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Engaging adolescents in mental health discussions through young adult literature: A literature review

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***Abstract:** This literature review explores the potential of using young adult literature (YAL) as a vehicle for engaging adolescents in mental health discussions by viewing it through the lenses of bibliotherapy and counter-storytelling. In bibliotherapy, books are used to promote mental health and emotional well-being. This includes the use of fiction to provide young readers with opportunities to address their personal struggles through fictional characters rather than directly confronting their own experiences. Counter-stories are narratives belonging to groups whose stories are not typically heard in society. These narratives give members of marginalized groups a voice while also allowing members of the majority group to access perspectives outside of their own experiences. This paper concludes with a discussion about gaps in current research on adolescent mental health and YAL and the need to access adolescent perspectives on mental health for mental health support and intervention programs.*

Keywords: adolescents, mental health, young adult literature

There is a growing body of research investigating the influence of school environments on adolescent mental health including specific effects on academic and social spheres (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2015; Cole, Maxwell, Dukwich, & Yosick, 2010; Frojd et al., 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck, Hunter, Waters, & Pronk, 2009). Additionally, studies show that school-based interventions have positive effects on improving student mental health (Listug-Lunde, Vogeltanz-Holm, & Collins, 2013) and in reducing mental health stigma (Perry et al., 2014; Sakellari, Sourander, Kalokerinou-Anagnostopoulou, & Leino-Kilpi, 2014). These studies provide valuable insight regarding the role school environments play in determining and promoting mental wellness amongst adolescents. What is lacking from these studies is an adolescent perspective into specific experiences with mental health.

A tool that can help researchers and practitioners access how adolescents navigate and understand mental health topics is young adult literature (YAL). YAL appeals to the

interests, experiences, and perspectives of adolescents and has therefore been of particular interest to a growing number of researchers and practitioners for its potential to engage students in critical thinking (Bach, Choate, & Parker, 2011; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). This literature review will investigate the potential of using YAL as a means of understanding how adolescents engage in discussions about mental health and mental well-being by viewing YAL through the lenses of bibliotherapy and counter-storytelling. Bibliotherapy and counter-storytelling will be explored by first unpacking their historical/theoretical backgrounds followed by a discussion of current literature. This paper concludes with a discussion on gaps in the research.

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is the practice of integrating book use into therapy to promote mental wellness. Historically, bibliotherapy has its origins in clinical settings in which fiction and non-fiction texts (e.g., self-help books and brochures) are used to support adult patients (Cuijpers, 1997; Jack & Ronan, 2008). One of the earliest records of book use in patient treatment was documented in 1272 at the Al-Mansur Hospital in Cairo where readings from *The Koran* were integrated into patient treatment. The term “*bibliotherapy*” first appeared in 1916 when Rev. Samuel McChord Crothers used it to describe the process in which a patient reads prescribed material and then discusses it with a therapist (Jack & Ronan, 2008). While the majority of studies regarding bibliotherapy have focused on its use with adult populations, bibliotherapy has also been effective in the treatment of children and adolescents with mental health struggles.

In a randomized depression prevention trial, 341 participants (ages 14-19 years) with elevated depressive symptoms received either a brief group cognitive-behavioural intervention, a group supportive-expressive intervention, bibliotherapy, or assessment only (Stice, Rohde, Seeley, & Gau, 2008). In the bibliotherapy intervention, participants received copies of *Feeling Good* by David D. Burns— a self-help book outlining cognitive-behavioural strategies for preventing and treating depression. Participants in the bibliotherapy intervention group did not receive professional support during their reading of *Feeling Good*, but were invited to highlight or annotate their copy of the book. In comparison to the assessment-only group, participants in the cognitive-behavioural, supportive-expressive, and bibliotherapy groups showed a lower risk for major depression onset over the six-month follow-up period. Additionally, participants in the supportive-expressive and bibliotherapy groups showed greater reductions in depressive symptoms than did the assessment-only control group.

Rapee, Abbott, and Lyneham (2006) found parallel findings in a randomized controlled trial in which 267 clinically anxious children (ages 6-12 years) received either standard group treatment, bibliotherapy, or were placed on a waitlist for treatment. The parents of children with anxiety disorders conducted a bibliotherapy intervention using the book *Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide* by Ann Wignall, Heidi J. Lyneham, Ronald M. Rapee, Susan Spence, and Vanessa Cobham which describes anxiety

management strategies and how to guide children through them. Participants in the bibliotherapy intervention group experienced greater benefits than participants in the waitlist control group that received no treatment. While these studies highlight the effectiveness of non-fiction bibliotherapy amongst children and adolescents, there is also a growing body of research on the use of bibliotherapy with fictional texts to aid children and youth with their emotional development.

