

Criteria for the Selection of Young Adult Queer Literature

The authors of this article advocate for the inclusion of YA queer literature and seek to provide educational professionals with a set of criteria for selecting appropriate YA queer literature and incorporating it into the curriculum.

I am queer. I have a lot of really wonderful friends who are of very different sexes and genders. I am very much in love with no one in particular. I've been trying to figure out relationships . . . I don't know if it is responsible for kids my age to be aggressively pursuing monogamous binds, because I don't think we're ready for them. The romanticism within our culture dictates that that's what you are supposed to be looking for. Then [when] we find what we think is love—even if it is love—we do not yet have the tools. I do feel that it is possible at this age to be unintentionally hurtful, just by being irresponsible . . . I am just trying to make sure my lack of responsibility no longer hurts people. . . . Getting socially outcast can be the best and most informative thing that could ever happen to you because you have to learn who you are separate from the pack.

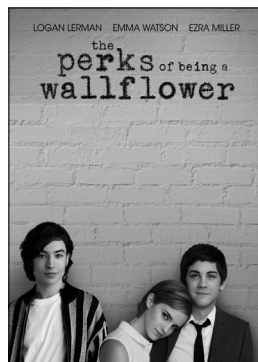
—Ezra Miller

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he quote above by Ezra Miller, the out, young actor who played Patrick in the 2012 movie *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, captures the ambiguous reflections on relationships and social positioning. Ezra has the words to articulate his meanderings, he has the experiences to be reflective, and he represents the voice of contemporary gay youth. As educators, we want all of our young people to be equally able to articulate and be reflective about their social navigation as queer youth. We know that for them to effectively navigate socially, they must be exposed to literature that represents their lives and enables them to be participatory learners in the classroom as well as expressive citizens in society. As Molly V. Blackburn and J. F. Buckley state, teachers “need to discuss the awkward, the different, and the new so that all students get the opportuni-

ties to learn about a range of gender and sexual identities that constitutes everyone's world” (204).

The release of the film *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* seemed to reignite enthusiasm for the novel by Stephen Chbosky. Visitors rushed to libraries and bookstores seeking a copy of the book that highlights the coming of age of a young high school ninth grader named Charlie. In reconsidering this cult classic, the authors of this article realized that there had been lots of “quality” young adult (YA) literature, literature that is marketed toward and developmentally appropriate for students in grades 6–12, that addresses queer identity, that has the potential for curriculum integration, bibliotherapy, and overall reading pleasure. Since 1996 more than 200 novels have been published that center around queer characters (Wickens). The reference to *queer* in referring to queer characters is specifically used to make



an empowering statement about the emancipatory strength of a word that was once used as hate speech and as a collective noun to capture the multiplicity of sexualities and gender expressions that are usually captured as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning/queer. We also realized that there are a number of studies that encourage and model how K–12 educators might make effective use of this wealth of queer literature (Blackburn and Buckley; Clark and Blackburn; Crocco; Schall and Kauffman). And, despite the fact that there is still apprehension about using YA queer literature in schools, there are many educators who choose to mirror the society that we live in by selecting texts that convey diversity and multiple identities. These educators are more likely to use the literature if they feel that they are in a supportive environment and have colleagues with whom to discuss and select YA queer literature (Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning). However, unlike multicultural literature, there are no tools or a set of criteria that can help guide educators through the process of selecting the best of the YA queer literature for use in their schools. We have set out to help remedy that.

There is quite a bit to think about in light of the overall history of YA queer literature. The maturity and fullness of YA queer literature has improved since the publication of John Donovan's *I'll Get There; It Better Be Worth the Trip* in 1969, the first YA novel to deal with homosexuality. YA queer literature has shown a steady progression over the years from texts that perpetuate stereotypes of queer identity and characters "doomed to either a premature death or a life of despair lived at the darkest margins of society" to texts that portray queer characters as "people of various ages, cultures, incomes, and perspectives, as the friends, family, neighbors, and mentors who are part of the social web of connectedness that teens of all sexual orientations navigate on a daily basis" (Cart and Jenkins xvi).

