

## Novel Roles for Books:

### Promoting the Use of Young Adult Literature with Students at a School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens

*Destiny Greer,\* an eleventh grade student at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens\* clicked away intently on her computer. Earlier in the class period, her English teacher, Bob Schaefer, had introduced a new unit, and Destiny was one of the students who appeared particularly excited about it. The goal of the unit was for students in Mr. Schaefer's class, ranging in age from twelve to nineteen, to create "wish lists" for books they were interested in reading. After compiling all of the students' wish lists, Mr. Schaefer's intent was to purchase two books from each student's list, adding to the classroom collection of books.*

*As Destiny searched websites for books to put on her wish list, I noticed that she had started her search by finding books she was already familiar with or had previously read. The book titles that she looked for, including *Caucasia* and *Fly Girl*, led her, through features on the booksellers' websites, to books of the same nature/ topic area. As Destiny scrolled through the new book choices and read each book's synopsis, she leaned forward with increasing interest. At one point in her search she turned to Bob and said, "We never got to do this at our old school."*

Proponents of using young adult literature with teens, particularly with young females, have identified the ways that young adult literature "speaks" to students who have similar interests and life experiences as the characters within the texts (Doyle, 2002; Hughes-Hassell, 2002; Miller, 1993). Other researchers concerned with the use of young adult literature in the secondary English language arts classroom (e.g., Bintz, 1993; Lenters, 2006; Worthy, 1998) have shown how young adult literature that relates to teens who are deemed "at risk" of school failure provides these young people with an ongoing forum from which to explore their identities as teenagers and students. In

this article, I contribute to this ongoing inquiry about the use of young adult literature in classrooms for students who are labeled as being "at risk" learners by exploring how teen mothers at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens were involved in the selection of books for their own classroom. Through vignettes of poignant moments at Eastview and through interviews with Eastview students, I illustrate the ways that young adult literature influenced how teen mothers think about themselves as students, mothers, and adolescents.

Because pregnant and parenting teens, as a population of students, have typically been "hidden" from mainstream education, little has been written about these teens' literacy and literacy development and how this, in turn, affects their identity. As documented in this article, teen mothers perceive that reading does make a difference in their lives. During the time of my study at Eastview I became particularly interested in the way books that Eastview teens selected assisted these students in talking about who they were and how they constructed a sense of self. I found the link between reading and identity to be a key element of the success of using young adult literature with students who may be otherwise labeled as "at risk" students.

### **Constructing Identity: Who Is the Pregnant and Parenting Student?**

Many studies focusing on pregnant and parenting teens have done an exceptional job of challenging the

stereotype that teen mothers are “deviant” as compared to the “normal” adolescent. As a result, in part, of Wendy Luttrell’s (2003) and Wanda Pillow’s (2004) research with pregnant teens, we do know that simple representations of the teenage mother are faulty and often present false unidirectional correlations between early childbearing and school/ economic success. Several other researchers (e.g., Luker, 1996; Zachry, 2005) have documented results that appear contradictory to the early pregnancy/ lack of success model so frequently assumed by the American public. Dominant portraits of the pregnant teen as “abnormal” have been contested and researchers (Luttrell, 2003; Pillow, 2004) have posed important questions about the teen mother’s “at risk” position. Nevertheless, many questions remain concerning what actually happens inside schools for pregnant and parenting teens. There have been, to date, few studies (Hallman, 2007; Luttrell, 2003) that document programs for this group of students that promote separate schools for teen mothers as potential providers of meaningful and/ or challenging curriculum. Exploring the successful use of young adult literature at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens contributes to this search for knowledge about such programs.

### **Connecting *Identity Work* to the Use of Young Adult Literature in the Classroom**

Throughout this article, the concept of *identity* and the development of one’s “self” is situated within a sociocultural lens of literacy and learning (Gee, 1996, 1999). This means that *identity* is viewed as constructed through interactions between people and *identity work* is accomplished by individuals staking claims about who they are in relationship to others. Identity is intimately tied to literacy, as literacy is positioned as a vehicle by which individuals can make such claims. Further, one’s identity is always connected with one’s use of *Discourses* (Gee, 1999; 2001), which act as “identity kits and come complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (Gee, 2001, 526). *Discourses* become conceptual forums from which individuals assert their affiliations and undertake identity work. Through such a view, one’s “self,” or identity, doesn’t exist as an individually created entity,

but rather is formed within a nexus of social relationships and affiliations.

