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Young Adult Literature and Early Teens: Meeting the Challenge of School Life

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Skipper was the oldest and most mature student in seventh grade. He was over six feet tall, smoked dope, cussed, and knew more about sex than anybody in class. Being seventh graders, we were impressed. We never knew whether *Skipper* was his given name or if he skipped so much school his mom, who frequented the school in her faded nightgown and bedroom slippers, nicknamed him that. We were, however, certain about two things: Skipper hated school and his mother was crazy.

Skipper reminds us that some students do not navigate school culture successfully. While some may journey through the early adolescent years relatively free of major obstacles, others are less fortunate and fall into Skipper's pattern: they struggle academically and socially, become discipline problems, turn to drugs, alcohol and sex, lose interest in school and/or drop out. Dilemmas in their personal lives affect how well they function in school. A host of issues such as self-image, relationships, family relocation, budding sexuality, intelligence and disabilities, et cetera, influence attitudes and school performance.

While English teachers are not counselors, we can provide opportunities for students to read and discuss issues that affect their school lives. Doing so may help some students better navigate school culture. What follows are discussions of six novels that can open doors for such discussions. These novels are unique in four ways: 1) School plays a central role in each story, providing more opportunities for students and teachers to talk about how personal issues carry over into school environments; 2) they are geared toward middle school readers—while high school students have similar concerns, early teens and older teens have different reading interests; 3) they are recent publications, providing the reader with new

titles to consider for classroom libraries; and 4) they deal with issues that have not been explored in depth in young adult literature.

Early Maturation

Every middle school has one: the twelve-year-old athlete who would pass for a seventeen-year-old jock. He is a coach's dream. While parents are proud, many fail to realize the pressure early developing boys can experience and how alienated they can feel. Without meaning harm, adults often expect them to act older and perform better athletically. Bigger boys, for example, should hit a baseball harder, throw harder, be better football players and act more mature. The pressure to excel can weigh heavily. Joan Bauer addresses this issue in *Stand Tall*.

The tallest seventh grader in the history of Eleanor Roosevelt Middle School, twelve-year-old Tree stands six-foot-three and a half inches tall. Great athletic feats are expected of him; unfortunately, he is not half the athlete of his two older brothers. No matter how hard he tries, he disappoints his coaches and his teammates. He struggles to find his place in school, on the basketball court and with his family. When a dam bursts, forcing community residents to flee low lying areas, Tree takes charge—helping his grandfather, a crippled Vietnam vet, to safety and helping community members save their loved animals.

Stand Tall is an excellent middle school read for both boys and girls. Boys and girls who supersede their classmates in development can relate to Tree's feelings of awkwardness and inadequacies. While teens like Tree are often envied by their classmates, others are jealous and like to see them fail. Many students do not understand the pressure associated with being physically more mature. *Stand Tall* raises questions about self image and expectations. Whether a teen is tall, short, overweight, freckled, et cetera, classroom discussions of Tree's experiences can show that everyone has a purpose and can find things he or she can do well. All teens, late bloomers included, may recognize they share common feelings despite physical differences.

Special Needs

Special needs students can have a brutal time in school. While teens may envy peers who appear to “have it all,” they sometimes shy away from or tease special needs students. While special needs students have appeared in a number of young adult novels, they are usually portrayed as being intellectually slow and/or having a physical disability. Until recently, little attention has been given to the needs of students with personality disorders. In *Not As Crazy As I Seem* by George Harrar, Devon Brown has obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). He is not slow or physically disabled; he does not fit the stereotype of the “dumb kid.”

Fifteen-year-old Devon has entered a new school, an expensive private institute, hoping for a fresh beginning. He attends regular therapy sessions; however, he is unable to get certain tendencies under control, most of which deal with cleanliness and order (e.g., doing everything in multiples of fours, washing his hands excessively, refusing to eat in the lunchroom because other people have used the trays and utensils).

