throughout the novel, his friends' presence grounds and comforts ZJ. He does not have to try to be one thing or the other. ZJ's friends support his decisions, such as no longer playing football (141, 152), without question.

Attributed to Exact Age

Celi in *The Moon Within* is 11, nearly 12 years old, but 13 is the age that holds the most promise to her. In the chapter "When I Turn Thirteen," Iván, Celi's crush, begins to ask if she could have a boyfriend: "*Would your parents let you have a . . . / Oh, never mind*, he sighs" (Salazar 118). Through her narration, Celi reveals that her father wants her to wait until she is 30 years old to date, while her mother says she needs to be thirteen. In addition to dating, she will be

able to wear makeup, have a phone, and go places unsupervised. Celi opines, "Why do I have to wait for all of the / good things when I don't feel / like a baby anymore?" (119). This chapter raises an interesting point that aligns with Lesko's confident characterization of the exact age: Why does it matter if Celi is 12 or 13 when she gains these privileges? There are differences between middle school and high school, but the attribution to exact age seems to be a holdover from a different era.

ZJ is ten when *Before the Ever After* begins. The novel covers the span of two years. As his father's condition worsens, ZJ grows, goes to school, and hangs out with his friends; meanwhile, his father's illness colors everything ZJ experiences. Flashbacks show ZJ's younger years, when time spent with his father was playful and happy. Images of his father driving him to school, cooking together, and the family having ice cream together show a distinct difference between his younger self and his new adolescent life facing his father's deteriorating health. ZJ strives to help his mother, but like most mothers, she tries to protect him from growing up too fast. During one frustrating morning with his father, she makes ZJ breakfast. ZJ offers to help, but she resists. "*I can do that*, I tell her. / *But you don't have to*, Mama says back. / *Not yet. Be a boy for a little while longer*" (Woodson 109). Like many families dealing with health crises, ZJ is growing up faster than his mother would hope. At the end of the novel, ZJ is 12, and there are still no solutions for his father, who is eventually hospitalized. Due to his young age, ZJ has limited visits with his father, and they are "Never alone" (Woodson 160). Despite hospital rules restricting ZJ's visitations, Woodson shows that there is no way to protect young adults from family illnesses.

Description of Lens #2: Youth Lens

For the last several years, scholars have written about the youth lens (Petrone et al.). Similar to feminism, Marxism, or critical race theory, their aim is to suggest another critical lens through which to view literature, especially young adult literature. Historically, adolescent behavior, thoughts, and feelings have been attributed to biology and psychology, but Sarigianides et al. argue that adolescence is a social construct, like race or gender ("How Re-thinking Adolescence Helps Re-imagine" 15). They contend that adults traditionally think about adolescents from a deficit-based perspective. Ultimately, they collected their ideas in a book: *Rethinking the "Adolescent" in Adolescent Literacy*, where they suggest using Lesko's confident characterizations for primary analysis leading to an overall analysis using the youth lens. Sarigianides and colleagues offer three questions for critically reading young adult literature with a youth lens:

(1) What visions of what it means to be a young adult are included and excluded?
(2) In what ways are dominant stereotypes [of youth] portrayed? Are they reinforced or diminished?
(3) How does [this text] represent adolescents/ce? (20)

Analysis Using Lens #2

Visions of Young Adulthood Included and Excluded

Adults often reflect on young adulthood as a time of powerlessness. While the examined texts depict preteens facing situations beyond their control, they also illustrate that the characters find the means to bring control to their lives through friendship and family. Celi cannot control the arrival of her period, but she can control her response. Instead of feeling "ashamed" as her

Mima had, Celi embraces her moon ceremony, surrounded by her family and friends (Salazar 85, 207-220). ZJ is powerless to stop his father's mental decline, but he finds ways to alleviate the suffering through his friends, family, and music. Music also offers ZJ a means to connect with his father who becomes more distant and detached (Woodson 160). These novels include multiple visions of young adulthood, as opposed to a traditional, monolithic vision.

Stereotypes of Adolescence/ts Reinforced and Diminished

Many consider adolescence as a time of identity creation, or even identity crisis (Petrone et al.). Yet the preteens in the examined texts seem to have clear images of themselves, good and bad. Toward the end of *The Moon Within*, Celi has an opportunity for her first kiss, which would align with the stereotype of being ruled by hormones. Instead, Celi recognizes who she is becoming and knows that kissing a boy who had made fun of her best friend would be the ultimate betrayal (Salazar 205). Despite the expectations of acquaintances and the general public in *Before the Ever After*, ZJ is certain his future does not include football the way it did for his father. Rather, he looks to music (Woodson 10, 14, 48, 111, 160). Even though these novels contain some stereotypical portrayals of adolescents, stereotypes exist because society believes them and perpetuates them, as previously described via Sarigianides et al. ("How Re-thinking Adolescence Helps Re-imagine" 17). The characters in these novels behave in realistic, not exaggerated ways, and the stereotypes are used to show growth in the characters.

