In providing concrete examples of how critical pedagogy manifests in real classrooms, Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell call for teachers to be “radical pragmatists” (p. 167). Written a decade ago, their words still guide my work as a high school English language arts teacher. The critical pedagogues argue that teachers enacting critical pedagogy must wear a “pragmatic hat” and a “radical hat.” The former requires teachers to acknowledge the micro and macro sociopolitical realities of teaching. This acknowledgment must be accompanied by navigational tools that teachers can use to envision and enact new possibilities. Wearing the radical hat is necessary when envisioning such possibilities. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s conceptualization of “radical pragmatist” has been my theory of change as a high school English teacher and has sustained me through difficult times.

From the point of view of a radical pragmatist, I outline how I worked within my ELA department to methodically incorporate LGBTQ texts in every grade level. An explicit focus on the department is important considering that departmental guidelines and choices are the most influential factor in teachers’ text selections (Darragh & Boyd, 2018). Grounded in my own experiences, I offer two guidelines for sustaining change. These practical guidelines reflect my time wearing my pragmatic hat, while the aims of confronting and dismantling homo-, trans-, and queerphobia within my school require me to put on my radical hat. For me, radical aims were met through a pragmatic process.

I first need to contextualize my school community. The school I teach at is a K–12 public school affiliated with a local university. Each secondary grade level is assigned one subject area teacher for the core classes. The English language arts department spans grades 6 through 12, thus, there are seven ELA teachers. I have taught ninth grade English since 2013. Thanks to the employment nondiscrimination policies of the school, I have the legal protection to be an out queer teacher. Although the legislative aegis does not protect me from every form of homophobia, I genuinely feel “safe” as an out queer teacher. I know the political leanings of my fellow English teachers and am constantly heartened when I see them take explicit pro-LGBTQ stances on their social media profiles. Yet, as Thein (2013) details, teachers who identify as “pro-LGBTQ” can still be resistant to incorporate LGBTQ texts within their curriculum.

It’s important for me to note that I was able to do this work because I had allies who believed in it, even if they were not leading it. The suggestions I outline in the following sections would be much more difficult to implement if not for having other teachers—especially teachers who have more experience at the school—who supported my vision. Similarly, I have privilege as a cisgender white male due to institutional racism, sexism, and transphobia. My queer identity does mark me as “other” in the school context, but I have benefited from my white, cisgender, and male identities. My radical pragmatism comes with social capital that is important to note.

Although I have witnessed a number of changes at my school from colleagues who take a radical pragmatist approach, I focus on two specific suggestions here: framing change in institutionally approved language and always looking for new collaborators and possibilities. These ideas emerged from my own experiences broadening curricular material to include LGBTQ voices.

**Frame Change in Institutionally Approved Language**

Schools often adopt various curricular initiatives over the years. There is no guarantee that my school’s initiatives will align with my views of social justice education. In fact, some initiatives can even cause harm to students in the name of improving education. Throughout my years, I have found that cloaking my work in the language of institutionally approved mandates has been a powerful way to advance the change I wish to see at the school. Framing my educational aims in familiar language has helped administrators understand the importance of the work and has provided them responses to address any potential pushback. Of course, there is always an ideological element to any school initiative. Teachers must be aware and critical of what and whose ideology are centered in any new school reform plan. Adopting the language of school-wide plans was an important element in including LGBTQ young adult literature in the secondary English language arts department at my school.
We adopted several school-wide initiatives that encouraged student choice in curricular material. While providing students options in their reading lives hardly seems revolutionary now, the focus on student choice was part of adopting a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. The UDL framework, which is growing in popularity as evident from its inclusion in federal education legislation (“UDL in ESSA”), has three broad columns. One of the columns, Multiple Means of Engagement, became a vehicle for me to argue about the inclusion of LGBTQ texts in classrooms. No language supporting LGBTQ students exists in the UDL framework. However, I argued that student engagement is hindered if they are unable to see themselves in their texts. Drawing on Rudine Sims Bishop’s work (1990), I argued that we should understand engagement through the concept of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. LGBTQ students are denied engagement if they cannot see themselves in the curriculum. By using the language of an institutionally approved initiative, I was able to frame the incorporation of LGBTQ young adult literature as crucial to the school’s embracing of UDL despite the framework’s lack of language for LGBTQ students. Students should have access to choosing LGBTQ texts in their English classrooms if they are to have multiple opportunities for engagement.

As a queer educator, I am ambivalent about positioning LGBTQ texts as “choice” reads for multiple reasons. For one, it allows cisgender and heterosexual students to opt out of reading LGBTQ narratives. Conversely, LGBTQ students are rarely given the ability to opt out of heteronormative whole-class novels that still permeate many secondary ELA courses across the country. However, in the framework of being a radical pragmatist, I recognize that I must work within the realities of my context while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of possibility. J. M. Hermann-Wilmarth and C. L. Ryan (2015) call this approach, in which teachers must be strategic and conscious about their school context in addressing LGBTQ topics, “doing what you can.” I knew that I would be supported in including LGBTQ texts in my classroom library, but centering a queer narrative for an entire class read was not yet permissible. Yet, “doing what I can” today expands the possibilities of what I will be able to do tomorrow.