In many ways, it is logical that the literature would grow progressively better. Donovan's 1969 publication aligns with the Stonewall Riots, a time that many historians mark as the beginning of the gay rights movement. The YA literature that was published over the next two decades follows a similar pattern of protagonists seeking visibility, voice, acceptance, and rights. Throughout the history of YA queer literature it is clear that there exists a three-part

framework that Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins refer to as homosexual visibility, gay assimilation, and queer consciousness/community. Many of the YA queer novels of the 1970s and 1980s can be classified under homosexual visibility. It was not unusual to find novels in which the problem was the sexual identity, signified by "coming out," and including the common themes of self-reflection, self-acceptance, or self-hate and seeking the acceptance of friends and family. This focus on the problem, the identity itself, often drained novels of in-depth character portrayals that teens could easily relate to and a lack of innovative plotlines. Still, they offered readers an opportunity to see protagonists acknowledging the existence of these identities. During the 1990s and into the 21st century, we find quite a few novels that may be classified as gay assimilation. These types of novels contain queer characters who exist in the context of their social circles. Their identities simply are and do not drive the plot or characterization of the novel. The sexual identity may have no significant meaning at all to the plot of the novel. More recently we are able to find novels that emphasize queer consciousness/community. In these novels we find that the characters are not alone but are surrounded by supportive friends and family members, living full, realistic, and well-rounded lives.

In reviewing the literature and developing the selection criteria, we chose to place an emphasis on those novels that fall into the queer consciousness/community framework, believing that it is important for educators to delve into contemporary texts and move beyond simple coming-out narratives to engage readers in thinking emphatically and critically.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify YA queer literature selections to assist educators as they make choices about queer literature for use in their schools. The authors incorporated a qualitative approach, first seeking to establish criteria to guide our work. We explored queer literature, queer literature review, and multicultural literature review and criteria checklists for multicultural literature to determine from the texts an emerging set of criteria that could be used to select quality YA queer literature for libraries, classrooms, teacher preparation courses,

and personal reading. As we established criteria, we were also mindful of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices' *Common Core College and Career Readiness Inclusion and Diversity*—inclusion literature usually reflects a world of ordinary people getting along regardless of their diversity. For YA queer literature, the inclusion and

Queer literature is curriculum relevant because it enables responsible instructional practice.

diversity relates to all types of sexual orientation and gender expressions and their intersection with age, religion, race, ethnicity, national origin, ancestry, disability, and socioeconomic background. Characters

will have their distinct gender and sexual orientations as well as their intersections with other aspects of diversity. YA queer literature provides a wealth of intersections as they provide a heightened awareness and increased contemplation of history and cultural stereotypes. These books also focus on the life changes of members of disenfranchised groups and the challenges faced by members of diverse communities attempting to maintain their cultural and sexual identities (Chevalier and Houser).

Criteria and Rationale

As we reviewed the literature and read various adolescent queer literature texts, we were intentional as we sought criteria that would enable educators to select literature that would increase the awareness and sensitivity of pluralism, celebrate diverse cultures and common bonds, and create a comprehensive, timely, and authoritative forum for reviewing materials on and related to queer adolescents (Shields; Vare and Norton). The criteria emerged as we read various articles pertaining to the availability and use of YA queer literature, queer theory, and queer curriculum integration. We established a set of criteria that educators could use to select literature for use in the classroom. The nine criteria that we identified are defined and a rationale is provided that is research-based.

Established Criteria

Curriculum Relevance

The criterion curriculum relevance focuses on whether the literature is relevant to what is taught

in the classroom or suggested as assigned reading to support curricular goals. Educators must ask themselves a series of filtering questions to select literature that is curriculum relevant. What are the disciplinary and interdisciplinary connections with the text? What salient content or subject matter is being conveyed by reading this text? How is this text or the reading of this text aligned with district or state standards? The use of queer literature is curriculum relevant because it enables responsible instructional practice. This means working diligently to help all students reach their college and career readiness goals by seeking to minimize educational inequities. This includes skill in selecting, representing, and opening content for a wide range of students from many different backgrounds; establishing sensitive, respectful, and helpful relationships with all students and their families; and resourcefully using students' out-of-school experiences (Ball and Forzani).

