

## ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

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“I *definitely* am Edward,” declares Bailey. “I can’t believe that!,” Jenna replies. “How can you relate to him? Jacob is totally more *real*.”

“That assignment was so lame. If the teacher had just been a Gallagher Girl—she would really understand the perfect school.”

“Hey Zach, you can sooooo skip the third and fourth in that series ...I think the author was just tryin’ to make some money but you’ve gotta’ read Book Five. It’s awesome!”

If these comments made by adolescents seem like a foreign language, then you might not be in touch with what today’s middle school students are reading and how they are conversing about books outside of the classroom.

### ADOLESCENT LITERATURE DEFINED

Adolescent literature, sometimes called young adult literature (YAL), describes text which has been specifically written for and targeted to a teenage audience as well as anything adolescents are reading of their own free will (Wilder & Teasley, 2000). Officially adolescent literature as a genre did not exist until the mid-twentieth century and until recently was often seen as condescending and without merit. In the past twenty or so years, YAL has increased in popularity, diversity and quality. At the onset of the recognition of the genre, many titles focused solely on realistic adolescent problems and were dismissed as problem novels and/or romances (Cart, 2008). Today ‘tween and teen books are an integral part of pop culture with

many story-lines often becoming movies, videos, and cartoons. Storylines focus on a wide variety of issues that young people face and these books empower readers to see themselves in the plot, make connections with characters, and to consider the possibilities through imagination. The Young Adult Library Services Association (Cart, 2008) regards young adult literature as "...essential to healthy youth development and the corollary development of healthy communities in which both youth and libraries can thrive" and believes it is an indispensable part of public and school library collections.

The accessibility, the sophistication, and the diversity of this genre are redefining the consumer habits of adolescents (Reno, 2008). With the explosion of media directed to young adults, this demographic has answered by buying books at an all time high and confidently sharing their thoughts and recommendations. The notorious negative attitudes and the resistance toward reading which middle school students are known for (McKena, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995) are not supported by their outside reading habits (Beane, Beane & Beane, 1999). Despite proclamations American teens are not reading, reports show (Benton, 1995a, 1995b; Fitzgerald, 2009; Hall & Coles, 1999; Hopper, 2005) reading for pleasure (private reading) has remained stable or has climbed. Fitzgerald (2009) reports while adults sales of trade books are falling, young adult sales are rising with an expected 30.6% increase in spending in the next three years. Interestingly, while digital media is more readily accessible by adolescents, it has not slowed their reading habits; if anything, the Internet has increased the possibility of networking and sharing information about books (Hopper, 2005).

Reading outside of school can lead to positive effects for students inside the school and the popular reading cultures in which they live (Hall & Coles, 2002). As middle school educators it is our responsibility to know and value our students, to help students make sense of themselves and the ever-changing world around them, and to guide students in making sound decisions. Adolescent literature provides an excellent context to make those connections.

### **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

For middle school educators, the influx and availability of adolescent literature provides both opportunities and challenges. Hall and Coles (2002) state “school literacy practices should complement and enhance home and community literacy practices (Hall and Coles, 2002 p.107) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2003) recognizes “those who spend more time reading for pleasure, read a great variety of materials and show more positive attitudes toward reading.”

Adolescent literature can provide a vehicle for active, engaged conversation about difficult issues and can be used to meet students where they are along their learning continuum, but many middle school students report a disconnect with the reading done in school and their reading outside of school (Alverman, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999; Blintz, 1993; Finders, 1997; Worthy, 1998). *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2010), notes an essential characteristic of successful school curriculum, instruction and assessment for young adolescents is educators valuing the nature of young adolescents and both content and methods must be diversified and individualized.

Choice among learning activities is the first step offered to help students reach and grow according to individual readiness and abilities, yet lack of availability of popular titles in schools, particularly in classrooms, inhibits many students' reading choices (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Also, studies note there might be a tension between what teachers think students should be reading and what students chose to read.

So knowing that

- a disconnect exists between students' reading in school and their private time reading
- teachers are key in helping develop students' interest in reading
- more and more young adult titles being published and
- there are only so many hours in the day

what can middle school teachers and schools do to support their students' reading habits and to create and empower young people as learners and future citizens responsible for understanding our world? Following are suggested considerations and strategies for supporting and empowering middle school teachers to use adolescent literature as a tool to connect with adolescents.

#### **STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT AND EMPOWER TEACHERS AND STUDENTS**

The definition of teaching as work is highly elastic (Michelson & Harvey, 2000). It does not take into account the overtime of meetings, the travel to and from work, the interactions with parents and students outside of the school day and the workplace demands which cannot be measured during the school day. Teaching today is not like teaching was a decade ago; the composition of classrooms has dramatically changed (Hargreaves, 1992). With so many needs to meet, teachers sometimes become overwhelmed. It is important for teachers to remember, however, every second counts and they do make a difference in the lives of the young

people they teach. Teachers of middle school students must realize their behavior sends a message to the students they teach and so must practice those qualities they want young adolescents to emulate ( NMSA, 2010).

In a survey about Teen Read Week, SmartGirl.org (2005) reported teachers had a significant impact on teen reading habits by encouraging students to read for fun or by setting a good example by reading themselves and sharing their habits with their students. So with all of these demands of teaching and the challenge to set a good example as a reader, how can teachers make a difference?

### **Recognize and value adolescent literature as important**

One essential strategy is for teachers to recognize and value adolescent literature as an important genre in the lives of adolescents. For some tried and true lovers of the classics, that might be a difficult task, especially as the genre of adolescent literature has expanded well beyond books into magazines, websites and digital media. Choosing to read is significant and teachers should reflect on how the issues reflected in adolescent literature help students explore and navigate real-life issues safely. Being responsive to meeting students on “their turf” by valuing what they read outside of school sends a message of goodwill and can positively impact reading in the classroom.

