11-2019

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Recommended Citation

Deakin, Kathleen and Eastman, Gloria (2019) "Where's My Happy Ending? Fostering Empathy through Conversations about Anxiety and Depression in Young Adult Literature," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 35: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2232>

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Where's My Happy Ending? Fostering Empathy through Conversations about Anxiety and Depression in Young Adult Literature

KATHLEEN DEAKIN & GLORIA EASTMAN

Madelyn was at the top of her game. She was first in her class; she was balancing five Advanced Placement classes; she was president of National Honor Society and Theatre Club; she had a strong support system at home and at school; and she was on track to have a substantial portion of her college studies funded through scholarship: in essence, she had it all. All of her success, however, came at a price. A high price. In November, 2017, I received a call from her school telling me that I needed to come and pick my daughter up immediately because she was having trouble breathing. I rushed over to find her rocking back and forth chanting “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.” I was stunned. What had happened to my beautiful, perfect daughter?

I now know that Madelyn had suffered a panic attack, a direct result of experiencing severe depression and anxiety. Attacks like this are, among other things, the body’s way of responding to overstimulation, a defense mechanism of sorts. But I couldn’t help but wonder what happened to my “normal” child. I felt an immediate sense of overwhelming guilt as a parent—how could I have not seen this coming? That guilt carried over into my work. After meeting with her teachers, all of whom were just as stunned by the chain of events, I realized that Madelyn was one of those students who went unnoticed because she was doing it all. She turned in her assignments on time. She never asked for help. She was at the top, literally and figuratively, and so she is the student we *don’t* worry about.

As a former high school teacher I thought I *understood* the pressures academics place on teenagers; I spent the better part of my week with teenagers and I *understood* them. I taught Advanced Placement courses, I taught honors courses, I taught ESL, and I taught students who weren’t planning on

pursuing higher education. Having dedicated my entire career to working with teenagers, I now prepare future educators for the rigors of teaching. But never in my wildest dreams did I imagine my daughter would teach me more about teaching than twenty-plus years of working with teenagers.

Throughout my career I have sought solace in two things: my colleagues and my books. This situation was no different. I confided in one of my closest colleagues—who also has two teenage grandsons dealing with depression and anxiety—and together we embarked on a journey of research. We discovered that anxiety and depression are on the rise with today’s adolescents. We discovered that there is no panacea for this epidemic. And we discovered that our classrooms and our teachers are ill equipped with a curriculum to initiate conversations about anxiety and depression. Our research led us to a series of questions: *What does it mean to be “normal”?* *Do we stigmatize the kids who “have it all”?* *Are their problems real problems?* This article is an attempt to begin that conversation in our classrooms.

“Moody” Teenagers in the Academic Pressure Cooker

“We read for the conversations that texts invite us to have about the world, human nature, and ourselves.” Jim Burke

Central to the notion of teaching adolescents is constructing an understanding of them. This understanding is often nuanced by the constructs set forth by dominant cultural depictions. Lesko (2012), in her book *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, argues that our culture typically sees teenagers “as synonymous with crazed hormones, as delinquents, deficiencies or clowns...not to be taken too seriously” (p. 28). Mood swings, the biological aspect of this

period of development, are depicted as a natural occurrence. And while we believe that these natural occurrences exist among adolescents, we also conceptualize them in relation to how we, as adults, experienced them at the same age (Lesko, 2012, p. 36). We tend to view adolescence as a natural phenomenon, a pilgrimage towards adulthood. And because we, as adults and educators, successfully (speaking figuratively) completed that pilgrimage, we accept that so can our students.

Coupled with an educational system that measures learning and intelligence through a series of data points, that pilgrimage bears a heavy burden. When we view this period of transition as “normal”, we pay little, if any, attention to how adolescents are coping with those pressures. The paradigm of what it means to be successful in the context of the classroom: good grades will lead to a good college, and a good college will yield a high paying job. As educators, we design a series of tasks that yield data from which we draw conclusions about success. William Deresiewicz, a former professor at Yale University and author of *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life*, admonishes a system that produces smart, talented, and motivated students who are in essence “anxious, timid, and lost with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose...” (2015, p. 15). This silent epidemic, so named by Abeles (2015) in *Beyond Measure*, impacts educators as well. They feel constant pressure to assign “information” rather than “pursue fewer, richer experiences” in the classroom (p. 17). Adolescence, according to Abeles, has been reduced to a performance, one that has resulted in chronic insecurities, anxiety, depression, and loneliness (p. 36).

We argue that an important place to begin to address this situation is in the language arts classroom. As we work with our pre-service teachers, we encourage them to create classrooms that are communities of acceptance and conversation about all kinds of identities and concerns. We point out that empathy for differences and struggles must begin with the teacher. Once empathetic to the real struggles of even the high achieving students, teachers need then to begin to create lessons and units that facilitate a wider understanding of self and others for their students.