Literary Merit

To select meritorious literature, educators must raise the consciousness of their own presuppositions. They must ask themselves questions such as, What is the theoretical position? In what way would an adolescent read this text? Literature with literary merit unsettles and enables the reader to question what was thought as certain because this literature does not just affirm everything we know (Shields). Meritorious literature is also textually complex. Text complexity focuses on levels of meaning, language convention and clarity, and knowledge demands in which the reader must employ various levels of background knowledge or more specific prior knowledge such as cultural understanding (Zarling). Blackburn and Buckley challenge teachers to provide instruction that is queer-inclusive when it pertains to English language arts curriculum. Michel Foucault also surmises that teaching queer theory works against oppression of being named, labeled, and tagged. Educators must select queer literature that enhances language and cognitive development in the language arts by providing a variety of vocabulary structures and forms. That literature that engages adolescent readers in processes such as comparing, contrasting, hypothesizing, organizing, summarizing, and

critically evaluating is considered literature of literary merit.

Window and Mirrors

Educators should select literature that provides students window and mirror opportunities. Window opportunities expose students to aspects of the literature that offer new insights and perspectives to their existing notions. A mirror opportunity occurs when readers get to relate to what is read through reflective interactions with the characters. The mirror opportunities are enhanced if the literature conveys positive self-images of characters that have affinity with the students. Mirror opportunities take place when the literature focuses on geographical locations, cultural traditions, developmental stages, sexual orientations, and gender expressions that are akin to those of the adolescent students. “The emphasis for using queer literature is its ability to encourage empathy in readers as they reflect on their own feelings, struggles, and experiences through which they have been marginalized” (Meixner 76).

Social Justice and Equity

Social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs (Adams et al.). Systemic equity is defined as the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner—in whatever learning environment that learner has found—has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life (Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich). With these definitions in mind, the YA queer literature selected must be vital in assisting educators in the promotion of social justice and equity values. Themes emanating from YA queer literature that is deemed socially just and equitable will acknowledge power imbalances and oppressive structures of queer people so that readers can thoughtfully engage in conversations pertaining to power, privilege, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. In the literature, there should be opportunities in which basic human rights are embraced

and not denied. There is mainstream acceptance of nonnormative sexual identities as well as established rituals to promote homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender and affirming values that assert a change in the social structure of the dominant culture (Crisp).

Stereotypes

Stereotypes oversimplify a generalization about a particular group and they often carry derogatory implications (Temple, Yokota, and Martinez). Educators should choose literature that discourages false images of queer persons and influences healthy perceptions about sexual orientation and gender expression. Non-stereotypical literature will enable readers to examine their own attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and confront the overt and subdued prejudice that accompanies institutionalized homophobia (Murray). Caroline T. Clark and Mollie V. Blackburn state that YA queer literature should be steeped in queer consciousness that portrays multiple queer characters within supportive communities and families, including families of their own making. Even though educators should select books that offset stereotyping, they should also embrace books that feature characters who are gay and effeminate as well as lesbian and masculine. These archetypes, not stereotypes, need to be discussed so that students can engender the expressive tools needed to support all members of the queer community.

Pride, Resiliency, and Self-Actualization

This criterion is best defined when YA queer literature reflects the achievements, self-awareness, and tenacity of queer characters. These books should champion resiliency as the ability to maximize assets, function effectively, and grow in the face of adversity and challenge. Literature that espouses the growth of pride, resiliency, and self-actualization in its characters is what Don Gorton defines as *literature of hope*. As characters encounter barriers, struggles, and crises, they gain resiliency and exit with a sense of self-confidence. This self-confidence leads to actualization, which is awareness followed by emancipation and empowerment. In this literature, there is a focus on the challenges and possibilities of the characters and not dwelling on despair.