Moreover, one’s identity, because of being situated within a social context, is subject to change over time. As contexts and affiliations change, so does one’s identity. *Identity* as Hall (2000) asserts, is something which is “not already ‘there’; [but] rather, . . . a production, emergent in process. It [identity] is situational—it shifts from context to context” (xi). As a consequence, identity work is undertaken as a fluid process—one is never finished with constructing his or her identity.

Throughout my work at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, I witnessed Eastview students’ desire to construct a “self” that extended beyond the identity of “teen mother,” a label they believed others viewed as their primary role. Teens with whom I spoke asserted that their conception of their identity encompassed much more than their role as “mother” and directed me to considering how their reading choices were an important tool in exploring the multiple facets of their identity. I learned that teens at Eastview consistently viewed young adult literature as a site from which they were able to stake claims about their identity as well as craft their sense of self.

The way teens at Eastview spoke about the young adult literature that engaged them also included a desire for the “place,” or setting, of the books to be familiar to them. Place was just as integral to teens’ reading choices as was character, and I highlight, in Figure 3, books that Eastview students selected because of their affiliation with the place of a book. In her outline of characteristics of fiction for African American urban teens, Doyle (2002) notes that books

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conflicts presented in the books were an essential part of the reading experience for Eastview students. Students’ quest for young adult literature with authentic situations surfaced often. Researchers Hughes-Hassell & Guild (2002) discuss the urban experience in recent young adult novels and emphasize how the characters, setting, and situations in these novels appeal to teens “just like them.” The students at Eastview clearly bore out this assertion.

### **Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens**

Eastview provides students with an alternative to the mainstream high school about parenting and pre-natal care. The school’s mission to provide an alternative environment for pregnant and parenting teens is undergirded by the passage, in 1972, of Title IX, a federal law that, in part, established the legal existence of schools such as Eastview. Bob Schaefer, a veteran English teacher who has worked at Eastview for over twenty years, invited me to participate in the classroom and multiple field trips, including a trip to the city zoo and the local children’s museum. Though the discussion in this article does not directly draw on these experiences, I feel it is important to note that my participation in these out-of-school venues assisted me in understanding the students and the school in deeper ways.

During the 2005-2006 school year, there were between thirty and forty students between the ages of twelve and nineteen enrolled at any one time at Eastview. The students involved in this study self-identified as African-American, Hmong, Mexican-

that appeal to this particular population of students frequently feature an urban, inner-city environment. In my findings concerning Eastview teens’ understanding of place I found similar patterns.

Finally, Eastview students expressed a desire to relate to “what the characters were going through” in the texts they read. The plotline and

American, Latina, and White. Enrollment was limited to three semesters (approximately one and one-half years), so I interacted with many of the students throughout part of their pregnancy as well as after the birth of their children. Other students enrolled at Eastview for only one quarter. At the end of the school year several students graduated, while others returned to their “regular,” or “home,” high school, the high school they attended before enrolling at Eastview.

### **Selecting Young Adult Literature**

For many students, reading had never been a desired activity. In an interview with Krystal Berns, a twelfth grade student, I learned that she had “never read until coming to [Eastview]. [She] never read a book cover to cover before.” Krystal elaborated more on her recent interest in reading by claiming that Mr. Schaefer was a teacher “who lets us read what we like to read. Not boring stuff like *Of Mice and Men*.” Krystal then told me that she was currently waiting for her favorite author, Omar Tyree, to write additional books because she had “read all of them. Maybe ten or eleven books.”

One week after beginning to put together book wish lists, new books started arriving in Mr. Schaefer’s classroom. He had been able to purchase books from each student’s wish list through utilizing the funds that were designated for new classroom materials. The books featured in Figure 1 list all the books that students put on their wish lists.

Throughout the duration of the wish list activity, Mr. Schaefer encouraged students to make reading a meaningful part of their lives. Instead of isolating reading as a “boring” activity only done in English class, he prompted students to expand their view of reading and start checking out books in the classroom to take them home to read.