Devon’s strange tendencies have prevented him from making friends; however, because his parents push him to make friends, Devon hooks up with Benjamin, a troubled youth who tricks Devon into accompanying him when he vandalizes the school. When the police and school administration blame Devon, Devon insists on his own innocence but will not expose Benjamin. No one believes him and he is suspended. In the end, Benjamin admits his crime and Devon begins working on his disorder.

I’m Not As Crazy As I Seem encourages discussion about prejudice that does not break along race lines. While Harrar’s novel can help students understand challenges facing individuals with OCD, sharing this novel with young teens may also encourage them to be more accepting of students with other disorders. Students who suffer from OCD or other disorders will welcome a character with whom they can relate.

Academic Failure

When teens move from elementary into middle school and high school, many make lower

grades (O’Reilly, 2001). Academic failure is attributed to the turmoil associated with the teen years, personal and family issues, as well as a change in school structure (O’Reilly, 2001).

While young adult novels abound with characters who do poorly academically, Jaye Murray’s debut novel, *Bottled Up*, illustrates that even under what feels like the worst possible circumstance, hope exists.

Pip is a sixteen-year-old with an alcoholic father and pill-popping mother who avoids thinking about his family life by skipping classes and smoking pot. After Pip avoids his teachers’ warnings to straighten up, Principal Girdaldi gives him an ultimatum: see a therapist or be expelled. Terrified of his alcoholic father, Pip agrees to see a counselor without his parents knowing. Angry, withdrawn and always stoned, Pip fears he will follow his parents’ destructive path. Principal Girdaldi, a caring teacher and an honor student who also takes therapy give Pip the support and structure he needs to begin changing.

Gritty and realistic, *Bottled Up* is a superb read for older middle school students who are on the brink of beginning high school. Students and teachers can discuss the powerful influence home environments play on school behavior and performance. While no novel should be used to preach or drive home issues, *Bottled Up* can create a safe place where early teens and teachers discuss factors that turn teens away from school. It is an excellent opportunity for students to talk about why they sometimes do not have their homework, why they did not study for tests, why they do not seem to care about school, et cetera. Students and teachers can discuss coping strategies and how individuals shape their own futures. As early teens prepare for high school, novels like *Bottled Up* can help them see they are in control of their own futures—they do not have to follow destructive paths chosen by their parents, siblings, or friends. The decisions they will make in high school will greatly influence their futures.

Transitions

One of the most difficult transitions for any teen is changing schools. While changing schools is

not easy, homeschooled teens, having limited experiences with “school culture,” have an even harder adjustment to make. Though the transition from home school to public or private can be frustrating, frightening and lonely, Susan Juby addresses the transition with humor in her first novel, *Alice, I Think*.

Fifteen-year-old Alice MacLeod has been homeschooled since first grade. To help her adjust to the public school system, her overly protective parents and inept therapist enter her in an alternative school program. Describing herself as a “social retard,” Alice maintains a journal in which she describes annoyances, her fears of public school, her struggles with her parents, her first boyfriend, and her therapist. Alice shares her concerns: Can she socialize with other students? How should she dress? Can she find a distinctive look? What about boys? Her future? A career?

Alice, I Think is smart, totally original, and told in laser-sharp language. Alice’s description of her know-it-all, motormouth first boyfriend, her unconventional mother’s physical encounter with Alice’s first grade adversary, Alice’s new haircut and clothes, her wacky female cousin, Frank, who wears a half-bald feather boa and silver slippers horseback riding, and her family’s experiences with their first computer are a few side-splitting vignettes in Juby’s novel.

Though an amusing look at an outcast teen trying to make her way in school, *Alice, I Think* addresses concerns that homeschooled students may have when entering the public school system. Alice confronts bullies, feels uneasy around boys and yearns for that “special” look other girls will envy. The light nature of the story may encourage teens to be a little easier on themselves, to laugh at some of their own mistakes. Though only a fraction of students transition from home school to public school, any student who has ever changed schools can relate to Alice’s concerns.