An additional school-wide initiative aided my goal of building LGBTQ representation across the secondary grades. Our school adopted a standards-based grading approach to rethinking how we assess and provide feedback for student growth. While I have my own qualms about the standards movement in general, I saw the institutional support for standards-based grading as another tool to use to incorporate LGBTQ young adult literature. Creating standards-based rationales for every book, including LGBTQ books, became a way to legitimize curricular choices in the eyes of the institution.

During my second year of teaching I used the language from these institutionally approved plans and included Sara Farizan’s If You Could Be Mine in a book club unit. The next year of teaching I added Farizan’s Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel and Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe to additional units. My colleague who teaches tenth grade English joined me in this endeavor. The following year, each middle school English teacher incorporated LGBTQ young adult literature into their curriculum. My experiences situating LGBTQ young adult literature in terms of institutionally approved mandates alleviated the very real concern about potential parent pushback that my colleagues experienced. With each passing year, LGBTQ young adult literature became more visible across the ELA curriculum.

**Always Look for New Possibilities**

Large-scale, radical change has not happened in big moments in my experience. Rather, the aims remain radical, but the means of achieving those aims happen in small, piecemeal moments. In fact, Rogers (2018) calls for social justice educators to widen the “gaze a bit further to those moment-to-moment acts and actions that make up life in classrooms and communities” (p. 6). The aims of radical change must remain centered, but the pathways to enacting such change need to be dynamic. New opportunities to include LGBTQ voices and experiences in the curriculum have presented themselves. I would not have imagined such opportunities when I first began my teaching career. Thus, my final suggestion is to always look for new possibilities.

One such possibility comes with new colleagues. The school where I work hired new teachers each year, especially in the elementary wing. After spending time together in and out of work, I saw that my colleagues in the elementary wing of the school were supportive of LGBTQ students, families, and teachers. This relationship allowed me to work with the elementary teachers to incorporate LGBTQ titles in grades K through 5. This school year, my ninth grade students critically analyzed their elementary experiences to identify the ones they had never read about in
elementary school. Then, my students located children’s literature that centered those experiences. Finally, my students read those children’s books to the elementary students at my school. Several students selected LGBTQ titles such as *Sparkle Boy*, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Prince and Knight*, and *Real Sisters Pretend* to read to their elementary counterparts.

Another possibility came when I began to mentor preservice teachers through their clinical experiences four years ago. Without fail, every year I am asked how I include LGBTQ books in my classroom. Preservice teachers can express resistance to and trepidation for using LGBTQ books even while vocalizing the importance of such texts in their teacher education coursework (Greathouse & Diccio, 2016). I work with preservice teachers on developing standards-based rationales for including LGBTQ books in their future classrooms. With my pragmatist hat on, I recognize and acknowledge the reluctance and fear that emerging teachers have about including LGBTQ books, especially in a state that has eviscerated due process for teachers. The preservice teachers I mentor may enter a school with a very different sociopolitical landscape than the one in which I work. I am frustrated that not all schools are welcoming of LGBTQ students, families, and texts. I am also against the standardization of curricula and our policymakers’ obsession with academic standards as a panacea. Yet, I cannot ignore these realities as I work to change them. Subsequently, I cannot truly say that I am supporting preservice teachers if I neglect to address the sociopolitical contextual realities.

**Conclusion**

I see LGBTQ texts represented in almost every classroom as I enter the sixth year of teaching at my school. I do not take sole credit for this. As noted here, several English teachers were vital allies in this work. None of the changes that I’ve outlined have completely eradicated heteronormativity and homophobia at my school. Still, there were no LGBTQ young adult literature titles during the first year I taught at this school. Now, LGBTQ voices echo throughout nearly every English classroom. Of course, visible is not the same as centered. And there is still much-needed work to be done in supporting all teachers as we learn how to teach in ways that challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity. While changes have been made, strides for just and equitable LGBTQ representation are still warranted. I am always searching for that space between the radical and the possible. As Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) remind, “Even as we prepare students for the educational system that is, we have a responsibility to work to make the educational system what it could be” (p. 167). It is my belief that the space between the radical and the possible diminishes with each accompanying change.

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**YAL Mentioned. .**

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. 2014. New York, NY.


*If You Could Be Mine* by Sara Farizan. 272 pp. 2014. Algonquin Young Readers, Chapel Hill, NC.


*Real Sisters Pretend* by Megan Dowd Lambert, illustrated by Nicole Tadgell. 32 pp. 2016. Tilbury House, Thomaston, ME.


*Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* by Sara Farizan. 304 pp. 2014. Algonquin Young Readers, Chapel Hill, NC.
References

Join the conversation! Henry “Cody” Miller