A study exploring bibliotherapy as a means of coping with bullying revealed that children's fiction about bullying has the potential to help students by providing them with characters that they can identify with on a cognitive and emotional level. These books give children a channel through which they can more easily access and discuss bullying rather than directly addressing their own experiences (Flanagan et al., 2013). Flanagan et al. suggest that bibliotherapy can be used in conjunction with other school interventions to prevent bullying and support students.

Paralleling these findings, a case study conducted by Stewart and Ames (2014) explored the use of culturally affirming and thematically appropriate bibliotherapy with elementary school aged African American children traumatized by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Stewart and Ames found that participants began the process of rebuilding their self-awareness and self-esteem by identifying with the strong and resilient characters in children's books. Echoing Flanagan et al.'s (2013) observations, Stewart and Ames noted that participants in this study were able to articulate and process their emotions regarding their trauma/displacement by attaching their feelings onto the characters of the books prior to identifying those feelings in their own lives. One participant, DJ, identified with the character Maxie from *Drita, My Home Girl* by Jenny Lombard as they both live in a single-parent household, though under different circumstances (DJ's parents are separated while Maxie is being raised by her father due to her mother's death). DJ expressed that she could not share her feelings with her friends as they were struggling with their own troubles and trauma. Reading *Drita, My Home Girl* gave DJ an emotional outlet through which to explore her feelings.

Hebert and Kent (2000) investigated the use of developmental bibliotherapy with gifted children. Unlike the aforementioned studies by Flanagan et al. (2013) and Stewart and Ames (2014), the selected text in Hebert and Kent's study does not center on specific difficult or traumatic experiences but instead focuses on the theme of friendship. The adolescent participants of this study empathetically connected to characters in the novel because of the experiences the characters had in the story regarding their friendship (particularly one character's support of a friend who was undergoing treatment for cancer): a connection made despite the participants not having any personal experiences with cancer. This shows that imaginative engagement with fiction helps cultivate self-awareness and self-identity regardless of specific or direct connections with the reader's situation, which can cultivate well-being in the reader.

Central to the findings of these studies is the participants' ability to cope and understand emotionally difficult situations through identification with characters that are

of similar age and in similar situations. It is within this connection between personal and fictional narratives that participants cultivated a dialogue regarding their own experiences. Although these studies do not address the specific concerns of adolescent mental health and how YAL in particular can be used to support adolescents, their investigations into the use of bibliotherapy with children through children's literature is valuable for understanding how age-appropriate fiction can potentially be used to aid in the socio-emotional well-being of adolescents.

Counter-Storytelling

Taken from critical race theory, counter-storytelling is a method of telling stories about those in the margins of society whose experiences are not often heard. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-stories as stories that incorporate the five elements of critical race theory: the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination, the challenge to dominant ideology, the commitment to social justice, the centrality of experiential knowledge, and the transdisciplinary perspective. Hughes-Hassell (2013) argues that multicultural YAL is a valuable source of counter-storytelling for adolescents of colour since it provides narratives that reflect the experiences of adolescents of colour and challenges social/cultural stereotypes; it provides opportunities for adolescents of colour to discuss racial/social issues without directly addressing their own experiences. In this way, counter-storytelling connects to bibliotherapy since identifying with characters in their reading experience of the text is a source of empowerment. Representation of marginalized people through fiction is a main element of counter-storytelling and, although speaking specifically about multicultural YAL, Hughes-Hassell's analysis of multicultural YAL as counter-storytelling can be applied to other oppressed or underrepresented groups.

In a qualitative study exploring the experiences of LGBT multi-parent families, counter-stories were framed as the lived narratives that LGBT parents shared with others when they engaged in community events and activities (Vaccaro, 2010). In sharing their lives and experiences with other parents (both heterosexual and LGBT) through formal and informal interactions, the parents in this study created counter-stories in making visible their experiences which are unrepresented in heteronormative discourse. Vaccaro argues that sharing their lived counter-stories with other LGBT families is an important form of activism since the LGBT parents in this study did not have role models when they became parents and can therefore become role models for other potential LGBT parents through their counter-stories. Additionally, Campbell (2008), in an article theorizing how critical race theory can be used to understand the experiences and consequences of internalized ableism by drawing parallels to internalized racism, pays particular attention to the potential of using counter-stories in which individuals with disabilities are depicted as successful in spite of their disability.

Vaccaro (2010) and Campbell (2008) both apply counter-storytelling to marginalized groups as a method of empowerment through representation. By engaging

readers in stories in which their typically unrepresented experiences are portrayed, counter-storytelling offers a way to understand how adolescents engage with and respond to YAL with mental health themes. However, counter-stories are also important for cultivating understanding amongst adolescents from majority groups since, through voicing the authentic experiences of marginalized adolescents, YAL counter-stories illuminate alternative experiences (Hughes-Hassell, 2013).

