

Reading Between the Lines: Book clubs as a safe space for literature about LGBTQ+ characters

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Many adults are concerned about children's and adolescents' reading habits. For some adults, this is because of what young people are reading, as evidenced by recent and recurring curriculum debates in state legislatures (Schwartz, 2021). For others, it is because recreational reading has declined for children and adolescents. Adolescents in the United States are among the least engaged readers in the world (OECD, 2011), with many students admitting that they only read the material assigned in class (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). In recent years, reading habits of school children have declined as they spend more time on technology completing digital assignments and interacting on social media platforms.

While students may be reading fewer traditional texts, like bound, hardcover books, in reality, many students are reading and writing a variety of texts daily. These might include ones that are digital in nature, such as social media, blogs, and internet sites, but also traditional texts that they have selected for themselves. This type of recreational and digital reading offers students opportunities to interact and engage with texts that are part of their worlds all while capitalizing on student interest and their prior knowledge. Many times, the texts students choose to read independently and on their own time are ones that have relevant material and characters that students can readily connect with.

Schools have a role to play in developing students' independent engagement with literature. Independent reading offers a number of benefits such as improvement in vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency, the creation and building of background knowledge, and increase in self efficacy and agency with regard to reading (Krashen, 2014). Independent, *in-school* reading increases the likelihood of students reading outside of the classroom (Allington, 2017; Krashen, 2014; NCTE, 2019). Students who engage with high quality literature in the classroom from classroom libraries (experts recommend an average of 10 books per student in a well-stocked classroom library) are more likely to read outside of school

(Catapano, Fleming, & Elias, 2009; Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, & Teale, 1993; Reutzel & Fawson, 2002). In fact, students who have access to diverse books read 50-60% more than their peers (ILA, 2018). Choice and diversity among titles are especially important for struggling 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, many students will read widely and willingly (Brooks & Frankel, 2019; Guthrie & Humenic, 2004; Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Novels offer students an opportunity to tackle difficult topics and issues in a safe space. Engaging in a discussion about the contents of the stories found in novels helps young people further elaborate their ideologies, beliefs, and positions. Freire (1970) argued that dialogue has transformative power for individual identities, identity construction, and collective action. His premise of hope that "can be carried out in communion with others" (Freire, 1970, p. 91) presupposes that creating this community through dialogue can only occur when students are able to "speak their world" (Freire, 1970 p. 88). By naming their realities and situations as true participants in the dialogue, they can acknowledge and transform their worlds. For some students, their realities may be different from many of their peers or may include challenges that they find difficult to openly discuss. However, when teachers utilize novels with characters that mirror students, they offer opportunities for students to make connections and develop conversations about difficult and/or troublesome issues. In many instances, students can channel their feelings through characters in literature, thus creating a sense of anonymity, yet still offering a space for discussion centered around difficult topics (Harper, 2021). When students are engaged in reading, they are able to think through character decisions, analyze and contemplate problems presented in a character's life, navigate tensions between difficult situations and decisions, all under the guise of a literary experience

or a transactional reading experience (Rosenblatt, 1983). Adolescents readily engage with characters that are relevant to them and mirror life situations and dilemmas that they are familiar with.

While numerous titles have been published that address contemporary and social issues, few classrooms utilize them as primary reading sources (Lewis & Docker, 2011). This can be partially attributed to the fact that many of the topics that students find personally relevant may involve content that some adults find difficult, such as substance abuse, sexuality, homelessness, race, and physical abuse. 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. For many students, these dark funds include knowledge of drug abuse, physical violence, mental health issues, or other sensitive matters. Yet, while students may be presented with challenges or may possess identities that aren’t necessarily mirrors of the sanitized version of adolescence that is often described as the norm, these experiences are just as valid.

