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A Vocabulary of Intimacy:
Building and Nurturing Healthy Adolescent Relationship Skills

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"Today we are faced with the preeminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships . . . the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world, at peace."
—Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd President of the United States (1933–1945)

I f a science of human relationships does exist, as Roosevelt suggests, I suspect that it is as much an art as a science, and it has certainly not yet been perfected. As adults, we engage in interpersonal relationships on a daily basis, with family, friends, significant others, and people at our workplace. Ideally, most of these associations, which range from brief to enduring, will be healthy and positive in nature. We learn how to develop and maintain these relationships early in life, at home with family and friends, and at school with classmates and teachers. As early as kindergarten, schools attempt to introduce and reinforce relationship skills through programs that teach everything from positive character traits like respect and fairness to anti-bullying. But as students enter junior high and high school, a major storm looms on the horizon that none of these programs are equipped to face. The storm is called adolescence, and it carries with it some monumental relationship challenges for students and their teachers.

Adolescence is an extremely complex and confusing period of life, both socially and emotionally. A teenager's central focus shifts from home and parents to school, friends, and peers. A marked increase in social interactions occurs, both inside and outside of school, as teens learn to manage—with less assistance from parents and significant adults—the social circumstances that arise in their lives (Cross & Frazier, 2010). They also become more willing and able to make moral and ethical decisions that will guide their actions. However, a teenager's ability to comprehend connections between behaviors and their resulting consequences has yet to fully develop. Combine this with what may be the defining characteristic of adolescence—the onset of sexual and romantic desire—and suddenly "the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world, at peace" becomes a tremendous challenge, particularly when that world is your classroom and your school.

An adolescent's increase in sexual and romantic desire, especially when paired with an inability to fully comprehend connections between behaviors and consequences, begs the question: Are these students' socio-emotional needs being met at home and/or in the classroom? The most significant adults in a teen's life should be the most credible sources when it comes to responding to these needs, but in many cases, neither parents nor teachers are comfortable having the necessary conversations. As a result, many teens acquire their romantic relationship *knowledge* from peers (Gillis & Simpson, 2015). If teachers want their classrooms to be safe spaces where students feel comfortable as they attempt to navigate the complexities

of adolescent relationships, then it is time we create a curriculum that will do just that.

To date, the only US school curricula that have had the potential to foster discussions about dating and relationships were sex education classes. Unfortunately, since their inception in the United States in the early 1900s, these programs have been devoid of any content that addresses relationships or adolescent socio-emotional development. Instead, sex education programs provide isolated, disconnected information on biological functions, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and in many cases, the portrayal of sex outside of marriage as inappropriate. The messages are typically delivered through lectures and often employ fear tactics to make key points (Allen, 2006; Gillis & Simpson, 2015).

Not surprisingly, over the past 100 years, sex education has failed to make any positive measurable impact toward its three major goals—the reduction of pregnancies, STIs, or sex outside of marriage (Moran, 2000; Guttmacher Institute, 2005). This can be attributed to several factors: the miniscule percentage of time spent teaching sex education as compared to the rest of the academic curricula, the lack of student accountability for learning the content that *is* taught, and perhaps most significant, the failure to connect sexual information with real-life adolescent situations and emotions (Moran, 2000). The omission of any socio-emotional development context demonstrates a disregard for the crucial relationship between an adolescent's ability to process the facts presented about basic sexual functions and the likelihood that he or she will apply those facts to real-life scenarios, scenarios in which a variety of intense and often conflicting emotions are occurring. For example, just because a teacher lectures on the functions of a condom does not mean that a teenager will make the most informed choice when an emotionally charged situation arises that requires the use of one (Moran, 2000).

Research strongly supports the idea that the building and nurturing of positive romantic relationships is a critical element in the development of a healthy adolescent identity and can help teens achieve developmental milestones, including identity and intimacy development (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebbenbruner, & Collins, 2001). These relationships can also promote self-worth, social status, and resolution skills (Kuttler & La Greca, 2004; Madsen

& Collins, 2011). Furthermore, studies have found that healthy romantic experiences in adolescence can improve the quality of romantic relationships in early adulthood (Bouchey & Furman, 2003; Madsen & Collins, 2011).