Bullying

Bullying is addressed often in young adult literature. While dozens of novels can be used to

discuss this serious issue, few, if any, novels feature protagonists taking positive actions to reduce and or eliminate school/student harassment. In *The Revealers* by Doug Wilhelm, however, three bullied students take action.

Seventh grader Russell Trainor believes middle school is a place where teens try to survive: “If you have no hope of being accepted in a cool clique, or any clique for that matter, you’re safest if you can manage not to get noticed at all” (10). Bullied by Richie Tucker after school, Russell tries in vain to find a safe route home. When he fails, he seeks advice from Elliot Gekewicz, a fellow classmate tormented by bullies since grade school.

Russell and Elliot befriend Catalina Aarons, a new student at Parkland Middle School, when they discover she is being harassed too. Using the school’s LAN line, KidNet, they send a letter Catalina writes about being bullied to the entire school. Soon, other students email their own stories and the Bully Lab begins, an electronic bulletin board where students share their personal stories about being bullied. When the trio publishes an anonymous letter identifying Bethany DeMere, a mean-spirited popular girl who torments Catalina, they are threatened by her father, an attorney. Given two weeks notice, they are told they will no longer have access to KidNet. The trio, however, will not be stopped. Having two weeks left, they use the network to develop a science project about bullying. When they win the contest, the principal is forced to maintain the network.

Bullying is no longer seen as a harmless schoolyard game. It can have lasting effects on victims; moreover, those who bully often commit other crimes as they mature. While elementary students are protected more, middle school students are less sheltered. Early teens usually enter larger schools and meet new faces. They have new freedoms. What were once childish schoolyard pranks can suddenly develop into dangerous stunts.

While bullying may be a difficult subject to address in the classroom, it is nonetheless an important one that students need opportunities to discuss. Though novels about bullying are popular and plentiful, *The Revealers* is worth reading because

the central characters take action against their tormentors. They do not simply “get even.” Rather, they establish a plan through which the entire school begins talking about harassment. Though the principal’s actions and attitudes are unrealistic, the fact students become empowered and promote change in the school makes the novel valuable. Students who are harassed see a good example of what can happen when they stand together against abuse. More importantly, they see the empowerment that comes with opening up and not remaining silent.

Student/Teacher Relationships

Middle school is a time of growing sexual awareness. While boys and girls may have had their first crushes on teachers in elementary, their feelings (and often reactions) toward teachers they admire become more sexual in middle school. While most infatuations are harmless, occasionally a student and/or teacher takes a situation too far. Inexperienced in relationships, teens can sometimes find themselves in impossible situations. E.R. Frank addresses this topic in *Friction*.

Twelve-year-old Alex and her classmates at Forest Alternative, a private school, believe Simon is the greatest teacher. Young, energetic and handsome, Simon is more like a classmate than teacher. When Stacy, a new girl who is secretly sexually abused by her father, starts sexual rumors about Simon and Alex following a camping trip, neither Alex or her friends know how to act. A series of events causes Alex to re-evaluate Simon’s responses toward her and she begins questioning whether Stacy could be right. After Stacy has an accident and Simon carries her into the building for treatment, she accuses Simon of molesting both her and Alex. Alex is so confused and scared she cannot say his intent was not sexual. Simon, bitter and angry, leaves the school.

Friction illustrates serious consequences of inappropriate teacher/student behavior and the power of rumors and how hurtful words can have lasting consequences—whether those words are truthful or not. While the novel may be controversial in some middle grades classroom, such topics cannot be dealt with realistically otherwise.

Conclusion

While some early teens pass through middle school and successfully complete high school with minimum difficulty, others encounter major obstacles along the way that affect their attitudes toward school and their performance. Bringing novels into the classroom that speak to issues that impact students at school may help students deal with school life better. Teachers may also wish to examine novels that offer strong teachers as mentors and witnesses. Though teachers cannot solve teens’ personal problems or create a perfect school climate, they can help make the journey less difficult; they can also get to know their students better by allowing them to talk about their lives through story.

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