Whenever possible, teachers should allow student choice of reading material to meet curricular goals. For example, class texts could be read along-side assigned student-selected texts as part of interest circles. Teachers might also consider allowing core time for individual reading for pleasure.

### **Grant permission not to know it all**

Advances in technology and the learning demands of the information age are changing how we teach and learn. In the 21st century, the teacher's role cannot simply be to fill students with information and the teacher cannot be expected to know all things—including every book students are reading. Although basic content knowledge is important, there also needs to be a focus on process. As knowledge and skills change from day to day, what is important is to teach students how to learn. By teaching students to reflect on how they learn and by developing their skills to pursue their learning goals, students will be empowered to change from passive recipients of information to active controllers of their learning. The teacher's role, as facilitator, is to empower learners by promoting student involvement in learning, helping learners to develop skills which support learning throughout life, and helping learners to assume personal responsibility for learning. By recognizing and valuing students' outside reading lives, middle school teachers are sending a clear message that reading is important.

### **Use resources wisely**

Even though it is impossible to know it all, it is important to be well informed. So how can teachers stay current? One way is to love a librarian. Get to know the school and the public librarians. Librarians can be an excellent resource and they should be able to offer from the adult viewpoint what is most popular with teens. However, it is important to note many students report the school and public libraries are way behind in housing the hottest titles.

The Internet offers a host of sites to help teachers and parents become savvy about adolescent literature. These resources are a huge time saver. For a list of recommended sites, see Appendix A.

### **Form learning partnerships with students**

One of the easiest way to stay current with adolescent literature is to put students in the drivers' seat. Encourage students to be the experts and to act as reviewers. Keep an area in the classroom dedicated to hot titles. Have students post what they are reading or better yet, create a class blog where students can rate, review and recommend titles and where parents can weigh in with their own thoughts and ideas.

### **Encourage dialogue**

Students love to talk. Engaging in dialogue about books is exciting. Spend a few minutes each week—no matter what content-and let students share with the class or in small groups what they are reading outside of class. As a team, consider assigning weeks so each team member can benefit from hearing these discussions and so students will see reading is something which can be enjoyed by all. By validating outside reading, teachers are empowering lifelong learners!

### **Be a reader**

Middle school teachers are inevitably role models for students and their reading habits will send influential messages to their students. Students will note what teachers are reading and they will pick up on teachers' attitudes toward reading. Be sure to positively share what you are reading—magazines, a book on how to train your new puppy, the latest best seller.

### **Make the classroom a print-rich environment**

The classroom library is the last place students go to find popular titles (Fitzgerald, 2009). Why? Most classrooms are woefully short on tradebooks and magazines for teens and

even those whose stock books tend to stock traditional classics. The cost of purchasing these resources can be a reason many teachers do not stock the latest and greatest, but consider asking students for donations. With so many teens purchasing adolescent literature, many families will donate recently read materials. Start a book and/or magazine swap area in the classroom. Because some materials for today's teens may discuss sensitive issues, be sure to let families know the swap area is "not endorsed."

### **CLOSING**

According to NMSA (2010), the most successful learning strategies are ones which involve each student personally. By using adolescent literature as a tool to connect students outside reading lives with the classroom, middle school educators will be encouraging the development of a reading habit that will empower lifelong learning.

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## Appendix A

### **Adolescent Literature: Sites to Know**

#### **Literacy Matters**

This web site focuses on adolescent literature and content area literacy. It is intended for teachers, parents and there is an area for students.

[www.literacymatters.org](http://www.literacymatters.org)

#### **Teen Reads**

Become a fan on Facebook of Teen reads or visit their site to explore the latest and most popular teen literature

[www.teenreads.com](http://www.teenreads.com)

#### **Reader's Club Teen Corner**

The public library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County created a guide to enjoyable books, including reviews and a form to submit one's own 100-word book review, author interviews, and personal reading log. [www.readersclub.org](http://www.readersclub.org)

#### **Teen Ink: Books**

Teen Ink is a web site and print magazine dedicated to teenage writing and art. The book review section contains over 600 reviews written by teens. Students can also submit their own reviews.

[www.teenink.com/Books/](http://www.teenink.com/Books/)

#### **Teens' Top Ten: YALSA**

Teen readers choose the winners in this annual contest.

[www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/teenreading/teenstopten/teenstopten.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/teenreading/teenstopten/teenstopten.htm)

### **International Reading Association: Choices Booklists**

Visit the section "Young Adults' Choices" to get a list of books selected by teenage reviewers.

[www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices.html](http://www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices.html)

### **Children's, Teacher's, and Young Adults' Choices Fact Sheet**

Furnished by the International Reading Association (IRA), this web site offers downloadable lists of children's, adolescents', and teachers' choices since 1998.

[www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices.html](http://www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices.html)

### **The Children's Literature Web Guide**

This site Internet resources about literature for children and young adults. It also includes award winners, bestsellers, and searchable resources which link books to teaching ideas.  
[www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/index.html](http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/index.html)

### **Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site**

Reviews of books for children and adolescent including teaching ideas and suggestions.  
[www.carolhurst.com/index.html](http://www.carolhurst.com/index.html)

### **ALAN, the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English,**

Dedicated to exploring and researching young adult literature, ALAN offers multiple resources for teachers and monthly book reviews of young adult literature.

<http://www.alan-ya.org/>