Reading young adult literature (YAL) with characters that are navigating the slings and arrows of teenage romance is a powerful way to develop and reinforce positive relationship skills with our students. When readers vicariously experience the actions and accompanying emotions of the characters in the YAL they read, verisimilitude occurs. This phenomenon enables students to make personal connections with fictional characters in a safe place. It also provides teachers with opportunities to facilitate discussions and learning tasks that emphasize connections between character and student experiences. As Amy Pattee notes in "The Secret Source: Sexually Explicit Young Adult Literature as an Information Source" (2006), "novels that contain physically and emotionally descriptive scenes allow teen readers to contextualize the physical descriptions of sex." This provides them "with a vocabulary of intimacy they can use to make sense of their own sexual and romantic feelings" (p. 34).

To explore these ideas, I chose two of my favorite authors, Bill Konigsberg and Tom Leveen, and two novels that represent vastly different relationship experiences. Neither are traditional romance novels, but there is much to be gleaned from both in terms of real-life decision making.

Manicpixiedreamgirl by Tom Leveen (2013)

Synopsis

Tyler Darcy has been obsessed with Becky Webb since his freshman year in high school. Two years later, he still hasn't found the courage to talk to her. Tyler has a steady girlfriend, Sydney, and although he truly cares about her, he can't stop imagining what it would be like to be in a relationship with Becky. Sydney tolerates her boyfriend's undying infatuation with Becky, including Tyler's constant questioning as he attempts to learn more about her.

In Tyler's junior year, he joins the drama club so that he can be closer to Becky. The two eventually begin speaking, and as a friendship slowly develops,

Tyler becomes disheartened as he observes Becky engaging in behaviors that don't mesh with the perfect image of the girl he has created in his mind. He suspects that Becky has been hurt in some way and decides that he must try to save her. Tyler is afraid to take the relationship to the next level, though, so instead, he writes a fictional story about the relationship he desires but has been afraid to initiate. He enters the story in a writing contest, and when it is published in a literary magazine, Tyler worries that Becky will read it and immediately recognize herself as the protagonist. The Becky character he has created is based on the girl he imagines her to be, not the girl he is afraid she might actually be.

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As Tyler eventually comes to that realization, our hearts break with him. He continues to try to become more intimate with Becky, and readers feel how much he really cares for her. Conversely, Becky's responses to Tyler's attempts at intimacy reveal that the secrets she hides may affect her ability to ever be intimate with anyone.

Manicpixiedreamgirl (http://tomleveen.com/books/manicpixiedreamgirl/) is a realistic look at first love—through the eyes of an extremely likeable and relatable teenage male protagonist—and the measures a teenager is willing to take in order to keep the vision of his dream girl alive. Leveen's use of believable teen dialogue and actions that develop rich characterizations enables readers to experience—along with Tyler—the emotions that accompany romance, lust, and love.

In the Classroom

Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) conducted extensive research—974 students in 64 middle and high school classrooms in 5 states—that examined the connection between student performance and classroom instruction. They found that high student performance was most closely related to *how* the literature was used. Reading and writing strategies that provide opportunities for meaningful interaction with YAL are critical, because in order for students to make lasting connections, *we must teach concepts* through the book. I have found the most effective way to do this is through the use of text connections. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) describe three types of text connections students can make with literature: 1) *Text-to-self:* connections between the text and prior knowledge and experience; 2) *Text-to-text:* connections between the text being studied and another text; and 3) *Text-to-world:* connections between the text and people, places, and things in the world. Activities that lead students to make these types of connections enable them to value the resources, understandings, and knowledge that they bring from their home lives, communities, and cultures as assets to enrich learning opportunities.

Activity 1: What's in a Name?

This activity involves exploring the significance and relevance of a book title to the story. Nathan Rabin coined the term *manic pixie dream girl* in 2007 in his review for the movie *Elizabethtown* (Rabin, 2007; http://www.avclub.com/article/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-emeli-15577). He explains that the manic pixie dream girl is a fantasy character who "exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures." In an article seven years later, titled "I'm Sorry for Coining the Phrase Manic Pixie Dream Girl" (http://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im_sorry_for_coining_the_phrase_manic_pixie_dream_girl/), Rabin (2014) discusses how much he regrets introducing the term and laments the fact that some even view it as a misogynistic trope. This latter article mentions several female movie characters, including Kirsten Dunst in *Elizabethtown* (2005), Natalie Portman in *Garden State* (2004), and Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall* (1977), who, since the publication of the first article, have been described as manic pixie dream girls.

After students read the two articles, ask them to view these movies. Then discuss: 1) traits that define the term, 2) whether they believe the term to be misogynistic, 3) whether the characters portrayed fit the

term's original description, and 4) if/how these movie characters compare to Becky. Rabin specifically addresses Leveen's book and John Green's *Paper Towns* (2008) in his article, so there are plenty of opportunities for text-to-text and text-to-world connections.

