Caroline T. Clark and Mollie V. Blackburn

Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People: What's Possible?

***Assigning LGBT texts to students is a positive step but not enough, according to the authors. Teachers must be careful about how they* position *students as readers of LGBT texts, and they should help students learn to read such texts for* pleasure.**

As professors and teacher educators at a large Midwestern university, we work with preservice middle and secondary English language arts teachers. Our work is shaped, in part, by the assumption that English language arts classrooms can be significant sites for combating homophobia and heterosexism in schools, and that reading LGBT-themed literature is one of the best ways to do this work. We encourage this stance in our preservice teachers and model it in our teaching through the use of such literature in our classrooms. The recent NCTE "Resolution on Strengthening Teacher Knowledge of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Issues" affirms and reinforces our commitment to this work.

Students' responses are mixed. For some, teaching LGBT-themed texts seems impossible. They cannot imagine how teachers, especially novice ones, can do this work. This stance is often undergirded by a belief that teaching needs to be a value-free enterprise. Despite being personally antihomophobic, they believe that teachers must be neutral and apolitical in their classrooms. While other students embrace the idea of entering the classroom as LGBTQ people or allies and explicitly taking up issues of heterosexism and homophobia in their teaching, they feel limited in their sense of *how* to do this work. Whether in their experiences as K–12 students, in their placement schools, or in their teacher preparation programs, most students see few if any models of using LGBT-themed literature in curricula and, hence, have a limited vision and language for doing more explicit antihomophobia and antiheterosexist work as part of their teaching.

Our belief that using LGBT-themed literature in schools is possible and necessary, coupled with students' sense that either it cannot or is not being done, prompted us to write this article. While we are sympathetic with students' perspectives, and agree that examples are limited, such work is happening and has been documented in scholarship. One goal of this article, then, is to bring that scholarship together to showcase what is happening in classrooms. A second, related goal is to trouble this scholarship and consider how work around LGBT-themed literature in classrooms may be limited by the context of school. Through analysis of these studies, we identify limitations and constraints relative to *positioning* of readers and texts, the acknowledgment and uptake of *pleasure* around these readings, and issues of *politics* and *power* that shape engagements with LGBT-themed literature in schools. Finally, drawing from work in out-of-school, queer-inclusive communities, we suggest ways of opening up spaces in classrooms to a range of reading positions and work around texts that offer more possibilities for young people to become readers of LGBT-themed literature in schools and to work with adults against homophobia and heterosexism.

Documenting Readings of LGBT-Themed Literature in Schools

In the past decade, scholars have argued for queer-inclusive K–12 English language arts (Allan; Blackburn and Buckley; King and Schneider) and for expanding texts in schools to include LGBT-themed young adult literature (Cart and Jenkins; Gallo) and lesbian and gay readings (Reese). While these

studies are valuable in developing a rationale for using queer texts in schools, they do not document the use of these texts in actual K–12 classrooms and therefore do not provide the concrete images of practice that novice teachers, especially, may need to gauge the possibilities for using LGBT-themed literature in their work.

Though limited, there is a body of scholarship that documents readings of LGBT-themed children's and YA literature in schools, particularly in high school English classrooms. For example, Allen Carey-Webb describes the work of Tisha Pankop, an English teacher in an inner-city, US high school. Pankop's students read Bruce Coville's "Am I Blue?" the title story in a collection of young adult lesbian and gay-themed stories. Steven Z. Athanases focuses on Reiko Liu, a teacher in a multiethnic urban high school in the San Francisco area. As part of his several-year study, Athanases documented Liu's students' responses to Brian McNaught's essay "Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual." Vicky Greenbaum and Marvin Hoffman describe their work as high school English teachers engaging students in work around LGBT themes. As a closeted teacher, Greenbaum sought to challenge the assumed absence and invisibility of lesbian and gay content, students, and experiences in schools by examining gay and lesbian subtexts in canonical works (e.g., *Catcher in the Rye*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). In contrast, Hoffman taught Harvey Fierstein's play *Torch Song Trilogy*, a text in which gay and lesbian themes are prominent, to his high school creative writing students in Houston, Texas.

Taken together, these studies show that reading LGBT-themed literature does and should happen in schools.