Fostering Empathy

“Our goal should be shaping human beings with intellectual curiosity, a caring heart, and a belief in the common good.” Jeffrey Berman

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker (2012) of

Harvard University argues that an in-depth study of historical data reveals that violence in human societies has been in decline for long stretches of time. This may seem hard to believe because media and technological communication bring the news of violence around the globe into our moment-to-moment awareness, but Pinker maintains that we are probably living in the most peaceful time in our species’ existence. In a graphic in the *New York Times Book Review* (June 22, 2017), Anders Nilsen titles his review of Pinker’s book, “Why we don’t burn cats anymore.” The answer to his query: the development of the novel! Fiction, as first developed by English writers in the 18th century, caused its readers to place themselves in the shoes of a character not at all like themselves and to begin to develop empathy. Nilsen’s example is Richardson’s *Clarissa: Or, the History of a Young Lady* (1748), which details, for over 500 pages, the efforts of the virtuous title character to fend off the sexual advances of her titled employer. Although contemporary readers likely acquired this early novel for sheer entertainment, Pinker posits that some readers may have, for the first time, begun to consider the negative affects of aristocratic male privilege on the lives of middle-class females. Thus, the development of empathy.

A number of sociological studies have established that volunteers scored higher on measures of empathy after having read passages from literary fiction. The choice of genre appears to be an important distinction: thrillers, for example, focus on a fast-moving plot, while literary fiction asks the reader to consider the behaviors and motivations of complex characters who are struggling with a variety of human challenges. As students come to interpret the lives of the characters within the novels that we help them choose, they are often able to grow their understanding beyond their own limited experience. Empathy, therefore, becomes a kind of receptivity to others, and eventually, to themselves. Literary fiction “uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to a character’s subjective experiences” (Beam, 2018, p. 23).

Although many adolescents report that they read only “to pass the class,” when themes and ideas important to their own lives are presented to them, they often find that the reading has come to have a purpose (Tovani, 2000). The CCSS outline important skills that adults know will help students become successful in their adult lives, but that transfer is not yet obvious to teenagers. The goal of reading books in order to learn to understand self and others, however, does make sense to many students. Books can become the door into an authentic inquiry, a series of meaningful problems for which

there are multiple solutions. An extremely important aspect of this kind of meaning-making is the need to keep the classroom discussions open-ended and student-centered. The teacher CAN NOT be the sole authority of meaning for the books the students are reading. In fact, according to Peter H. Johnston (2012), "A greater tolerance for uncertainty brings with it a greater tolerance for others" (p.13). As students explore the identities and problems of the characters in the books, they develop the capacity to invent understandings and solutions to the circumstances of these characters and also the ability to transfer their thinking from the book to themselves and, with practice, to the larger human community. For our anxious teens, this means empathizing with the issues the characters are facing and understanding that these are real issues that their peers might be experiencing as well.

Importantly, teachers pay a key role in helping students to read with empathy and to transfer understandings to their own situations; merely handing students a list of books to read is not enough. Teens are likely to find it difficult to connect with characters who are in radically different circumstances than their own. Teachers should begin with novels whose characters are close to the experiences of the students and gradually build resilience by selecting materials that are more challenging or that concern characters who are in different circumstances. Gradually, we want them to become other-focused: *How would I feel if I were this character? What can I learn about this person that can be applied to other situations? How is this perspective different from my own?* These questions can be explored in literature circles, class discussion, and written work. Teachers pose important thematic questions and invite students to explore: the teacher must plan learning activities that invite students to develop empathy.

Texts Talking to One Another

"Reading, especially complex reading, doesn't occur in isolation."
Sarah Brown Wessling

Text sets are not necessarily new to education. Textbooks often "enriched" short stories with poetry and excerpts (fictional and non-fictional), all of which served to enhance the thematic relevance. We both remember the infamous "textbook adoptions" whereby publishers would reveal boxes of curricula that would somehow miraculously enhance our classrooms. The planning was done for us and we had curricular units of instruction to help foster the activities in our

classrooms. Text sets promised our students and ourselves an entryway into deeper understandings. Admittedly, however, these curricular units of instruction were prescribed, meaning was fixed, and we were often just reiterating significance and understanding. There was little inquiry. There was even less exploration.

