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More than Academic: Texts for Teens

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Abstract: Middle and high school students are dealing with many heavy issues and topics daily – and we’re noticing the strain this is putting on their mental health -- yet there are several texts that can be used to help middle grades students develop decision making skills and coping strategies. Teaching reading and writing with books like these in classrooms can help students build a sense of empathy and compassion for others, along with offering them opportunities for contemplation and reflection. Plus, these experiences can also allow students a safe space to invite dialogue and discussion about topics that are part of their worlds.

Keywords: literature, text sets, engagement, social and emotional needs, diversity, empathy, resiliency

Introduction

Today’s young adults are balancing several issues, many that are not related to their academic endeavors, and we are noticing the strain this is putting on their mental health. In fact, over 70% of adolescents indicated that anxiety and depression were a major problem amongst their peers (Pew Research Center, 2019). Other noted concerns included bullying, drug and alcohol addiction, poverty, teen pregnancy, and gangs. While academic demands are still a source of stress for middle and secondary students (Pew Research Center, 2019), it is apparent that today’s adolescents are carrying burdens that aren’t only academic in nature.

In an effort to equip students with the needed tools and strategies for these numerous societal influences and stressors, educators can plan, develop, and implement instructional engagements in their classrooms that, while standards and academic based, serve a far greater purpose than the acquisition of literacy skills. Instead, with learning opportunities that focus on the education of the whole child, we can begin to offer another place for adolescents to lay down some of the heavy burdens they carry with them, as we attend not only to their academic needs, but their social and emotional health, which can have impacts on their academic achievement, civic engagement, and facilitate movement towards social justice endeavors. Utilizing literature that addresses these societal issues can offer students the space to begin dialogue and discussion about those matters that encompass more than the academic demands; they can also

serve as vessels for critical reflection and consideration of the social and emotional needs of our students.

While today’s pedagogical considerations often take up social justice as a means in which to move students to activism and civic engagement, before this type of engagement can occur, students’ own social and emotional needs must be first considered. Utilizing contemporary literature to ascertain and acknowledge the depth and breadth of worldly issues can offer powerful moments for students to consider these narratives as reflections of their own worlds. This provides spaces for conversation and action beginning in the classroom but moving beyond the school walls. While social justice teaching in some cases is restricted to theory with little practical teaching application, Freire (2001) reminds us that, “Right thinking requires right doing” (p.1). Creating spaces for learning that involves more than the acquisition of academic skills can be part of this “right doing,” Freire described.

One way that middle grades teachers can address the academic and individual needs of students is by incorporating literature into their instruction that addresses timely topics along with titles that focus on life skills and decision making. Utilizing text sets and mentor texts for mini lessons can aid teachers in constructing lessons that meet the academic demands standard sets require, while also offering students additional opportunities to engage and respond to quality literature. Access to high quality literature from classroom libraries can have extended benefits, as students who are given opportunities to read inside of school are more likely to read outside of school as well (Catapano, Fleming, & Elias, 2009; Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, & Teale, 1993; Reutzell & Fawson, 2002). In fact, students who have access to diverse books read 50-60% more than their peers (ILA, 2018).

Allowing students choice when it comes to the selection of titles as well as access to diverse titles is especially important for striving readers and underrepresented student populations. Research indicates that when students have a variety of books readily available to them and are allowed choice and avenues for dialogue and discussion amongst their peers, more students will read willingly (Brooks & Frankel, 2019; Guthrie & Humenic, 2004; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Freire (1970) asserted that dialogue has transformative power for individual identities and identity construction and can aid in the formation of collaborative communities in which these revelations may occur. Creating this community through dialogue can only occur when students are able to “speak their world” (Freire, 1970, p. 88). For some students, their realities may be different from their peers or may include challenges that they find difficult to openly discuss. While many educators are aware of what Moll and colleagues (2006) describe as rich “funds of knowledge” that students possess, it is those “dark funds of knowledge” (Zipin, 2009) that many teachers wrestle with. Literature becomes a natural vehicle to capitalize on our student interests and needs, while also addressing their funds of knowledge, both light and dark.