In a study conducted by Munson, Floersch, and Townsend (2009), seventy adolescents from the greater Cleveland area were interviewed using the Illness Perception Questionnaire-Revised and the Inventory of Attitudes Toward Seeking Mental Health Services to examine the relationships between demographics, clinical characteristics, perceptions of illness and attitudes. One of the findings from this study is that adolescents with mood disorders were found to have greater negative emotions towards their mental illness if they experienced more stigma. As such, YAL counter-stories with mental health themes have the potential to be a powerful combatant against peer-related stigma since, as aforementioned, it gives non-marginalized adolescents the opportunity to perceive experiences outside of their own and thus build empathy and understanding.

The capacity to build empathy through YAL was found in a study exploring the phenomenological experiences of English speaking Malaysian secondary school students as they studied *Step by Wicked Step* by Anne Fine, *Catch Us if You Can* by Catherine McPhail, and *The Curse* by Lee Su Ann (Govindarajoo & Mukundan, 2013). Govindarajoo and Mukundan describe the students' reading experiences as emotional exchanges between the students and the adolescent characters. As a result, students developed close, protective kinships with the adolescent characters which suggests that reading texts with adolescent protagonists connected to students on an intimately emotional level. The researchers noted that emotional responses were elicited from students even if they were not in the same situation as the characters in the novel. This is a meaningful finding as it suggests that the adolescent participants were able to develop an empathetic understanding of others through their YAL reading experiences.

Corroborating these findings, Guarisco and Freeman (2015) conducted a study in which eighty sixth grade students from a high-tuition independent school in Baton Rouge, Louisiana were found to have increased levels of empathy after reading the novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. *Wonder* features the story of Auggie, a middle school student with facial deformities, as he transitions to a new school after being homeschooled for several years. The story is told by multiple narrators and was selected by the researchers since the multi-character narrative provided students with ample opportunities to empathize with various characters. To measure changes in participants' empathy levels, Guarisco and Freeman used the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI).

IRI is a set of 28 statements that participants scored on a 5-point scale. Seven items measure interpersonal reactivity for four subscales: empathetic concern (feeling sympathy or concern for others in distress), perspective taking (the ability to adopt another point of view), personal distress (the tendency to share another's pain or distress), and the fantasy

scale (the tendency to transport oneself mentally into a fictional work). Results from the study showed that students had increased levels of empathy in three of the four categories on the IRI (perspective taking, personal distress, and fantasy scale). These results reinforce the findings from Govindarajoo and Mukundan's (2013) study in that even though there are many aspects of Auggie's story that did not directly connect with the students' situations, participants could still empathize with the characters in the novel.

While *Wonder* and the YAL novels in Govindarajoo and Mukundan's (2013) study did not have explicit mental health themes, the empathetic connections the students had to the adolescent characters demonstrate the potential YAL has to connect students to experiences outside of their own. Using YAL to give adolescents access to experiences and situations that are external to their realities holds great potential for understanding how they perceive complicated issues and transform their perspectives after accessing counter-stories.

In a study by Malo-Juvera (2014), the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson was used as an intervention to reduce eighth grade participants' acceptance of rape myth (i.e., the assumption that rape victims lie about their attacks). Participants were 139 eighth grade students at a Title I middle school in a large school district in the southeastern United States. Post-intervention tests showed that participants had significantly lower scores on the Adolescent Rape Myth Scale— a 20-item researcher-created instrument designed to measure date rape myth acceptance in adolescents. Malo-Juvera argues that accessing the topic of rape and rape myth through a YAL text gave students a shared experience that was easier to discuss and understand than an actual event. Moreover, Malo-Juvera concludes that using literary instruction and YAL to reduce rape myth acceptance is more effective than a didactic approach since the simple presentation of contrary information can cause neutral or defensive reactions. While studies show that didactic style programs have been effective in reducing mental health stigma (Perry et al., 2014; Sakellari, Sourander, Kalokerinou-Anagnostopoulou, & Leino-Kilpi, 2014), Malo-Juvera's study provides a model for how YAL can be used to educate and change adolescent perspectives on difficult issues (such as mental health) in a manner that is more accessible to adolescents and actively involves them working through the complexities and nuances of the issue.

These studies by Govindarajoo and Mukundan (2013), Guarisco and Freeman (2015), and Malo-Juvera (2014) highlight the emotional and intellectual engagement adolescent readers experience through YAL and the capacity these reading experiences have to develop empathy and critical thinking. Therefore, YAL mental health counter-stories provides opportunities to empower adolescents by building understanding and reducing stigma.

Gaps in the Research: Exploring Adolescent Perspectives

Despite increasing research in the fields of adolescent mental health and YAL, there is no research exploring adolescent engagement in YAL to discuss mental health topics. As argued by Askell-Williams and Lawson (2015), adolescents are capable of understanding and explaining their mental health and school experiences making them a valuable, yet often unheard, source of information for the design of mental health promotion and intervention programs. Exploring how adolescents engage in mental health themed YAL will give researchers and educators access to the adolescent perspective and therefore build a better understanding of how to design support programs that better address the needs of adolescent mental health.

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