Sexual Expressiveness

Adolescent literature that focuses on sexual expressiveness is viewed as relevant, current, and authentic. Sexuality and gender expression is a de facto part of the human explicitness and expressiveness of those of typical adolescent literature. Characters are depicted in sexual and intimate relationships that are parallel in hugging, touching, kissing, and making out are captured as natural, age-appropriate interactions and not exoticized or eroticized (Watson). Educators should choose books that will enable adolescents to discuss the “fluidity of sexuality, since teens are rejecting traditional labels for sexual orientation, such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, and now invent their own terms like multi-sexual, hetero-flexible, poly-gendered, and omni-sexual” (Martin 38). When selecting queer adolescent literature for instructional purposes, teachers often want to select books that are devoid of sexual encounters. The filter question that teachers should use is whether the same encounters would be considered acceptable if heterosexual characters engaged in them (Blackburn and Buckley).

Offsetting Heterosexism and Homophobia/ Challenging Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is defined as the understanding of straight and gender-normative people as normal and others as not (Blackburn and Clark). Educators should select literature that identifies assumptions about heterosexuality that often regulate the social norms and language of a school with regard to topics of family, love, attraction, and sexual and emotional relationships. This literature should also identify how by ignoring homosexual culture, many learning institutions remain tolerant of verbal harassment (pejorative jokes and epithets) and physical abuse (pushing and kicking) directed at students who are perceived to be queer.

Content Analysis

The authors read books representative of queer identities. The books that we chose to read were those that we viewed as emblematic of queer consciousness and community. Embedded in the books were coming-of-age themes of love, loss, alien-

ation, independence, friendships, and being true to one’s self (Letellier). The authors, using the established criteria, conducted a content analysis of each book to determine which criteria were represented. Table 1 captures the list of books read by the authors and which of the established criteria each book met.

Essential Discourse

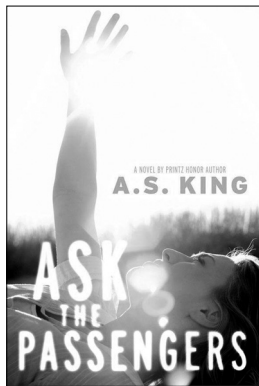
An important component of our work was the essential discourse that occurred among the authors once the reading and content analysis portions were completed. The authors of this article through in-depth discussion, deconstruction, and critical analysis provided examples of how the books met the established criteria. While the criteria were important in helping us identify our selections, the discussions provided a way to further explore the value of the books as they might apply in an educational setting. Because of our diverse educational experiences, we discussed the valuable cross-curricular uses of the books, for example, literature class and health class. The discussions included questions such as: Would this book be one that would be supported in a school setting? In what type of classrooms might this selection be used? How might this selection be integrated within already established instructional goals? How might use of this book provide multiple perspectives? How might this selection support diversity awareness in a schoolwide initiative?

Through our discussions, two criteria emerged as essential: curriculum relevance and literary merit. We felt that these two criteria could serve as important cornerstones for educators who make literature suggestions for their classrooms and individual students as well as recommendations to the district, libraries, and other colleagues. As authors, we recognize that there may be risk factors involved in the selection of queer literature for classroom use. Educators must be armed with justification for why they are using these books as opposed to other canonical texts. To establish the curriculum relevance and literary merits of a text, educators should engage in essential discourses with critical friends to provide the rationale so that the books can be used in class or assigned as ancillary reading. As the educators read and discuss YA queer literature, they

are engaging in the democratic process of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, which are the same concepts and skill sets they want to engender in their learners. The authors wrote this article with the intentional desire that educators could use our manuscript as an ally text as they make the decision to use YA queer literature as a valid replacement for traditional literature.

Featured Books Meeting Established Criteria

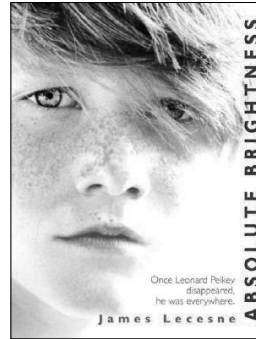
As we read the reviews and articles while creating the criteria, we identified several YA literature texts that were written about queer youth either as main characters or secondary characters. The books below represent those that feature the essential criteria of curriculum relevance and literary merit. Our descriptions provide a synopsis of the book or short story as well as commentary about how the book aligns with the other criteria.