After the class discussion, offer writing and discussion prompts for *Manicpixiedreamgirl.* Here are a few examples:

1. In what ways does Rabin's original definition of manic pixie dream girl help readers understand the character of Becky?
2. Do you think Tyler would ever identify Becky as a manic pixie dream girl? Why or why not?
3. Critics have stated that the term *manic pixie dream girl* is disrespectful. Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.
4. Have you or any of your friends ever known a manic pixie dream girl (or boy)? No names please.
5. How does identifying the manic pixie dream girl trope provide readers with a clearer understanding of the relationships in the story? Explain.

The purpose of these prompts is to encourage discussion. I avoid creating too many personal relationship prompts for my students, but have found that they willingly share personal experiences once they begin making text-to-self connections.

Activity 2: Oprah Show

Louise Rosenblatt (1982) uses the term *efference* to refer to readers' tendencies to read solely for the purpose of arriving at what they perceive to be the desired result. In the context of the classroom, efference can occur when students believe that the purpose behind reading an assigned piece of literature is the demonstration of their reading skills, such as a multiple-choice test. Teachers' verbal questioning techniques, both prior to and during reading, and the learning tasks created during and upon completion of the text reveal testing agendas and can result in reading being reduced to the act of searching for information that students believe is required. Whereas traditional approaches to reading literature encourage these efferent responses through the acquisition of specific predetermined information, an *aesthetic* approach requires students to make meaningful connections that promote better comprehension and higher-level thinking. Traditional school literature

experiences do not encourage this aesthetic engagement and, as Rosenblatt argues, lead to limited views of reading.

The Oprah Show activity allows teachers to assess students' engagement with the text while simultaneously creating opportunities for relationship discussions. This game show simulation works well with stories that contain multiple well-developed characters. *Bronx Masquerade* (synopsis at http://nikkigrimes.com/books/bkbronx.html) (2002), by Nikki Grimes, with its abundance of first-person narratives, and *No More Dead Dogs* (synopsis at http://gordonkorman.com/the-books/novels/no-more-dead-dogs) (2000), by Gordon Korman, which features one storyline told from multiple viewpoints, are both stellar examples.

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First, place students in groups of four. Each group member selects one of four characters to research and, from that research, creates and responds in writing to 10 questions that the researcher anticipates being asked by the "audience." For *Manicpixiedreamgirl,* for instance, Tyler, Becky, Sydney, and one of Tyler's friends are optimal choices. One at a time, groups take the stage as a unit and the four characters introduce themselves. A student host (Oprah) that I have selected (a different student for each group presentation) then invites the audience to ask questions. If one or more characters is not being addressed by the audience, the student host can direct a question to a specific character or ask the audience to do so. Since everyone in the audience has researched a character, each has questions prepared to ask someone who is on stage at that moment.

I encourage the characters on stage to do more than simply respond to questions from the audience. It is when they begin reacting to other characters' comments on stage that verisimilitude is amplified. Students are playing characters, but it can feel very real. Once each group has performed, it is time to process. How did it feel to be in character? How did you (as

the audience) perceive the individual character performances? I have found that when assessing students' understanding of the text, documenting each student's participation—both in character and as part of the audience—works best. I also require students to write reflections, using text connections, that detail what they learned about the characters and themselves.

Brandi Morningstar, a teacher candidate, prepared the following sample audience questions for *Manicpixiedreamgirl*:

For Sydney: You knew of Tyler's unwavering feelings for Becky from the beginning. Why would you continue to endure the relationship knowing that he didn't love you?

For Becky: If Tyler had approached you on day one and introduced himself, perhaps even asked you out, how would that have changed your high school experience?

For Tyler: What was it about Becky that captivated you and made you push Sydney to the side, even though she stuck with you for all that time?

Honestly Ben by Bill Konigsberg (2017)

Synopsis
Honestly Ben is the sequel to *Openly Straight* (2015), Konigsberg's (https://billkonigsberg.com) award-winning novel about Rafe, an openly gay student-athlete who decides not to tell anyone when he moves from Colorado to his new private high school in the east. When Rafe meets Ben Carver, sparks fly, but Ben is straight, or at least he thinks he is. Ben's physical and emotional connection with Rafe is amplified, at least in part, because he believes that Rafe is also experiencing these feelings for the first time. When Ben learns that Rafe came out as gay in Colorado, their relationship begins to fall apart.