Engaging student readers with LGBT-themed literature is not limited to high school. Greg Hamilton taught A. M. Homes's YA novel *Jack* (the title character is the straight son of a gay father) to his middle school students in New York in response to an eighth-grade student's letter to the faculty complaining about homophobia in the school. Gloria Kauffman, a teacher in an elementary, multiage, structured English immersion classroom in a large Tucson, Arizona, school district, introduced picture books with gay and lesbian characters to her students in a one-day literature unit that she and Janine Schall documented (Schall and Kauffman). And, in a more comprehensive study, Debbie Epstein describes the complicated negotiations of gender and sexuality in a Year 5 (nine- and ten-year-olds) classroom in north London. Working with a popular, out-to-his-colleagues, gay teacher, Mr. Stuart, Epstein examines his teaching on the topic "Me, My Family, and My History." Focal texts for the topic included the picture book *Asha's Mums* by Rosamund Elwin and Michele Paulse and the photopack *What Is a Family?*

Like us, many of these scholars were prompted to conduct their research in response to preservice teachers who doubted such teaching was possible. Hoffman, for example, taught *Torch Song Trilogy* in response to his work with preservice teachers who felt that reading gay-themed texts with students in public high schools was unimaginable. Similarly, Schall and Kauffmann were prompted by their work with preservice teachers who argued such books were "inappropriate" and that children did not and could not know about or understand issues of homosexuality. Taken together, these studies show that reading LGBT-themed literature does and should happen in schools.

Troubling Readings

While these studies show possibilities for reading LGBT-themed literature in classrooms, they are also problematic, in part because of the schools in which those classrooms are located. Occurring in institutions that are both implicitly and explicitly homophobic and heterosexist (Crocco; Friend; Kosciw), school-based readings of LGBT-themed texts are inevitably shaped by homophobia and heteronormativity (Epstein). As a result, queer youth may not only feel disconnected from school, a place that may feel hateful and unwelcoming, but also from literacy, particularly conventional reading and writing (Blackburn, "Exploring;" de Castell and Jenson). Moreover, the dynamics shaped by homophobia and heteronormativity in schools influence the positioning of readers and texts, the degree to which students enjoy the readings, and the political action sparked by this work.

Positioning, Pleasure, and Politics in Classroom Readings of LGBT-Themed Texts

In all of these studies, how readers and texts in the classroom were positioned in relation to the texts afforded different possibilities to engage with LGBT-themed literature and combat heterosexism and homophobia. Indeed, these positionings often worked to exacerbate the homophobia already at work in schools. Across the studies we researched, teachers, texts, and/or institutions invariably presumed student readers to be straight and often aggressively homophobic, even when they deemed it possible that students might have a loving relationship with someone who is lesbian or gay—an aunt, uncle, sibling, cousin, or the like. Hoffman, for example, suggests, "it is hard to imagine a more homophobic group" (56) in describing his students, most of whom were racial minorities identified as having intellectual gifts.[1] And, in the classroom Schall and Kauffmann examined, students were positioned as straight and were allowed the choice of not engaging with LGBT-themed texts if they felt uncomfortable—a choice that was made by 4 of the children in a class of 29. Similarly, one of Liu's goals for McNaught's essay was to help "especially some of the more homophobic members of our class to understand where this [gay] person is coming from" (Athanases 232). Accompanying this goal, however, was the tacit suggestion that it was acceptable to maintain a homophobic position in this classroom. Liu started this ethnic literature unit with a chapter from Martin Luther King Jr.'s book *Stride Toward Freedom* because King "brings to life the age-old notions of love as a unifying force, of hating the sin, but not the sinner" (Athanases 237). This rationale is problematic in two ways: one, that homosexuality is a sin and that gay and lesbian people are sinners; and two, that straight students, who are understood to be homophobic, are affirmed in both viewing their gay peers as sinners and hating their fundamental sexual orientations and gender identities. This is not to say that all of Liu's students were homophobic or even straight—in fact, one student in the class came out as a lesbian a year and a half after the classroom reading—but all students were *positioned* as straight and generally homophobic.