Mr. Schaefer was positioned largely as the mediator in making students’ book choices become a reality. Throughout the unit, he also considered the consequences for the use of some of the texts listed in Figure 1. Some of these considerations about the content of the books exceed the scope of this article. However, the key aspect of featuring all of the books students put on their “wish lists” is to reinforce students’ agency in the selection of texts for their classroom. Figures 2, 3, and 4 move forward from this

Book title	Author	Copyright Date	Annotation
<i>Every Thug Needs a Lady</i>	Wahida Clark	2003	sequel to <i>Thugs and the Women Who Love Them</i> sexual content
<i>Tears of a Tiger</i>	Sharon Draper	1996	male-female relationships drinking and driving teen athlete's experience
<i>Holler If You Hear Me:</i>	Michael Eric Dyson	2002	relationship issues: family/ friends story of celebrity fallen rapper, Tupac Shakur
<i>The Skin I'm In</i>	Sharon Flake	2001	(Flake's books): African-American female experience
<i>Money Hungry</i>		2003	
<i>Begging for Change</i>		2004	
<i>Who am I without Him?:</i>		2004	
<i>The First Part Last</i>	Angela Johnson	2004	relationships: family/friends/ male-female relationships Coretta Scott King award teen father's experience
<i>Lost in the City</i>	Edward P. Jones	2004	African-American Experience triumph over struggle
<i>Whispers from the Dead</i>	Joan Lowery Nixon	1991	the supernatural female protagonist
<i>The Republic of East L.A.</i>	Luis J. Rodriguez	2002	gang violence triumph over difficult circumstances
<i>Push</i>	Sapphire	1997	female protagonist incest
<i>No Disrespect</i>	Sista Souljah	1996	(Souljah's books): female protagonists
<i>The Coldest Winter Ever</i>	Nikki Turner	2000	male-female relationships
<i>A Hustler's Wife</i>		2003	female protagonist triumph over difficult circumstances
<i>A Project Chick</i>	Omar Tyree	2003	male-female relationships teen mother's experience
<i>Flyy Girl</i>		1997	(Tyree's books): African-American experience
<i>Single Mom: A Novel</i>		1999	relationships
<i>For the Love of Money</i>	K. Williams, J. Turner N. Turner, and Joy	2001	triumph over difficult circumstances
<i>Leslie</i>		2002	
<i>Diary of a Groupie</i>		2003	
<i>Boss Lady</i>		2005	
<i>Girls from Da Hood 2</i>		2005	African-American female experience
<i>Like Sisters on the Homefront</i>	Williams-Garcia.	1995	teen pregnancy setting of the rural south

Figure 1. Books on Eaatview student's Wish Lists

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**“Sometimes you see these characters in these books [LaShaundra was holding the book *The Skin I’m In* by Sharon Flake] as real people. They are teen moms like us [students at Eastview] sometimes but they are not just that. And sometimes I think people just see us as teen moms.”**

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larger compilation of books to highlight texts that students noted, when speaking to me in interviews, as especially influential to them.

Educators who use young adult literature in their classrooms may observe that some of the titles featured in Figure 1 blur the lines between what might be considered young adult literature and what may be labeled as adult fiction. I have intentionally featured these “adult” books because the reality of Eastview students’ reading habits suggest that these books were highly influen-

tial in students’ lives. However, it would be a worthwhile investigation at a later time to consider how some of these texts challenge what has typically been considered to be young adult literature and how such texts may be valuable to students.

It is also important to note that Mr. Schaefer considered how to best meet the needs of his students through the book wish list activity. Although his original plan was to purchase two books from each student’s list, he eventually purchased most of the books featured in Figure 1 for the classroom library.

### **Constructing the “Self” through Young Adult Literature**

LaShaundra Goodwin, a twelfth-grade student at Eastview, provided me with a summary of why young adult literature was so valuable to her not only as a teen mother, but also an adolescent, a student, and a daughter.

Sometimes you see these characters in these books [LaShaundra was holding the book *The Skin I’m In* by Sharon Flake] as real people. They are teen moms like us [students at Eastview] sometimes but they are not just that. And sometimes I think people just see us as teen moms. And, these books [young adult novels], they are like an inspiration. You know, like you can overcome.

LaShaundra’s comments about the book choices featuring characters who have “overcome” resonates with Doyle’s (2002) criteria for books that appeal to African American urban teens. Doyle emphasizes that characters in such books “must overcome one or more obstacles, whether it’s poverty, drugs, rape, teen pregnancy, HIV, violence, incest, or some other trauma” (174). Because all of the students at Eastview have been or currently are pregnant, they feel strongly that teen pregnancy is positioned by society as “an obstacle for them to overcome.” The characters who are portrayed as being successful teen parents are particularly strong characters and models for Eastview students. A few of these books were featured in Taneka Graff’s comments during an interview with me:

**Taneka:** “I like these books with teen moms in them . . . like LaShaundra said. They are “real.”

**Heidi:** “What are some of those books?”

**Taneka:** “Um, I just read *A Project Chick*. And then there’s the book about the teen dad. It’s called *The First Part Last*, I think. And *Imani all Mine* but that book is about more than just being a teen mom.

