

## LAJM Review of MS #2077

### “Literature Circles: Utilizing Chris Crutcher to Empower Youth”

#### Overview of the Argument and Review

You argue that *adolescence* as a social construct often generates an “adolescent/adult binary” that leads to repercussions, particularly “constricting the possible give-and-take flow between adolescents and adults” (and implicitly, among students). Further, you state that by exploring selected YA texts (e.g., Chris Crutcher novels) in a classroom setting adolescent students will gain insights into the “terms that pigeonhole them and begin to look for ways to undo these entrenched narratives independently or in concert with adults.” YA literature can become a “crucial site,” a “window” through which to have “authentic intergenerational dialogues” for the purposes of viewing others and “to imagine, to empathize, to learn different ways to live [or perceive] a life.” Therefore, you initiate ambitious goals of examining dominant discourses centered on adolescence and suggesting literacy practices that might lead to solutions for widening the typically narrow view and limited number of characterizations of adolescents.

The manuscript’s foundational argument and suggested study unit are intriguing, and I think the manuscript will add to the discussion of how teachers might use YA literature to explore with the students the social construction of adolescence and adolescents. However, I recommend three main revisions: one that focuses on the role of the teacher/adult; one that addresses YA literature as an agent vs. authors, readers, and students/teachers as agents; and the role of values constructed through the processes you describe.

#### Role of Teacher/Adult

After reading the first two pages, I recognized two underlying, unstated tensions: (1) although adolescents’ lives may be “essentialized” by adults who “control the discourse of adulthood,” etc., adolescents are legally positioned as lacking experience, control, judgment, etc.; they are young people who require legal and adult supervision, including by teachers in schools—in fact, teachers are expected to *control* students, at least in terms of safety; and, (2) that adolescents are defined by their literacy needs (e.g., Karen Wood & William Blanton, *Literacy Instruction for Adolescents*, 2009, p. 43). The more interesting tension for your argument is the former, especially since a “two-week literature circle study” unit implies a school-based activity led and initiated by an adult. Although this may seem obvious, it is worth building into your argument because the implied teacher/adult is one who recognizes the narrowness and potential constraints of the “machinations behind” particular views of adolescence; and this teacher understands how knowledge is discursively constructed (i.e., through the “give-and-take” of intergenerational classroom conversations). Furthermore, the teacher has the confidence to put him or herself into a role of student, especially for purposes of modeling inquiry processes and uncovering whatever might be discovered through discursive interactions (as readers, discussants, and writers).

Therefore, consider building discussion into the manuscript about the unique role of the teacher in initiating local literacy practices that will encourage exploration of adolescence in YA texts, including knowledge of contextual layers contributing to the findings.

#### Agents that Contribute to the Dialogic Approach

Next, I was intrigued by the role of YA literature as an agent. In other words, you depict YA literature as becoming a “fixture” in schools, among other places, and earning a “larger sphere of influence.” You raise questions about whether or not YA literature foregrounds or

blurs “widespread assumptions about adolescence,” or if it contributes to the “ghettoization of youth.” (By the way, consider “marginalization of youth.”) You state that YA literature “can deconstruct” selected discourse; however, implicitly you are raising questions about how YA authors construct adolescents in their texts—which you begin to more effectively discuss with examples from the works of Levithan, Johnson, and Crutcher. Similar to questions raised about how authors portray adolescents, you suggest questions about the way teachers organize study units and classroom literacy practices, and how students take up these practices and read and interpret the texts for their purposes, which include addressing classroom norms and expectations. In other words, the argument that YA literature can become a “crucial site” for exploration of how adolescence is constructed, portrayed, discussed, etc. is the more important critical perspective—not the apparent agency of YA literature.

So, consider reshaping how you describe YA literature: instead of presenting it as an agent, consider beginning with how authors construct adolescents (i.e., how the process is understood—e.g., as you mention, sometimes authors create characters based on personal experience or “commonsensical understandings of the adolescent experience”). You might, for example, move the question on p. 4 (“...how do such texts represent young people”) to the beginning of the section where YA literature is introduced (bottom of p. 2/top of p. 3).

### **The Role of Constructed Values**

One final consideration for your argument. The goals suggested by adapting this unit (e.g., learn “to imagine, to empathize, to learn different ways to live a life”) represent preferred values. Similarly, values emerge from the represented examples and provide insights into norms and expectations of particular communities (e.g., in Johnson’s book, that parents should do “not what is best for [them] but what is best for [their] family,” p. 5). As you consider revising the manuscript to include the role authors, teachers, students, etc. play in (re)constructing perceptions, definitions, or characterizations of adolescence, describe how values are constructed through the process. In other words, what *counts*, for example, as being a mature or responsible person (whether an “adult” or “adolescent”) include values or qualities that are constructed through interactions among community members over time.

### **A Suggestion for the Unit Plan**

A few words on the unit plan. Consider the literacy practices embedded in your argument and align those with the unit plan. For example, you mention that Crutcher’s novels provide the opportunity “to consider counter-examples to the dominant discourse on adolescence.” In other words, one of the practices that you value is that students should learn to read from, or observe, different perspectives, particularly ones that challenge the norm. Of course, the unit plan implies this practice, but it might be interesting and useful to make more concrete three or four classroom practices that will guide teachers who are attempting to generate the rich conversations that you suggest.

One final note. Many of the stereotypical characterizations you mention are the more traditional ones. Consider adding examples of current characterizations (e.g., the techno or science nerd (I’m not sure of the label), or other pop culture roles that appear on television and have made their way into YA literature. Your manuscript has the potential to equip teachers with a critical frame and literacy practices that could prove pivotal in reshaping how adolescence is discussed, defined, etc. and how adolescents are positioned, by themselves and others. I enjoyed reading your manuscript and thinking about the topic.