Representation of Adolescence/ts

The overarching questions of the youth lens are the following: how is adolescence represented as a construct in the text, and how are adolescents represented as people? In *The Moon Within*, adolescence is represented as a time of self-discovery supported by adults.

Through Celi and Marco, adolescents are portrayed as slightly impulsive, though mostly thoughtful. The young adults in *Before the Ever After* are full of life and spirit, whether they are joking around in school or playing sports. At the same time, ZJ is depicted as thoughtful and observant as he becomes aware of the seriousness of his family's situation.

Discussion Across Novels

While the pre-service and in-service teachers and librarians in our courses are excited about the middle grade literature classification, they are still typically unsure, perhaps even uncomfortable, about the idea of reading an entire novel in verse. We work to break down those walls by sharing the words of Jason Reynolds, Nikki Grimes, and other amazing poets. Once they read a novel in verse like one of the novels analyzed here, the adults generally see how this could be a format their students will love.

The protagonists of the texts are on the threshold of change towards maturity, whether it be physical changes or changes within their home pushing them to grow. Coming of age is socially constructed and typically determined by adults; however, the main characters in these novels are aware that they are at the very beginning of their transition into adolescence. Part of the tension in middle grade literature arises from the young adults realizing that there are new expectations of them, but not knowing just what that means for their future.

Another tension in middle grade novels is the external conflicts creating internal conflicts. Physical and emotional changes are present, but they do not create the drama. While drama manifests itself in stereotypical ways (e.g., tearing up pictures or a voracious appetite), the characters' behaviors reflect feelings of powerlessness in response to changes in their personal circumstances, not just hormones. Adolescents have little control over the forces acting upon

them, but over the course of these novels, the characters grow in how they manage their responses.

Interestingly, peer orientation is one way middle grade realistic fiction novels differ quite a bit from young adult novels. We noticed the characters in the novels we analyzed spend at least as much time with their families as their peers, if not more time with their families or older adults serving in familial roles. The authors seem to suggest that both family and friends provide a foundation for the changes coming with adolescence.

The expectations for adolescents of specific ages have shifted with the centuries, as 13–14-year-olds in the 1800s would have graduated from school in the eighth grade and begun working full-time, basically making them adults. Today, 13-year-olds are thought of as teenagers, closer to childhood than adulthood. The main characters from the texts we analyzed are pulled between the safety of childhood and the growing responsibilities of adulthood. While parts of their hearts long to return to the past, each character understands they have no choice but to go forward. As outlined in the prompts for these analyses, readers should question the use of stereotypes. In these two novels, stereotypes are used in positive ways (e.g., to show growth in the characters), but that isn't always the case. Using the youth lens for analysis will help readers determine if the stereotypes are positive, negative, or neutral.

Conclusion

The novels we analyzed bring young people to the forefront of the narrative through realistic portrayals. Lesko's confident characterizations and Sarigianides et al.'s youth lens (*Rethinking the "Adolescent"*) provide a structure for teachers and students to examine their own assumptions about adolescents and the depiction of those assumptions in the literature they

consume. Via our analysis, we realized that in reading these texts we were on a journey of growth alongside Celi and ZJ, not on a path toward a final destination. These novels are a small sample of the wide array of middle grade novels in verse available today. Through reading middle grade novels in verse and utilizing the two lenses, we hope the pre-service and in-service teachers and librarians in our courses will become more comfortable including novels in verse in their classrooms and libraries, see the potential for diversifying their approach to young adult and middle grade literature, and bring these analytical frameworks to their own students.

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Appendix: Representation in the Middle grade Novels in Verse Under Consideration

Characteristic	***The Moon Within***	***Before the Ever After***
Gender	Cisgender female	Cisgender male
Race / Ethnicity	Black - Puerto Rican - Mexican	Black
Language	English, Spanish	English
Socioeconomic Class	Not directly addressed; they own a house; protagonist does not mention financial distress	Not directly addressed; father is a successful professional football player
Religion / Spirituality	Naturalism, herbalists, ancient Mexican traditions	Not directly addressed
Family Structure	Lives with biological parents and brother	Lives with biological parents
Setting	Oakland, California	Not directly addressed
Hobbies	Bomba dancing	Music

Note: Each characteristic is in relationship to the protagonist, unless otherwise noted.