Text sets are resources collected by the teacher that span a variety of reading levels, genres, and perspectives and often include multiple types of media centered around a common theme. Utilizing books in middle grades classrooms can offer several benefits to students in a variety of settings but are especially beneficial in the times following the pandemic. With students emerging from what could be described as a fragmented and destabilizing educational experience during COVID, returning to the traditional school routines can be challenging. In some cases, behavior issues can be a battle, while the social adjustments required can be frustrating for some. With this in mind, we have compiled a variety of texts that can be used to help attend to students' emotional and social needs, while also acknowledging the challenges exacerbated following the pandemic. Plus, as many students learn to re-navigate the face-to-face social world after considerable time online, and in many cases, isolation from their peers, offering students opportunities to engage in discourse with their peers, while also addressing many of their social and emotional needs, can prove beneficial.

You'll notice that several of these books in the text set are picture books, which is purposeful due to the fact that picture books serve as unthreatening modes of delivery for material. Knowing that some middle grades students are reading below grade level, the incorporation of these books helps to remove this potential barrier. Additionally, teachers may choose to extend this lesson idea by allowing students to create their own picture book on a social topic. Using picture books in the original text set offers students the ability to make note of the features and characteristics of this particular genre which they can then transfer into a writing composition of their own. Below are some sample texts that can be included in a text set that focuses on decision making, mental health, and social emotional learning.

After the Fall: How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again

Santat's (2017) children's book focuses on the familiar fairy tale favorite, Humpty Dumpty, but this time, we get the rest of the story. Told in beautiful illustrations and vivid text, readers learn how Humpty's fall has affected him since the event. Afraid to venture out a because he is fearful of getting hurt



again, he begins missing out on the activities he loved the most.

After a while, Humpty realizes exactly what he is missing out on due to his fear and he decides to venture out and try again. This book is a fantastic example of resiliency and the power of conquering fear. Plus, since the storyline focuses on a character who's known mostly for his tragic fall,

this allows readers to see that their shortcomings or mistakes don't have to define them; instead, they can write the rest of their stories. Failures don't have to be defining moments, but rather opportunities for learning, reflection, and change.

Scholastic Choices: I Did It Without Thinking

Hugel (2008) compiled true stories from teens who have made rash decisions without thinking and how that impacted their lives. Within the book, a variety of teenage students share their accounts, both positive and negative, that impacted them. Some share about getting a tattoo while others share about helping the homeless. The teens reflect on their choices after they have occurred and, at times, wished they could have done things a little differently.



The book not only gives students a chance to hear from other students just like them, possibly making similar decisions as them, but also see the regret and pain the choices have brought upon themselves. Plus, it gives a first-hand account of how taking time to make decisions not only can help you at the moment but also long term, saving yourself from years of regret.

Princess Princess Ever After

O'Neill (2020) takes us on a journey of two unlikely friends; Princess Amira is a strong, warrior-like character whereas Princess Sadie is more of the sweet and kind type. Princess Amira helps rescue Princess Sadie from a town and the two set off on their adventure to rescue others. The story puts a spin on the traditional "save the princess" storyline. Instead of the traditional fairy tale components, which are often gendered, this graphic novel shakes things up. These princesses save a prince in distress, deviate from the violence of slaying an ogre, and instead engage in dialogue and teach him to dance among other adventures.



This graphic novel blends several different aspects of decision-making into a single storyline with diverse storylines and LGBTQ characters. It touches on the decision to act ethically, like when Sadie convinced Amira to help save the prince. It also

addresses the pressures of pleasing parents and sometimes making choices that best serve yourself. Plus, it includes traditionally oppressed populations in the characters: LGBTQ+, African American, and female. The story allows readers to see that how you treat others and the choices you make go a long way.

Extra Yarn

Barnett and Klassen (2018) share a touching story of a young girl's impact on her community through a magical box of yarn. The story starts with a black and white town, until Annabelle uses the yarn to "beautify" the streets. She makes a sweater for herself and her dog and another for a bully and his dog, who quickly changes his mind about the sweaters. At school, Annabelle is turning heads and distracting the class so she knits a sweater for all of her peers (and the teacher) and still had more yarn. People travel from all over after hearing about the amazing yarn that Annabelle had that never ran out. Later, a duke offers ten million dollars to purchase it from her, but she denies the request. The duke steals the yarn and when he arrives back home, the box is empty. He throws the box out of the tower in anger, and it floats across the water back to

Annabelle, where she continues to knit with the yarn.