Across the classrooms these researchers studied, homophobia was normalized, and students were free and even empowered to maintain a homophobic position, at times in ways that were self-degrading. Greenbaum's aims, for example, were to reach both gay/lesbian and straight-identified students, helping the former hear their voices actively in texts, and helping the latter see the range of "ways to be sexual in the world" (71). Even with these expressed goals, however, Greenbaum's single gay-identified student, who was not out to his peers, felt he could only enter a class discussion and raise issues related to homosexuality "in homophobic disguise," asking in a discussion of Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*, "Is this about faggots?" (72). His question reinforces the emphatic positioning of young people as straight and homophobic in schools and the socially sanctioned demand that students position themselves as such, despite Greenbaum's efforts.

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Likewise, texts in these classrooms were positioned in ways that privileged didactic purposes over pleasure or political action and thus subtly reinforced homophobia and heteronormativity. Pankop's use of "Am I Blue?" for example, occurs in a unit on "Fear," a topic that presumes homophobia in its basest terms ("fear of gay people") and that gays and lesbians lead fear-filled lives. In both cases, the texts are selected to serve as windows (Bishop) through which straight students might see into the world of a homosexual character.

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Schall and Kauffman embedded children's literature with lesbian and gay characters in a unit on "Survival," with a focus on name-calling on the playground. Students were invited to engage with a range of picture books, but the way the teachers framed the unit caused some confusion, because children were expected to recognize that calling

someone "gay" or "fag" was an insult, but also to discuss positive portrayals of gay people, a discussion that required them to use *gay* in positive ways.

Liu approached "Dear Anita" similarly, based on her positioning of students as homophobic and her sense that this homophobia was linked, in part, to religion.[2] She explicitly aimed to expose students to an author, McNaught, who was family-oriented and religious, traits he shared with many of her students, and also gay, an identity that was apparently at odds with nearly all of her students.

In all cases texts were chosen as a means for exposing students to issues pertinent to LGBTQ people so as to provoke empathy, understanding, and a sense of commonality across differences. In no cases were texts ever presented as possible mirrors (Bishop) for LBGTQ readers to examine and reflect on their possible queer selves in a text.

These didactic positionings of texts may lead, at best, to sympathetic responses in straight students who now feel sorry for gay people, a response that leaves LGBTQ students in the classroom positioned as pitiable. That these texts might provoke pleasure or empower readers to take political action is rarely, if ever, a consideration. Moreover, by exposing students to LGBT-themed literature in schools without a political end goal of actively combating homophobia and heterosexism, teachers fail to hold themselves and their students accountable. Teachers can say they have done their work by raising issues and making texts available, but that it is not their job to challenge their homophobic, heterosexist students (see, e.g., Schneider). However, by positioning students as straight and homophobic and then leaving these normative beliefs unchallenged, teachers are tacitly—if not willfully—affirming and even promoting heterosexism and homophobia in schools.

By refusing to position students as homophobes, teachers can, from the start, disrupt the heteronormativity that is so typical in classrooms and challenge students to live up to the expectation of being supportive of LGBT rights and people.

Alternative Approaches to Positioning, Pleasure, and Politics

The issues we see in the scholarship representing the reading and discussion of LGBT-themed literature in English language arts classrooms have taken quite different shapes in our similar work outside of classrooms. We offer and illustrate suggestions designed to improve the use of LGBT-themed literature in classrooms by drawing primarily on our work with a book discussion group comprised of teachers and high school students who met ten times over two years to select, read, and discuss LGBT-themed literature. Both of us, and all of the other adult participants, are members of the Pink TIGers (Blackburn, "Pink"), a teacher inquiry group focused on combating heterosexism and homophobia in classrooms and schools through literature and film. The youth participants are the students of Pink TIGers.

When reading and discussing LGBT-themed literature in classrooms, teachers could position students as LGBTQ people or their straight allies or potential allies. In our book group, for example, all the teachers were invited because of their affiliation with the Pink TIGers. All of the youth were invited either because of their affiliations with their schools' Gay-Straight Alliances or with the local LGBTQ youth center. Participation was voluntary. As a result, it was safe to assume that everyone in the group was either LGBTQ or a straight ally. This is not to say that no one ever exhibited homophobia. People did. Still, assuming that everyone was LGBTQ or a straight ally made homophobia, rather than homosexuality, nonnormative. By refusing to position students as homophobes, teachers can, from the start, disrupt the heteronormativity that is so typical in classrooms and challenge students to live up to the expectation of being supportive of LGBT rights and people.