With the advent of CCSS, there was a resurgence of the text set. These standards do not lay out a curriculum, per se, but emphasize a need for "students to be able to read more complex texts" (Calkins, et al., 2012, p. 32). Text complexity has undoubtedly become a point of contention, but there are three measures set forth to determine text complexity: Qualitative Measures, Quantitative Measures, and Reader and Task Consideration Measures. Qualitative Measures involve "meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands" (p. 35); Quantitative Measures ask educators to consider things like Lexile levels; and Reader and Task Consideration Measures allow teachers to consider "the familiarity the reader has to the language and the content of the text" in addition to the reader's motivation for comprehension (p. 36). The third and final consideration is, in our opinion, perhaps the most pivotal for the text set. Our students must see themselves in the literature they read. They must develop a deeper understanding of their world and curricular units built around text sets is the means to help them do so.

In 2011, Sarah Brown Wessling, NBCT, and 2010 National Teacher of the Year, published a guide to unit planning in the wake of the paradigmatic shift to CCSS. She endeavored to de-mystify CCSS and presented a systematic approach to unit planning, one that "layers the reading" into a series of sets: Context, Fulcrum, and Texture (p. 26). The Context set establishes perspective for further reading. These brief, multimodal reads help focus the group by establishing a "reservoir of prior knowledge." The Fulcrum text is more traditional in that it is read by the whole class; these texts are typically longer and more complex. Texture texts simply provide consistency in that they texturize the whole class (fulcrum) read; they deepen student understanding and further student discussion. We have adopted this framework in our methods courses because it allows our students to envision a unit conceptually rather than one that simply focuses on daily lessons building comprehension.

Using this framework, we propose a set of texts (see Table 1) to initiate conversation about teenage pressures and the subsequent anxiety and depression that might accompany these pressures. Petrone et al. (2015), advocated for a Youth

Table 1
A Proposed Set of Texts to Start the Conversation

Essential Questions:

How is adolescence represented in this text? How does this text reinforce/subvert dominant ideas about adolescence?

Texts to Establish Context	Fulcrum Text	Texts to Build Texture
The Grit Scale by Angela Duckworth In her 2018 book, Duckworth asks readers <i>How Gritty Are You?</i> This “test” is a series of questions that explore individual stamina and grit. This tool is an excellent way to get students talking and listening to each other about perseverance. “Ch. 1: The Students,” <i>Excellent Sheep</i> by William Deresiewicz This non-fiction text explores the perils of competition as it relates to college admissions. This first chapter delves into the “the winners of the race we call childhood.” A great option for seminar discussions about the price of success. “Numbered Identity” by Tira Okamoto This poem, written by a San Francisco high school student, opens the book <i>Beyond Measure</i>. It is a series of “I am” statements that illustrate an adolescent’s loss of identity as a result of a standardized system. “I’m 17” <i>Ted Talk</i> by Kate Simonds This TED Talk is aptly named. Kate Simonds begins the talk admitting that she has done nothing remarkable except be 17. The talk concludes with a passionate plea for her audience to invite young people into the conversation—they know so much more than they are credited for knowing. An excellent discussion piece.	Small Things by Meg Tregonning This graphic novel tells the story of a young boy who is surrounded by people but still feels alone. It is a story without words, but it speaks volumes. Sadly, Tregonning took her own life before it could get published, but with the help of Shaun Tan and Tregonning’s family, the book was published in 2018. It can easily sustain multiple readings and serve as a powerful source of discussion because it illustrates that what we think are small things can often feel insurmountable to some.	Lost Connections by Johann Hari This non-fiction text delves into the science of depression and anxiety—not necessarily useful for ELA classroom. Part II of the book has a series of chapters that talk about ways we disconnect from our surroundings. The young protagonist disconnects at times in the novel and these excerpts can help texturize both character motivation and establish concrete connections. The book also presents a series of ways to reconnect with our surroundings. Again, adding powerful texture to the fulcrum text. “Siri—A Coping Mechanism” by Patrick Roche This slam poem presents the façade of technology. Those we love are often unaware of how we feel. An excellent supplement to <i>Small Things</i>. “The Healing” <i>milk and honey</i> by Rupi Kaur The fourth and final section of the novel presents the healing power of connection. Connecting with self. Connecting with others. It is almost as if Kaur added words to the young boy’s journey in the fulcrum text.

Lens (YL), designed to examine how texts “reinforce and/or disrupt various figurations of adolescence and youth” (p. 511). This lens helps deconstruct the representation(s) of youth and the larger ideological implications of those representations by asking two foundational questions: “How does the text represent adolescence/ts? What role does the text play in reinforcing and/or subverting dominant ideas about adolescence?” (p. 513). These two questions are pivotal reminders oftentimes educators, as mentioned previously, view this period as a normal struggle, one that will pass; adolescence is viewed as a construct. However, it is our job to help our students transition through this tumultuous period

of their lives and we can use literature to help our students understand and empathize with one another.