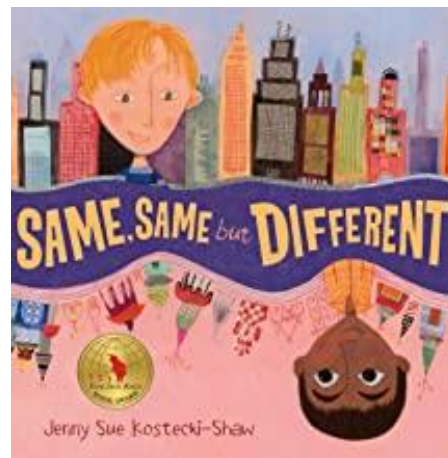


This story truly is that of giving. Annabelle always had a little extra to give her community, never knowing when she would run out. She continued to knit

sweaters for all and found joy in doing so. The story shows students that doing for others not only brings them joy but also yourself while giving them purpose. Others may try and steal what you are doing as their own, but it is only you who has the ability to do what you do. Students who are learning about decision-making can see the impact on the community in a fresh light with a creative story.

Same, Same but Different

Elliot and Kailash live on opposite sides of the world with very different ways of living; however, they find commonality in many of their hobbies and everyday routines. Through pen pal-like correspondence, Kostecki-Shaw (2012) tells the story of two boys sharing what their world looks like, such as their passion for climbing trees. One boy climbs in a backyard with a treehouse and the other in the forest with monkeys; they find that even though they do not have the exact same experiences, they both love climbing. Through a series of other similar experiences, the two boys recognize they are from different cultures but have so much in common, forming a friendship from across the ocean.

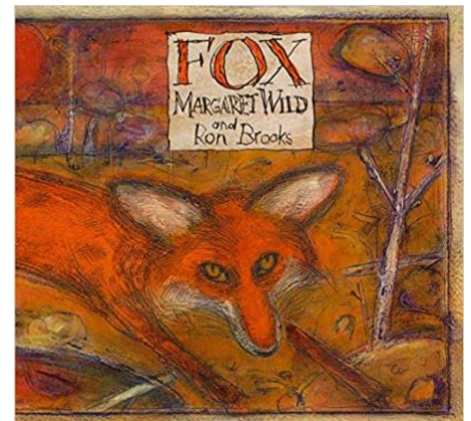


This picture book gives students a chance to see that no matter how different we might think we all are, we are more similar than different. The story gives a chance for reflection for students to relate to the characters and think about the friendships

they have. Especially in diverse populations, students can see that although they might come from different home environments and cultural practices, they can connect on some level. As students build their decision-making skills, they are able to see how they can treat others that seem different; they can not only bridge the gap between them but possibly form friendships as well.

Fox

Wild's (2008) picture book offers multiple opportunities for rich discussion. Unsettling, yet hopeful, *Fox* follows the characters of the magpie, dog, and fox and the impact of their brief encounter and interactions. A stunning work that addresses trust, loyalty, betrayal, and hope, this picture book is one that is certainly not for young readers. Its abrupt ending doesn't have the typical bedtime story resolution, which offers multiple chances for students to discuss the complexity of the relationships and the consequences of decisions as well as the impact decisions may have on those around us.



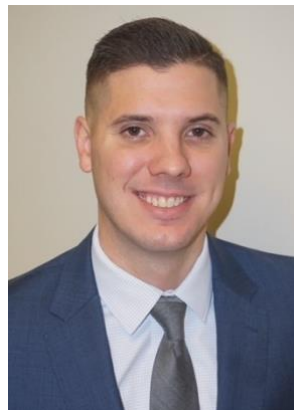
Conclusion

While these suggested books are only a few of the possible texts that can be integrated into middle school classrooms, these can provide students with opportunities for discussion and reflection, while also addressing world and societal concerns. Because dialogue and discussion can be transformative for students and since literature can allow students to engage and interact with a variety of characters, books such as these are invaluable in the classroom. By attending to our students' social and emotional needs, we can begin to better prepare them for the challenges of the world.

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