How a teacher positions texts in the curriculum plays an important role in creating classroom environments that either reinscribe or disrupt heteronormativity and support LGBTQ people and their straight allies or not. When LGBT-themed literature is read and discussed on a single day or even in a single unit of the school year, such literature is positioned as nonnormative. In all the cases we reviewed, reading LGBT-themed texts was a singular event, typically occurring only once in the school year and at times on a single day. Most of these studies chronicle the single time an LGBT-themed text was ever taken up in the course of a student's K–12 schooling. One exception was

Greenbaum, but no explicitly LGBT-themed texts were read in her class. Rather, canonical texts were read to uncover hidden subtexts, and for the first time, possible homoerotic subtexts were addressed. These typically singular engagements with LGBT-themed texts, along with their topical, didactic focus, positioned this literature as nonnormative.

Our book discussion group showed an alternative by meeting multiple times across two years. We did not read LGBT-themed literature all day, every day, or at the expense of texts with different themes, but we read it consistently over time. Thus, such literature became normative. If LGBT-themed literature were read throughout the school year in relationship to a variety of topics and units, then it would disrupt the notion of what is normal, at least in the context of the classroom in which it was being studied. Moreover, if this literature were engaged in over time, students would be challenged repeatedly to consider what it means for them to be LGBTQ, allied, or homophobic.

However, positioning of texts is complicated. Not only can texts be positioned as normative or not, they can also be positioned as windows or mirrors, as we mention above. For example, when a text focuses primarily on an LGBTQ character, it is positioned by LGBTQ readers as a mirror, a way of seeing themselves. These same students, however, may position a text written from the perspective of a straight person struggling with his or her homophobia as a window into people who have the potential to affect their lives dramatically, positively and negatively. This same text, of course, may be positioned by non-LGBTQ students as a mirror.

This positioning is further complicated by multiple identities. For example, in our book discussion group, we read *Finding H.F.*, in which the narrator is a white lesbian. This text served as both a mirror and a window, but in different ways, for the white gay male and the Mexican American straight female in the group. We suggest encouraging diverse students to consider texts as both possible mirrors and windows. This goal is achievable when a wide range of LGBT-themed literature is read and discussed regularly throughout the school year.

When choosing LGBT-themed literature to read and discuss in English language arts (ELA) classrooms, it is also important to consider how the texts represent LGBTQ people. Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins describe fictional portrayals of lesbian, gay, and queer characters in young adult literature from 1969 through 2004. Their model describes three dominant portrayals of LGBTQ characters. Stories of "homosexual visibility" (HV) typically portray a single character, assumed to be straight, who comes out or is outed as gay or lesbian. The responses, or potential responses, of other characters are the problem that drives the stories. HV books make homosexuality visible in a homophobic world. "Gay assimilation" (GA) stories present gay/lesbian characters as no different from straight characters aside from their sexuality. They portray sexual identity as just another characteristic, much like being left-handed or having red hair. Cart and Jenkins call their final category "queer consciousness/community" (QC); however, their application of this term emphasizes community over consciousness. QC books portray multiple LGBTQ characters within supportive communities and families, including families of their own making. They show the diversity of LGBTQ characters and dispel the myth that being gay means being alone.

We found that the books that attracted the youths in our book groups were ones that give a sense of queer youth in queer communities. For example, the first book youth selected was David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy.* The narrator, Paul, is a gay male high school student in a school where everyday experience includes cheerleaders who ride Harleys, a homecoming queen who used to be a guy named Daryl, and a Gay-Straight Alliance that was formed to help the straight kids learn how to dance. Cart and Jenkins categorize this book as both QC and GA: QC because the book has many queer characters who share developed relationships, and GA because their sexual and gender identities are simply a given in the story and not distinctive from those of their straight peers. Only one of the group-selected books is one that Cart and Jenkins categorize as HV: Carol Plum-Ucci's *What Happened to Lani Garver*; even this categorization is dubious because it disregards the queer community the characters experienced in Philadelphia.