Utilizing texts with diverse characters helps aid in the creation of an inclusive classroom and offers additional opportunities for students to see the world through several lenses. While Style (1996) described the need for curriculum to serve as both windows and mirrors, Bishop’s (1990) notion of texts serving as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors offered us insight when choosing the texts used in this study. Window texts allow students to see the world through a window, almost like viewing a character and his/her world and experiences through a windowpane. These types of texts allow readers to see glimpses of a world that may be very different from the one that they have experienced. Correspondingly, mirror texts are ones in which readers see much of themselves in the character's actions and experiences. In other words, it is like looking in a mirror and seeing similar experiences and characteristics. Yet texts also serve as sliding glass doors, offering readers the opportunity to step into a character’s world and take part in the imagined experiences and world the author has created. For students to have a comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of characters, a mixture of texts should be employed in the classroom because they allow students to not only see the world through different eyes, but also through connections

and relationships they can build with characters due to similarities in background, situations, and experiences.

Historically, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) characters are underrepresented in literature and even more so in the required reading of many middle and high school curricula. While teachers may want to incorporate books with diverse characters in their curriculum plans, some districts have extensive approval processes for the adoption of new required texts which can discourage teachers from including these books in their current instruction. Affirming LGBTQ identities in classrooms and educational settings is pressing, as a significant amount of research has shown that anti-LGBTQ bias can negatively affect LGBTQ students and their academic success including lower attendance rates and GPAs, as well as significant links to depression and substance abuse (Kosciw et al., 2016). Excluding the identities of LGBTQ individuals creates the message that they do not exist or are somehow wrong or deviant (Linville, 2017).

One way that teachers can incorporate books with LGBTQ characters is through optional book clubs. Because these are not mandated instructional events, teachers can utilize them in extracurricular settings where the approval process may not be so laborious. Of course, other methods for incorporating books with LGBTQ characters might consist of the inclusion of the books in classroom libraries, recommended reading lists, or options within larger units of study which allow for students to make independent choices regarding their reading. However, if teachers are unfamiliar with titles that include LGBTQ characters for their grade level, they may not be sure how to begin adding these materials into the extra-curricular or recreational reading selections in their classroom or school.

In order to investigate the potential for teachers and other school personnel to use LGBTQ young adult novels in our local districts, we advertised a book club for teachers that would utilize books that were LGBTQ friendly and inclusive. Our titles included only ones that had LGBTQ characters and topics. Through intramural grant funding, we purchased titles for all participants of the book club. We advertised our book club through emails and listservs, as well as flyers that we distributed in our undergraduate and graduate level classes, as well as at local schools. Ultimately, the Reading Between the Lines book discussion group brought together twelve teachers and

other school personnel, including school counselors and library media specialists. The participants included four Black women, six White women, and two White men. In monthly meetings, participants discussed curricular possibilities for the stories, as well as adults' understandings of non-heteronormative sexualities and gender creativity among young people in their schools, and how they understood adults' roles in making those young people feel welcomed and safer in schools. The book discussion meetings were audio recorded, and the recordings were transcribed so that the researchers could conduct close readings of the discussions to interrogate the nuances in the questions and responses that participants offered to the group. In addition, researchers completed observational field notes from the interview sessions. Participants elaborated on the challenges, barriers, and successes each had in utilizing texts such as these, as well as other related LGBTQ stories.

During the study, we explored the benefits that the inclusion of LGBTQ-themed book clubs with middle and secondary students offered as well as the challenges presented with the inclusion of diverse, and sometimes controversial literature. All teachers in this study indicated that incorporating books with LGBTQ characters was important and needed in schools. However, some of the participants indicated that inclusion of the reviewed titles was more difficult in the classroom, unless they were used as self-selected books for independent reading. While some indicated that students in their schools had access to books with LGBTQ characters, participants admitted that access wasn't always easy. Some of the books with LGBTQ themes were held in special closets or rooms behind the circulation desks so that students had to specifically request the material, thus creating a barrier for access. Others noted that when LGBTQ books were placed on shelves in media centers or classroom libraries, they "walked away" either with students who read them and didn't choose to return them or with teachers who removed them because they did not agree with the content presented.