Lesbian

Ask the Passengers by A. S. King (New York: Little, 2012) is about a teenage girl named Astrid Jones who is struggling with her sexual identity. Astrid's story meets some portion of each of the nine identified criterion. However, only four will be discussed in this annotation.

The criterion of curriculum relevance is apparent as we see the characters grapple with secrecy and change. The criterion of literary merit is evident as the book enhances language and cognitive development via the use of a variety of vocabulary structures. There are many opportunities for readers to experience windows and mirror perspectives. While Astrid's dilemma is the primary component, it is more than just Astrid coming to terms with her sexuality; the experiences of the people surrounding her dilemma are significant as well. In addition, the criterion of pride, resiliency, and self-actualization is palpable as readers watch Astrid encounter adversity, work through crisis, and emerge with a sense of self and of self-confidence.



Gay

Absolute Brightness by James Lecesne (New York: Harper, 2008)—“Once Leonard Pelkey disappeared, he was everywhere.” This brief statement of anticipation captures the experiences of small town, USA,

where a Leonard Pelkey-type of boy is unusual. The book is relevant to curriculum that discusses the democratic process of arrests, accusations, investigations, trials, and sentencing. Educators will find that the book houses many examples of literary merit as the author is masterful at storytelling through the use of suspense, figurative language, voice, character development, and visual imagery. Leonard represents the stereotypical gay young man in his appearance and behavior, but there is no mentioning of his gayness or any sexual expressiveness. The author simply describes the character and the readers make their own hegemonic assumptions. The book focuses on diversity and inclusion because the town represents different ethnicities, but the small town values are expressed by all and no one group seems to be marginalized.



Bisexual

Boyfriends with Girlfriends by Alex Sanchez (New York: Simon, 2011) captures the lives of Sergio, Allie, Kimiko, and Lance. Their lives unfold throughout the book as the four main characters navigate their varied familial, personal, and sexual identities and relationships.

This book has curriculum relevance because the concepts of sexual identity, relationships, intimacy, and sexual exploration should be discussed in sociology, psychology, or health courses. The book has literary merit because of the thematic concept of intersections as the various characters'

TABLE 1. Examples of Books Meeting Select Established Criteria

Category/ Book	Curriculum Relevance	Literary Merit	Window and Mirrors	Social Justice and Equity	Stereotypes	Pride, Resiliency, and Self-Actualization	Sexual Expressiveness	Inclusion and Diversity	Offsetting Heterosexism and Homophobia/Challenging Heteronormativity
Lesbian									
<i>Ask the Passengers</i> , A. S. King	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Finding H. F.</i> , Julia Watts	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Gravel Queen</i> , Tea Benduhn			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Name Me Nobody</i> , Lois-Ann Yamanaka	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
<i>The Miseducation of Cameron Post</i> , Emily M. Danforth	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Gay									
<i>Absolute Brightness</i> , James Lecesne	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
<i>Archie's Pal Kevin Keller, Welcome to Riverdale</i> , Dan Parent		X	X		X	X			X
<i>Hero</i> , Perry Moore	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You</i> , Peter Cameron	X	X				X		X	
<i>Someone Is Watching</i> , Mark Roeder			X		X	X	X		X
<i>Stitches</i> , Glen Huser			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>The God Box</i> , Alex Sanchez	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X

Bisexual										
<i>A Really Nice Prom Mess</i> , Brian Sloan								X	X	
<i>Boyfriends with Girlfriends</i> , Alex Sanchez	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>My Heartbeat</i> , Garret Freymann-Weyr	X			X	X			X	X	
<i>Saints of Augustine</i> , P. E. Ryan	X			X			X	X		X
Transgender										
<i>Almost Perfect</i> , Brian Katcher		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Happy Families</i> , Tanita S. Davis		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>I Am J</i> , Cris Beam	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Luna</i> , Julie Anne Peters	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Questioning/Queer										
<i>Boy Meets Boy</i> , David Levithan	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Hard Love</i> , Ellen Wittlinger	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>The Flip Side</i> , Andrew Matthews	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>The Full Spectrum</i> , David Levithan and Billy Merrell	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>The House You Pass on the Way</i> , Jacqueline Woodson	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