In *Honestly Ben*, told from Ben's point of view, the boys return to school after break, and both are dealing with the events of the past semester in their own way. Ben is named captain of the baseball team and is awarded a prestigious scholarship. He begins dating Hannah, a beautiful girl from the neighboring girls' school, and Rafe is dating a new guy. As the two attempt to rekindle their friendship, Ben becomes

conflicted as his feelings for both Hannah and Rafe intensify. Is it possible that Ben could be mostly straight but gay for Rafe? Konigsberg has created extremely likeable and believable teen characters in Ben and Rafe. Readers will laugh with and hurt for both as they navigate the slings and arrows of teenage romance.

In the Classroom
The interactions between reader, text, and context help to define the effectiveness of the learning activities I design. My goal in the development of these relationship activities is to elicit student responses that make relevant text connections while employing literary elements like theme, character development, plot, and setting. The following are sample prompts to guide this process.

Does the activity give students the opportunity to:

- demonstrate an understanding of character relationships?
- reflect on story elements such as plot, setting, and themes and consider how each contributes to the development of character relationships?
- make choices and personal connections by utilizing prior knowledge and experience?

Jim Burke's *103 Things to Do Before/During/After Reading* is a great resource for activities that can easily be adapted for YAL and relationship discussions (http://www.readingrockets.org/article/103-things-do-beforeduringafter-reading).

ACTIVITY 1: ANTICIPATION GUIDES
The purpose of an anticipation guide is to help students connect to the themes and main ideas of the text. Statements should encourage disagreement and challenge students' beliefs about specific subjects. Each statement should include decision indicators such as true/false or agree/disagree so that students are encouraged to make a commitment. Anticipation guides 1) elicit students' prior knowledge of topics and themes that will be encountered in the text, 2) establish purposes for reading (efference) that extend far beyond a basic factual comprehension of the text, and 3) assess students' understanding after the text has been read.

The first two aims are met prior to reading (the anticipation), and students' responses are based on

personal experience. After reading the story, students reread the prompts and consider their initial responses to the statements. They then gather textual evidence that either confirms their initial beliefs or causes them to rethink those beliefs. The post-reading responses should be more detailed and include text-to-self as well as text-to-text and text-to world connections. Recognizing the effects of one's own point of view in formulating interpretations of texts is central to reader response. These post-reading responses can then be shared in small and/or large discussion groups.

What follows are several anticipation guide sample statements for *Honestly Ben*:

1. If someone is really attracted to a person who is already in a committed relationship, it is okay to still pursue that person.
2. If someone breaks up with me, there is no chance that I will ever date that person again.
3. If someone is attracted to another person of the same gender, they should both keep it to themselves.
4. It is acceptable to lie to someone you love if it means not hurting that person's feelings.
5. If I were in a romantic relationship with someone I knew my parents wouldn't approve of, I would keep the relationship from them.

ACTIVITY 2: MUSICAL RESPONSE TO LITERATURE
In this activity, students create a soundtrack that represents one of the characters in the story. The soundtrack—as determined by the titles, lyrics, and mood of each song—should represent the substance of that character's relationships. Playlists should consist of 12–15 songs and include titles, artists, and text (lyrics) connections that explain how the song relates to the character and his/her relationships in the story and to the student's own life. Students can then include links to each of the tracks or create an actual CD. Songfacts (http://www.songfacts.com/) is a great site for searching songs because of the extensive number of search categories it offers (e.g., "written by," "performed by," "inspired by"). A sample song for *Honestly Ben* might be "Bizarre Love Triangle" (1986) by New Order. The song describes a character that is in love but conflicted, just like Ben in the story. The chorus, "Every time I see you falling/I get down on my knees and pray/I'm waiting for that final moment/

You say the words that I can't say," speaks to how Ben feels throughout much of the story. He loves Rafe but is afraid to express it openly.

Conclusion

YAL provides teachers and students with incredible opportunities to safely explore the socio-emotional landscape of adolescent relationships. It is this partici-pation with story that helps to create verisimilitude, thus motivating and engaging our students in mean-ingful learning experiences. Perhaps Robert Probst (1987) said it best:

> Literature's value lies not in information it imparts but in experience it enables us to have. It does not provide knowledge of data, codified and transmitted, chunks of information to be stored away. Literature enables each of us to shape knowledge out of our encounter with it. It is personal knowledge, knowledge of how we relate to the world, how we feel and think and see. . . . It invites, even demands our participation. . . . It requires us to participate in the shaping of the experience. (p. 27)

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