Taneka’s identification of books that featured teen parents was poignant and her comment about the book *Imani all Mine* was especially so. *Imani all Mine* (1999) features a teen mother who loses her baby due to a stray bullet and is a book that several of the students passed along to one another after they were finished reading it. LaTasha Jones, a twelfth grade student, summed up the books that spoke to teens’ concept of “self” as featuring not only a teen mother, but featuring a teen mother, who at the end of the book, is changed from who she was at the beginning of the book. LaTasha said, “I’ve learned who I am more as he’s [her baby, Aaron] gotten older. Like the moms in the books [books that feature teen mothers].”

### **Finding a Familiar “Place” through Young Adult Literature**

In addition to characters who were teen mothers, several students expressed a desire for familiar settings. Although students recognized place in various ways, an environment that they could relate to

Book title	Author	Copyright Date	Annotation
<i>A Project Chick</i>	Nikki Turner	2003	teen mother's experience
<i>The First Part Last</i>	Angela Johnson	2004	Coretta Scott King award teen father's experience
<i>Imani all Mine</i>	Connie Rose Porter	1999	teen mother's experience violence death of a child
<i>The Skin I'm In</i>	Sharon Flake	2001	African American female experience relationships: female/ female

**Figure 2:** Book Choices that Students Spoke of as Challenging “Self” and/ or their Identity as a Teen Mother

resonated with them. Star Pates, a freshman, told me that she liked books that reminded her of Midcity, a large city she had lived in before moving to Lakeville, the smaller city in which Eastview was located. She noted that, “the scenes of the city seem real to me and I miss that.” Lakeville, a considerably smaller city than Midcity, was not “home” yet to Star (She had only lived in Lakeville for a little over two years). When I asked Star what books particularly reminded her of home, she noted books by Sharon Flake. She told me that she was excited about Flake writing more books because they “reminded her of home.”

Doyle (2002) identifies an “urban, inner-city environment” as one of the characteristics of fiction that appeals to African American urban teens. Many of the students at Eastview told me that they had moved from larger cities, such as Midcity, in recent years. Their search for books that featured more urban environments often reflected the place of the life they had before moving to Lakeville. *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, a book set, in part, in the rural south, was

also a favorite of students. LaTasha told me that she visited her grandmother who lived in Georgia each summer and she felt that the books reminded her of being there. Ayanna Bemis, a sophomore, commented that the “place” of a book matters because it “makes you feel like you’re there. The people in the book might be like you but the setting of the book is where it all happens.”

Figure 3 features books that students spoke of as being strong for the way they featured “setting,” or “place.”

### The Quest for Authentic Situations as Portrayed in Young Adult Literature

Many students, like Destiny Greer, the student who was featured at the beginning of the article, were extremely excited about getting books they had selected by searching booksellers’ websites. In the process of selecting such books students were not afraid to express their opinions. One day, Jessi, a tenth

<i>The Skin I'm in</i>	Sharon Flake	2001	(Flake's books): African-American female experience Relationships: family/ friends/ male-female Relationships
<i>Money Hungry</i>		2003	
<i>Begging for Change</i>		2004	
<i>Who am I without him?: Short Stories about Girls and the Boys in their Lives</i>		2004	
<i>Like sisters on the Homefront</i>	Williams-Garcia	1995	teen pregnancy Setting of the rural south

**Figure 3:** Book choices that students spoke of as finding a familiar “place” through young adult literature

grade student in Mr. Schaefer's class, exclaimed, "I want a book about baby daddy drama. You know, like some fights and some jealousy. I like reading that kind of stuff."

Immediately, Mr. Schaefer responded to Jessi's statement. He rolled his eyes playfully and said, "Yeah. I knew that would be a big topic. Any of you find any baby daddy drama books?"

Mr. Schaefer's question was met with some looks from other students, but a more central force gave an

answer to his question. Ms. Bickmore, the school principal, was visiting Bob's classroom during that class hour and gave her own response to Jessi. As she put her hands on Jessi's shoulders, Ms. Bickmore asked Jessi why she wanted to read a book about fighting. Why didn't she prefer reading a book about men loving their wives and caring for their children?

Jessi remained still and looked down at her paper as Ms. Bickmore questioned her. I wondered at that moment how Jessi

would proceed with her book search.