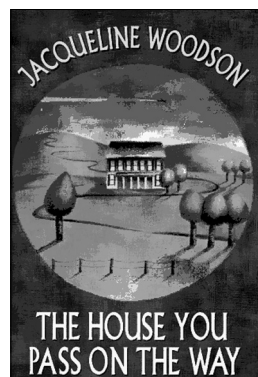
lives ebb and flow together. These intersections include the blending of different ethnicities and their stances toward sexuality as well as a focus on diversity in sexuality (gay, straight, bisexual, lesbian, and questioning). The book also explores all aspects of sexual expressiveness including reflections on heterosexual intercourse, same-sex kissing and touching, and an account of what is described as hand sex as explored by Lance and Sergio. The book truly captures the myriad complications that adolescents face as they are trying to discover who they are as sexual expressive beings, family members, school attendees, and friends.



Transgender

I am J by Cris Beam (New York: Little, 2011) is about J (Jennifer) who has known for most of his life that he is in the wrong body. Now a senior in high school, J struggles with the relationships in his life as he tries to come to terms with his inner and physical identities.

J leaves home for a brief time and takes this opportunity to embrace what he has always known and to begin the process of physically transitioning from female to male. All identified criterion are met in *I am J*. The text is a tightly woven rendering of fear, internal struggle, and denial. The desire for acceptance and understanding is palpable in this text, and many students can relate to these desires. The characters are complex and well-rounded. And, while the characters do struggle with J and his identity, the author conveys these struggles in a manner that is realistic and just. Finally, there is one episode where J kisses his best friend who he has been falling steadily in love with over time. Although Melissa interrupts the kiss and is angry with him and with her own physical response, the book gives J the opportunity to participate in, and the reader to witness, developmentally appropriate acts of sexual intimacy, which is a rarity in this field of YA literature.



Queer/Questioning

The House You Pass on the Way by Jacqueline Woodson (New York: Speak, 2003) chronicles the experience of Staggerlee, a 14-year-old biracial girl living in a small southern town called Sweet Gum. Despite having a close-knit and supportive

family, Staggerlee recognizes she has no one who understands who she is or to talk to about her feelings of rejection until her adoptive cousin Trout comes from Baltimore to visit. The two cousins learn they both had their first crushes on girls and spend the summer reflecting on what it may mean to be gay. In addition to meeting the outlined criteria for curriculum relevance and literary merit, *The House You Pass on the Way* also highlights a few other selected criteria. First, the book's best feature is its exploration into inclusion and diversity by providing an avenue for the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality to be examined. In the book Staggerlee's struggle to identify her ethnicity, her concept of femininity, and her sexuality are explored individually and simultaneously as she works toward self-acceptance. Additionally, in meeting the criteria for addressing stereotypes, *The House You Pass on the Way* works to challenge the image of a white-gay character living in an urban environment as the typical queer character by presenting the story of an adolescent-biracial girl living in the South.

Application

Curriculum Integration Rationale

As we developed the criteria for selection and the featured books, we realized that this work would be futile if we did not provide a rationale for curriculum integration. Regardless of how committed readers of this article are to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, in some cases and places the integration of YA queer literature in the classroom will be viewed as a controversial disruption. To move the conversation about curriculum integration of YA queer literature from the controversial to the commonplace, the National Council of Teachers

of English in 2009 passed a series of resolutions to prepare “students for citizenship in a diverse society” (14), which included a focus on queer students, teachers, and parents and the education practices that educators will need to provide services and support for this demographic.