Media specialists indicated that when discussing the integration of LGBTQ books into their libraries, they often heard other media specialists saying they were afraid to put those books on the shelves in their libraries. Others confirmed the special shelves behind the circulation desks that held the LGBTQ books that other participants in the study had seen. In order for students to check out the books,

they had to ask the desk attendant for them and in other schools, a signed parental permission form was required before a student could check out the book, which participants indicated was wrong for multiple reasons, including the potential that the form would "out" the student. All participants acknowledged the potential impact on the perception of these titles. "It makes it feel like these are bad books," one participant remarked.

Another participant talked about how students might be embarrassed to check out a book that had LGBTQ characters in it or dealt with topics that were sensitive, such as STDs or sex, so she placed some books with these topics on carts for students to take. These books were there on an honor system; students could take them without officially checking them out and simply return them when they were ready. Because these carts were not labeled with a specific genre and different types of books were intermixed on the carts, access to titles with sensitive subjects was made easier for students.

The media specialists in the group indicated that they could justify inclusion of books with controversial topics to district and school administrators if they met the criteria and guidelines for book selection which often included positive reviews from reputable sources and/or award nominations. Books that participants indicated difficulties with often included substance or physical abuse, sexual assault, the occult, and profanity. Yet, despite the justification of awards and reputable reviews, they often were approached by colleagues or administration who questioned their inclusion in the school library. One participant had a colleague who would take books off the shelf that had LGBTQ characters in it and refuse to return it because she did not believe students should be exposed to the content.

Along with issues regarding access, our participants indicated that there were also challenges with how certain material was addressed in schools. The content taught in schools, and fear about talking to youth about queer identities and sexual practices creates social environs in which queer trans identities are often not recognized formally or informally in classrooms, which was evident in our discussions with participants. Heteronormative beliefs are also codified into law in six states where it is illegal to discuss queer and trans identities and lives (see <https://www.glsen.org/activity/no-promo-homo-laws>). The prevalence of these beliefs was evident in book club discussion

as one participant who had taught health in the past, recalled mandates from her district and state. “They were very specific in the health standards for seventh grade that the only mention.... of homosexuality was that it was basically another good way for STDs to be spread,” one participant remarked. Other participants described the absence of Gay Straight Alliances (GSA) at their schools or difficulty in the creation of groups. One recalled a conversation with a friend who asked her about the club at the high school that “taught people to be gay.”

Because access to LGBTQ-inclusive literature can be so challenging, and the representation of LGBTQ identities so pathologized in schools, participants in the book club imagined ways to provide students opportunities to read and discuss these texts. Participants agreed that the inclusion of books with positive examples of sexualities, identities, and intersectionality offered a new lens through which they might imagine another individual’s experiences. Adults in this book club were able to imagine LGBTQ youth relationships with empathy, as they were presented with fictional characters’ experiences with sexuality and identity-questioning behaviors (Linville & Harper, 2021). Teachers commented that many of the images students encountered of sex were often perceived as negative and explicit and were easily accessible outside of the media center. The titles used in this group offered another more balanced experience with content and topics that were often deemed too controversial or taboo to discuss. One participant remarked, “It would be good for someone who was trying to figure out their sexuality to be able to read something like [Drama by Raina Telgemeier],” yet many continued to struggle with the reality that obtaining access to the titles was a challenge.

Teachers also viewed the storylines as places where students could find themselves mirrored and envisioned how these narratives could offer opportunities to discuss identities. One teacher described,

I think, if you were to have a conversation with a student who picked [Luna] up and read it, and was a transgender student, the interesting thing would be to ask them if they can think about anybody in their lives that has always been there consistently for them.

In this observation, literature was viewed as the connection between teacher and student, offering yet another layer of support for students who might possess identities that deviate from the heteronormative. In other comments, teachers noted how setting, demographics, and geography served as other methods of connections for students. Many of the teachers in this group were teaching in rural school districts, so books such as *The House You Pass Along the Way* offered other connections aside from LGBTQ themes. Similarly, the representation of different types of families (single parent families, diversity in race and culture, and other non-traditional representations) was well-received by participants. In addition, conversations in this book club addressed the notion of intersectionality and discussions of how individuals’ identities overlap and intersect, thus offering another layer in our conversations regarding identities and lived experiences.