Much like we would with any other literary study, we approach the Youth Lens through a series of entry points: characterization, setting, plot, theme, and metaphor (p. 518). However rather than categorize our analysis by each literary element we consider them within the larger context of the YL. For example, as opposed to simply exploring the setting of a piece, we explore how youth are positioned within the setting of the piece in addition to how that setting contributes to the youth identity. This depth of analysis fosters conversation that goes beyond simple comprehension and deepens our

understanding of adolescence.

The unifying thread to a text set is the Essential Question. These questions, according to Jim Burke (2010), “are the Swiss Army knife of an active, disciplined mind trying to understand texts or concepts and communicate that understanding to others” (p. 3). Each student, therefore, has an entry point to the EQ if the text set is rich enough. Finding thematic questions that can be answered in a variety of ways and can be addressed at each student’s level of readiness. Even if the anchor or fulcrum text doesn’t speak to a student’s identity or psychological need at this moment, another piece of text might. Thus, using the above questions as a starting point, and a series of text connected by those overarching questions, will provide a gateway to collaborative discussion about characters, both fictional and real, who are struggling with the academic, social, and mental pressures of adolescence.

Our intent with these books is not to promise a happy ending, but rather to build empathy in our classrooms for all students—even the ones who appear to be “normal” and successful teenagers. In order to balance a culturally sustained, yet academically rigorous classroom, we argue that educators must select literature that recognizes and reflects the very students they serve. (For more examples, see Table 2.)

The Scholarship of Self

“We want schools to be a place where kids go to feel stimulated and supported, not ranked and sorted, and where the great poet, peacemaker, or political debater is valued as highly as the adept test taker.” Vicki Abeles

In 2014, the Harvard Graduate School of Education released a study entitled *The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults are Sending About Values*. This report revealed, among other key findings, that a large majority of the youth sampled valued personal success and achievement over “concern for others.” More importantly the gap between what adults say their top priorities are and what their children hear is largely conflicted—in essence, we are sending the message to our children that achievement is more important than empathy. This notion that life can simply be reduced to a series of achievements that will ensure security and comfort—what many of us label success—leads to a distorted perception of perfection. Perhaps we can step back from a world where it is acceptable to be busy, to be overscheduled, to be overwhelmed. We can invite our students to explore fictional and real characters who combat academic and social pressures and talk about those pressures, empathize with one another as they navigate the murky waters of adolescence.

Currently, Madelyn is well-entrenched in her first year of college, where I have seen a resurgence of the girl I once

Table 2
Suggestions for Alternative Text Sets or Classroom Libraries

Young Adult Literature - Fulcrum Texts	Non-fiction - Context and/or Texture Texts	Poetry - Context and/or Texture Texts
Abertalli, B. (2018) <i>The Upside of Unrequited</i> .	Homayoun, A. (2017) <i>Social Media Wellness: Helping Tweens and Teens Thrive in an Unbalanced Digital World</i> . Corwin.	Celan, Paul. “Where Am I.”
Barnard, S. (2018). <i>A Quiet Kind of Thunder</i> .	Homayoun, A. (2012) <i>The Myth of the Perfect Girl</i> . Perigree.	Dickinson, Emily. “There is a Certain Slant of Light.”
Bowman, A. (2017). <i>Starfish</i> .	Wilson, S. (2018) <i>First, We Make the Beast Beautiful: A New Journey Through Anxiety</i> . Dey Street.	May, Jamaal. “Respiration.”
Chbosky, S. (2012). <i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i> .	Vizzini, N. (2012) <i>Teen Angst? Naaah....</i> Delacourt Books for Young Readers.	Oliver, Mary. “The Journey.”
Emmich, V. (2018). <i>Dear Evan Hansen</i> .	Wolf, M. (2018) <i>Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World</i> . Harper.	Valentine, Jean. “Sanctuary.”
Green, John. (2019). <i>Turtles All the Way Down</i> .		Whitman, Walt. “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life.”
Ness, Patrick. (2016). <i>The Rest of Us Just Live Here</i> .		
Niven, Jennifer. (2018) <i>Holding Up the Universe</i> .		
Silverman, Laura. (2019) <i>You Asked for Perfect</i> .		
Whaley, John Corey. (2017) <i>Highly Illogical Behavior</i> .		
Yoo, Paula. (2012). <i>Good Enough</i> .		

knew. She is outgoing, she is charismatic, and yes, she is happy. In retrospect, I wish her high school classrooms represented more than a vehicle for her to raise her GPA. I wish her teachers afforded more opportunity for discourse about what it means to be an adolescent. I wish her school didn't "rank" students according to their academic achievements. And yes, I wish I could have seen the signs of pressure overload. There are a series of things I would have done differently as an educator and a parent, in hindsight. Almost every day I meet a parent or teacher who knows an adolescent like Madelyn and the conversation always begins the same: "I had no idea..." It is time that we set aside what we deem is normal teenage struggle, all students, even our high-achieving ones, deserve a happy ending.

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