As schools in the United States are typically heterosexist and homophobic institutions that often foster fears of queer individuals, few of them advocate for studying literature addressing sexual diversity (Blackburn and Buckley). Schools represent the places where gender and sexual identities are developed, making it imperative for educators to challenge the unwritten curriculum of schools that normalize homophobic patterns, support healthy development, and address anti-gay biases that often result in high levels of absenteeism, dropouts, and suicide for gay youth (Bryan; Crocco). When such literature is excluded from the curricula, all students learn that queer persons are not worth mentioning and the status quo of socially constructed gender and sexual identity hierarchies are allowed to perpetuate (Blackburn and Buckley; Nakkula and Toshalis). However, by learning about such individuals and their human struggles, students are given the opportunity to surrender some of their hate and begin to intellectually engage with mores, values, and individuals they often struggle to accept socially (Blackburn and Buckley). The integration of YA queer literature into the curriculum also supports the development of strong readers, writers, and critical thinkers in a culturally diverse society and helps students develop an awareness of stereotyping and discrimination (Laine). Integrating inclusive literature can also highlight the intersections between sexuality, identity, and literature (Moje and MuQaribu). Additionally, curriculum integration of YA queer literature capitalizes on the interdependence of the emotional, social, and intellectual aspects of learning as students become engaged in identifying, building projects around, and assessing their mastery of relevant core competencies (Bryan).

Integrating Queer Literature into the Classroom


Before integration of YA queer literature into curriculum can occur, teachers must first observe and challenge their attitudes about this issue. If indi-

viduals never explore their homophobia and the ways it affects students, the likelihood of interrupting the ideological heterosexism in schools is weak (Hermann-Wilmarth). Next, teachers should position students as queer or straight allies because “by refusing to position students as homophobes from the start disrupts the heteronormativity that is so typical in classrooms and challenge students to live up to the expectations of being supportive of queer rights and people” (Clark and Blackburn 28). In addition, it is imperative that educators hold students accountable for their statements and actions. Teachers must intentionally decouple the commentary from religious beliefs and parents’ assumptions because by positioning students as straight and homophobic and then leaving these normative beliefs unchallenged, teachers are providing tacit affirmation and may unwillingly promote heterosexism and homophobia in schools (Clark and Blackburn).

An essential element for integrating YA queer literature into classrooms is helping students to develop critical literacy. William P. Banks discussed the importance of critical literacy and getting learners to recognize that the texts that they are exposed to can help them shape their lives. Banks stated that “a critical literacy approach to [queer] literature might, for example, ask students to compare an experience of violence as represented in a novel to . . . attacks on queer youth, and ask questions about how and why these events happen, as well as how these events are reported in the news” (34). Through this critical literacy lens the reader learns the language for describing themselves, for narrating themselves into existence, and for articulating their needs and values. According to Banks, a teacher’s task is to encourage learners to read available YA queer literature both “empathetically and critically [and be] aware of the contexts that bring these books into existence and how changes in our culture could provide more positive, complex experiences for us all” (36).

As part of developing critical literacy skills, a conscious effort must be made by educators to

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encourage students to understand themes, concepts, and issues from different perspectives and to decide to take action to solve problems they identify in curricular activities (Crocco). The components of this task can be accomplished by having students analyze, research, and respond to homophobia with letter writing, survey research, volunteer activities, or even lobbying of politicians. Also, by employing the Socratic method through both small- and large-group discussions, students can vocalize their thinking and feeling and use critical thinking and analysis skills in their journaling (Blackburn and Buckley; Laine). These discussions and writing activities on same-sex expressions and relationships can be incorporated into already existing larger discussions on diversity of family, relationships, communities, and discrimination experiences. They can even be incorporated during the study of civil, human, and social rights concepts often explored in social studies related content (Crocco; Schall and Kaufmann). 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Tune in to the ReadWriteThink.org podcast episode "Gay and Lesbian Characters in Young Adult Literature" to hear about the many ways in which contemporary authors are including gay, lesbian, and transgender characters in their novels for teens, and listen for recommendations of new titles on these topics. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/lesbian-characters-young-adult-30329.html>

Preferences

They usually aren't mine,
even if I've dropped the menu
and set them myself
from a long list of possibilities.

Deco Type Naskh
Kailasa—I don't know either font

but both intrigue,
like the English muffin I ate this morning
with a poached egg and roasted peppers—
runny yolk on a white plate.

A Times New Roman life—
Students, animated by Nietzsche's
murdering of god and willingness
to set his own moral terms,

determine to create an authentic existence
as college applications come due,

as questions arrive with smiles
(which college? why that major?),

as I score their papers and enter grades:
my best judgment of their progress

along a long line of preferences
that reflect a readiness to step

beyond these glass doors
locked for their safety.

—Jason A. Zevenbergen
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