Participants viewed the literature as another open opportunity for teachers and other adults to initiate conversations and offer support to youth. These books, and the structure of book clubs allowed the participants to envision supportive communities and outlets for students who are often marginalized. All acknowledged that the discussions and conversations were often difficult to begin and could be considered uncomfortable by many. Some expressed concern over saying the right things, but all believed that these types of discussions were necessary and needed.

As participants returned to their schools with plans to implement diverse books into their media center collections or begin book clubs of their own, many continued to acknowledge the potential for LGBTQ books as lightning rods for controversy. However, there are several approaches and tips that educators can adopt and employ when planning for the inclusion of diverse and sometimes controversial material in their schools.

1. We encourage educators to become familiar with their district, county, and school policies regarding book selection. Determine what policies and procedures are in place for the inclusion of books that are “mandated” and “taught” novels or works of literature versus the policies and procedures for classroom library materials, media center inclusion, and self-selected/independent book titles. In many instances, the procedures for

adopting a text that is specifically “taught” in a classroom are more stringent than ones that focus on inclusion and access to a title in a classroom library or media center.

2. Find parental and community support for the inclusion of diverse titles in school settings. Seek out those parents and community members who are allies for LGBTQ youth and/or are themselves LGBTQ and encourage them to attend local school board meetings and other school based assemblies. In some instances, teachers can reach out to book authors who may discuss their work and the inclusion of their books in classrooms, which is something we have facilitated in collaboration with our National Writing Project Site on campus. Conversations with book authors often offer educators additional insights and suggestions for inclusion in schools.
3. Reach out to professional organizations, university partners, and other educational associations for support and guidance. In many instances, professional organizations have valuable information (statistics, research-based materials, fact sheets, etc.) that educators can utilize and distribute to parents, administration, and colleagues. These organizations also can often point educators to additional resources that can be valuable as they plan these types of book club projects.
4. Work with community partnerships/local libraries (Family YMCAs, Boys and Girls club, churches, and other community organizations) to make diverse literature accessible to individuals in the community. If a title is not available in a school or can't be purchased due to school policy restrictions, contact your local library to see if the book could be added to their circulation. Teachers can also work with small grass roots organizations like the Little Free Library (<https://littlefreelibrary.org/>) to bring small book exchange boxes to neighborhoods without public library access. Local bookstores are often great partners for educators as well as their staff can often offer suggestions for alternative titles in addition to the traditional texts featured in classrooms.
5. When implementing book clubs with students, work with English Language Arts (ELA) teachers to help select pertinent titles. Positioning book clubs as optional by offering them before school, during lunch, as part of an enrichment period, or after school can potentially limit opposition since it is not a mandatory engagement. If possible, connect with authors for book chats, collaborate with educators from other schools, and take part in professional organization continued education for suggestions and strategies to navigate this unique space.
6. Finally, it is important to remember that afterschool, student-initiated clubs are protected by the Equal Access Act that protects groups that might encounter discrimination in schools. This legal protection states that if any student, nonacademic clubs exist, then all student clubs must be allowed (Darden, 2015). Therefore, if schools have any student clubs that are not based on a class or academic grades, afterschool bookclubs to read LGBTQ+ young adult literature will be protected, if students initiate the club. Although this is a moment when school and public librarians are being followed on social media by political groups intending to oust them from their jobs and remove books from the shelves based on “objectionable” content (Natanson, 2022), current federal legislation protects the rights for identity groups to exist in schools.

In the end, the participants and researchers concurred that the value of diverse literature was undisputed. By integrating quality books that address LGBTQ themes, students could begin to see themselves represented in the literary and real world and adults could envision new ways to initiate conversations surrounding these topics. With this in place, literature becomes a vehicle through which teachers and students are offered opportunities for empathizing with diverse characters, thus aiding in the creation of a school climate and culture that is inclusive and safe for all.

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