This vignette raises a few key questions about Eastview students' reading choices: namely, "What is appropriate reading material for teens?" and "What content should pregnant and parenting teens be engaging with?" Although the principal, Ms. Bickmore, clearly shows her preference for guiding students toward reading material that affirms particular values concerning the relationship between men, women and children, Mr. Schaefer had a different method for encouraging students to become readers. His method was to provide what can be thought of as "high interest" reading material for students. High interest material did not have to match his agenda for what students read; rather, it had to speak to the lives and experiences of students. Mr. Schaefer shows in his answer to Jessi's question that his interest lies in

reaching out to find topics that engage his students and inspire them to read.

It is important to note that the identity work students have undertaken through reading does not always mean a desire to emulate characters or situations. Jessi, who wanted to read a book about "baby daddy drama," revealed how her understanding of finding books that related to her and her life was about much more than emulation. She told me in an interview:

"I mean, Ms. Bickmore [school principal] thinks we [students at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens] just want to read these books for the drama and that's not true. We read them because we identify. And sometimes these people [the characters in the books] do stuff that's bad and make bad choices. But it's not like we don't know that."

Jessi's comments about the role that reading plays in students' lives reveals an understanding that young adult literature provides an important forum from which students engage in critical thinking, learning to critique elements of the books they read. As *identity*, through a sociocultural lens of literacy and learning, is always contextual, students are also able to recognize the contextual nature of characters' lives and identities. Jessi, in the comments above, shows her ability to not just relate to characters, but to also critique them.

One of the most essential features of books that students searched for was a mark of authenticity. In many interviews with students, this aspect of texts was described as "being real." Ayanna Bemis told me that, when searching for books that she thought she would like, she most looked for books that "were real. You know, like you could really see what was happening in the books happening in real life." Ayanna's choices of books that particularly struck her as "being real" are listed in Figure 4.

## Promoting *Identity Work* as an Important Part of the Curriculum

Throughout this article, I have featured the voices of students at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens and their perceptions of how young adult literature exists as a site for them to engage in identity work. Teen mothers' narratives speak to the ways that texts help them not only craft a sense of

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**Mr. Schaefer's question was met with some looks from other students, but a more central force gave an answer to his question. Ms. Bickmore, the school principal, was visiting Bob's classroom during that class hour and gave her own response to Jessi.**

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<i>Tears of a Tiger</i>	Sharon Draper	1996	drinking and driving teen athlete's experience relationship issues: family/ friends
<i>The skin I'm in</i>	Sharon Flake	2001	African American female experience relationships: female/ female
<i>The first part last</i>	Angela Johnson	2004	Coretta Scott King award teen father's experience
<i>Push</i>	Sapphire	1997	female protagonist incest

**Figure 4:** Book Choices that Students Spoke of as Reflecting “Authentic” Situations

“self” and relate to a familiarity of “place,” but also how these texts assist them in being critical thinkers. The benefits for teen mothers in selecting young adult literature for their classroom are featured in Figure 5.

Students at Eastview had a central part in selecting the books they read and this proved to be an essential component of providing authentic literacy instruction for this population of students. Since we already know through extensive research (e.g., Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, and Prendergast, 1997) that instruction for adolescents labeled as “low ability,” or “at risk,” tends to be less authentic than instruction for higher-achieving students, it is especially important that English language arts teachers strive to incorporate principles into their pedagogy

- Students’ perspectives about text are validated (as opposed to just the teacher’s perspectives).
- Students are engaged in *identity work* when relating to characters in a text.
- Meaning-making through reading is encouraged and readers can take this skill into their future reading.
- Readers are actively encouraged to shape texts based on their own experiences. Because readers are encouraged to interact with text, the context of a text is not just the text itself, but also the extra-contextual (that which encompasses the reader’s experiences) is in relationship to a text.
- Students’ literate competencies that they bring to a text are validated.

**Figure 5:** Benefits for Teen Mothers in Selecting Young Adult Literature for their Classroom

and curriculum that allow students to be positioned as agents in their learning. And, it is especially important that convincing portraits of these possibilities are documented. To combat characterizations of “remedial” teaching for students who are labeled “at risk,” it is necessary to discuss how teaching and learning for students like those attending Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens is based on curriculum that invites students to interact and engage with texts and other learners.

**Heidi L. Hallman** is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum & Teaching at the University of Kansas, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in the English Education program. Dr. Hallman’s research interests include the social and cultural dimensions of “at risk” students’ literacy learning and the preparation of prospective English teachers. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *Equity & Excellence in Education*, and *English Journal* (forthcoming). Before working in higher education, Dr. Hallman taught high school English.

\*All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

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