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Mirrors & Maps: Using YA Literature to Navigate Risks in Adolescent Life

Lesley Roessing

Armstrong State University, lesley.roessing@armstrong.edu

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Mirrors & Maps: Using Young Adult Literature to Navigate Risks in Adolescent Life

Every child should see himself in a book. Some books provide a mirror and reflect their lives, to show them that they count and are valuable, helping adolescents discover identity. Other literature can help children and teens work through problems by mirroring risks and issues in their lives and allowing them consider and analyze how others—the characters—cope with those same issues, in constructive and detrimental ways—facilitating safe discussions about those choices and providing maps to help them navigate their worlds. Some risks faced by teens that are topics of YA literature are family and peer relationships, societal demands and moral issues, body image, LGBT topics, learning differences, mental illness, and surviving trauma and loss.

YA literature allows adolescents to mirror themselves in books, safely discussing problems in their lives through conversations about how characters handle/mishandle problems. Novels provide maps to navigate risks and issues experienced by teens. The presenter, a former middle-grades teacher and author of *No More "Us" and "Them,"* teaches Bibliotherapy and will share Young Adult novels/memoirs and strategies that focus discussions on risks contemporary adolescents face.

YA literature can be employed as bibliotherapy; teachers, counselors, and advisors can employ novels and memoirs as mirrors and maps to help adolescents navigate risks they face and issues in their lives by seeing themselves in books and safely discussing how characters handled or mishandled issues and faced risks, such as relationships, adversity, loss, trauma, mental and physical challenges, drugs, societal demands, and moral dilemmas. The presenter, a former middle school teacher, designed and teaches a bibliotherapy course and will share Young Adult novels and memoirs that focus on issues that contemporary adolescents face, leading participants through two strategies to generate conversations about issues adolescents face and help readers discover alternatives to dealing with risks.

Participants will be introduced to high-interest Middle Grade/Young Adult books categorized by issues presented, many published within the last few years, that are written on a variety of reading levels and in a variety of genres, such as verse novels and graphica, in order to engage even reluctant readers in reading and discussing literature and these issues.

Samples of strategies and activities that address both the academic and emotional aspects of learning and effectively facilitate discussions about characters and the divergent ways they deal with issues—such as writing I Am poetry from a character's perspective and drafting Poems in Two Voices to compare/contrast the reader and a characters—will be shared, and time allowing, attempted by participants. Book clubs and methods for facilitating effectual book club discussions will be introduced. Student samples of some of the activities that were employed with adolescents will also be shared.

Evidence:

The proposal is based on the writings and findings of many people.

YA Author Walter Dean Myers wrote, "Books transmit values. They explore our common humanity.... They [young people who have said they love my books] have been struck by the recognition of themselves in the story, a validation of their existence as human beings, an acknowledgment of their value by someone who understands who they are. It is the shock of recognition at its highest level." (Walter Dean Myers, "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books," *Sunday Review*, NY Times)

His son, author Christopher Myers wrote, "They [children I meet in schools visits] see books less as mirrors and more as maps. They are indeed searching for their place in the world, but they are also

deciding where they want to go. They create, through the stories they're given, an atlas of their world, of their relationships to others, of their possible destinations. (Christopher Myers, "The Apartheid of Children's Literature," Sunday Review, NY Times).

In his Introduction to *How Beautiful the Ordinary*, a collection of short stories featuring LGBTQ characters, editor Michael Cart wrote, "There are countless reasons for reading, but when you're young and uncertain of your identity, of who you may be, one of the most compelling is the quest to discover yourself in the pages of a book. What a comfort that provides, seeing that you are not alone, that you are not—as you had feared—the only one of a kind."

Joan Kaywell in her article "Books Save Lives—I'm Living Proof" in *Connections*, Vol. 51, No.1, referred to her book *Adolescents at Risk: A Guide to Fiction and Nonfiction for Young Adults, Parents, and Professionals* ((1993) as well as a series to which she was Series Advisor on using literature to help troubled teens cope with a variety of issues.

Presenter Biography:

Lesley Roessing was a middle school teacher for over 20 years and now serves as Founding Director of the Coastal Savannah Writing Project and a Senior Lecturer in the College of Education at Armstrong State University (now Georgia Southern University). She has taught Adolescent Literature to pre-service teachers and developed and teaches a course on Bibliotherapy for the Child & Family Studies program. Ms. Roessing is the author of four books for teachers: *The Write to Read: Response Journals that Increase Comprehension*; *No More "Us" & "Them": Classroom Lessons and Activities to Promote Peer Respect*; *Comma Quest*; *The Rules They Followed*; *The Sentences They Changed*; and *Bridging the Gap: Reading Critically & Writing Meaningfully to Get to the Core*, as well as many articles and guest blogs on literacy, YA literature, and student engagement. She is also a columnist for *AMLE Magazine*, a publication of the Association of Middle Level Education.

bibliotherapy, identity, problem solving, adolescents, Young Adult literature, engagement, counseling, meaningful discussion, adolescent issues, reluctant readers

problem solving, literature, adolescents, reading, YA-lit-as-maps, empathy, mirrors and windows, bibliotherapy, engagement, counseling, meaningful discussion