

# **“It Was a Real Eye-Opener”: Supporting Adolescent Mental Health Literacy Through Contemporary Young Adult Literature**

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## **Introduction**

In schools, it is often peer stigmatisation—evidenced through bullying and exclusionary behaviours—that restricts the social belongingness of adolescents with mental health concerns (Moses, 2010; O'Driscoll et al., 2015). Often stigmatisation occurs where peers are not aware or are ill-informed about the mental health concern and how it can impact their classmate/s (Gaziel et al., 2015). An important step to increasing pro-social behaviours towards peers with mental ill-health is building mental health literacy in adolescents.

## **Statement of the Research Problem**

With adolescent mental health an increasing concern in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting a broader understanding of mental ill-health in adolescents has become essential in schools. While research has shown the benefits of young adult literature and its potential to further social justice in the education environment (Heath et al., 2017; Hill, 2014; Malo-Juvera & Greathouse, 2020), there is little focus on improving behaviours towards

peers with mental ill-health. Research on the school's role in mental wellness in adolescents has also tended to focus on bibliotherapeutic practices, where the texts are focused towards increased understanding in the adolescent with the concern, rather than in their peers – one of the greatest influencers of poor mental health (e.g., Bergh et al., 2011; Fildes et al., 2014).

This research sought to address peer's lack of knowledge by raising awareness of mental health in the classroom. Using a grounded theory methodology and a constructivist approach, the research asked, 'How do adolescents respond to representations of mental health in contemporary young adult literature encountered in the classroom?' Importantly, this research presents the adolescent voice that has been lacking in prior research (deLeon, 2017).

### **Literature Review**

Oliver and Sapey's social model of disability (1999), is fundamental to the view that mental ill-health, due to its socially restrictive nature, should be viewed as a social problem that can be ameliorated through education, attitudinal change and social adjustment (Mertens et al., 2011). Empirical studies show behavioural change after reading fictional literature including increased empathy and pro-social behaviours as well as improved social cognitive skills (Deshpande, 2012; Guarisco et al., 2017; Johnson, 2012). According to Chance (2014), narratives that are well-written, complex stories and that reflect the lives of today's adolescents provide readers with an authentic reflection of the world many now inhabit. This allows for perspective taking that can improve attitudes and behaviours towards others (Bandt-Law, 2015). Through its ability to shift the emphasis from the problem to the results and consequences of character action and interaction, the contemporary young adult novel gives adolescents a fresh view of peer relationships and their effects.

Researchers are exploring ways in which adolescent mental health and wellbeing can be improved in the school environment in school libraries (Kirkland, 2022; Merga, 2020; Raffaele, 2021; Wallace, 2021) and in the classroom (Hendrickson, 2018; McPherson-Leitz, 2018; Zepeda, 2020). To date, much research is on the texts themselves (e.g., Malo-Juvera & Greathouse, 2020; Richmond, 2019), or promoting adolescent wellbeing in the library space (e.g., Merga, 2021; NSW Department of Education, 2021; State Library of Victoria, 2022;

Walworth, 2018). Often the views of teachers and teacher librarians are presented, without seeking to understand ways in which adolescents engage with discussions of mental health. The current research, therefore, aids in bridging the gap between these views and adolescent readers' own views of literature as a vehicle to raise awareness of mental health among peers.

### **Methodology**

An exploratory constructivist grounded theory methodology was chosen due to its real-world focus and flexibility, allowing exploration of multi-dimensional and complex phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014) and valuing individual interpretations and meanings (Creswell, 2014).

This research introduced the contemporary young adult novel *One Step* (Daddo, 2016) as the class text for Year 10 English students (aged 15-16) in two Australian secondary schools. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the form of written material produced by the students. Data were analysed using a constructivist epistemology, prioritising the adolescent voice in the discussion. The findings presented focus on how the participants felt the text was of value.

### **Preliminary Findings & Discussion**

When responding to this text in the classroom, participants discussed the consequences of negative behaviours in the school environment and reflected on their own experiences. Participants noted how “true” the portrayals were; that the novel had “a lasting impact,” and was “a real eye-opener” for one participant, Karli. Participants suggested that the text “helps to raise further awareness and can teach students what others are going through.”

These responses demonstrate that students will readily enter a dialogue about mental health, its causes, and consequences, given the right book and the opportunity. By using literature created for them, students are empowered to express their personal and emotional response to a text about mental ill-health.

In Australian schools, texts can be repeated for many years due to a lack of time and

information, budgetary constraints; curriculum or institutional restrictions, and a strong focus on curriculum requirements and maximising student outcomes (Davies, 2019; Healy, 2010; Jogie, 2015b, 2017). Even when new texts are introduced, new writing and formats are infrequently included (Hartnett, 1997; Jogie, 2015a, 2015b; Teese, 2013).

Participants advocate for contemporary young adult novels focused on mental health in their classrooms. Studying and discussing these texts provides a recognised avenue to enhancing mental health literacy, and the English curriculum offers the greatest opportunity in which to make mental health part of the everyday discussion.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Increased mental health literacy in adolescents is critical, as it can lead to greater empathy and result in less stigmatising behaviour (Mitchell, 2014; Perry et al., 2014). As a prime site of influence, schools are integral to raising adolescent mental health awareness and promoting pro-social behaviours (Carlisle et al., 2018; Lawrence et al., 2015).

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has provided little guidance and resourcing for teachers to select appropriate texts for study. If teachers have been designated as primarily responsible for text selection (Hateley, 2014) they need support from teacher librarians to suggest and source well-written young adult literature dealing with the issues around mental health as texts for the classroom.

More needs to be done to resource teachers with relevant texts for English study across the curriculum, and to explore innovative ways to ensure availability of these texts in all schools. The next phase of the research is to work with teachers, teacher librarians and students to identify suitable texts and supporting resources and to discuss how these can be best integrated into the English curriculum.

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## Biographies

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