The appeal of QC books and the relative lack of appeal of HV books to these youths is particularly interesting because, as Cart and Jenkins point out, most LGBT-themed YA literature does the work of making homosexuality visible, less of it

does the work of showing how gay and straight people are alike, and little of it portrays queer characters' connections to their queer communities. Based on our experience of youths' preferences and Cart and Jenkins' assessment of the extant LGBT-themed YA literature, teachers must make a deliberate effort to include literature that falls into the QC category.

It is imperative to consider readers' pleasure when selecting LGBT-themed texts in ELA classrooms. Because high school students gravitate toward it, we advocate using YA literature. This is evident in our book discussion group, where the majority of LGBT-themed literature selected, read, and discussed (nine of twelve books) was targeted toward young adults. These include the texts mentioned above as well as Kim Wallace's *Erik and Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High* and *Erik and Isabelle: Sophomore Year at Foresthill High,* Julie Anne Peters' *Keeping You a Secret,* Marion Dane Bauer's *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence,* and Perry Moore's *Hero.* All of these books were selected collaboratively by adult and youth participants, but the youths' choices were always prioritized. These choices, combined with youths' consistent voluntary participation, indicate the pleasure these youth readers find in LGBT-themed YA literature.

Pleasure is also an important consideration in determining how texts are used. Using texts primarily for didactic purposes can destroy the pleasure of reading even the most enjoyable work.

Pleasure is also an important consideration in determining how texts are used. Using texts primarily for didactic purposes can destroy the pleasure of reading even the most enjoyable work. In contrast, deliberately foregrounding pleasure can improve the experience of reading and discussing even a mediocre text. For example, the youth in the book discussion group so thoroughly enjoyed Wallace's *Erik and Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High* that they selected its sequel for the following meeting. One person even said that he'd like to read and discuss all four of the books during each of his correlating high school years. Between the meetings in which we discussed both the first and second books in Wallace's series, a summer passed, and the youth seemed to become more sophisticated readers. As such, they opted not to continue with the series because the books seemed to them a bit simplistic. Even though we would have agreed with such an assessment after reading the first book, we allowed youths' desires to guide our selection because we were more interested in the books being pleasurable than having them teach a particular lesson. (We do recognize, however, that there are now many high-quality and pleasurable LGBT-themed YA books available.)

Another way to foster students' pleasure with respect to LGBT-themed literature is to promote a wide array of responses. Here, we turn away from our book discussion group to other work in the field. Drawing on Erica Halverson's work with the About Face Youth Theatre, a program in which LGBTQ adolescents represent themselves through theater (see p. 116, this issue), we advocate inviting responses that engage the personal through crafting and performing narratives that strive to embody

Ways to Counter Heterosexism and Homophobia in Classrooms

Position your students as LGBT people or their straight allies. They are likely being positioned as straight and/or homophobic in most other parts of their lives (e.g., the English teacher who describes to her students the male protagonist in a story as "every girl's dream," or the football coach who refers to his players as "a bunch of girls").

- When students position themselves as homophobic, introduce them to other possible positionings by reading LGBT-themed literature with them.
- Read LGBT-themed literature with students across the school year in association with a variety of topics and units.
- Include a wide range of literature that works to serve as mirrors and windows for diverse students.
- Choose literature that does not just make homosexuality visible, but also shows queer people in queer communities; young people need to know that being gay does not mean being alone.
- Choose high-quality, pleasurable YA literature, and involve students in making those choices.
- Invite a wide range of ways to respond to this literature.
- Work with like-minded colleagues to recognize and challenge each other's biases and to support one another to use LGBTQ literature.
- Engage in the perpetual process of making educational contexts more LGBTQ-friendly every day.

the universal. And, drawing on de Castell and Jenson's research with queer youth involved in street culture, we advocate for multimodal responses. De Castell and Jenson found that multimodal documentation and composition is not only more compelling for youth, but it also foregrounds the expertise of young people.

For educators, knowing one's biases and working against them is critical for teaching LGBT-themed texts. Such work is political and challenges inequitable power dynamics. Most people in the United States have been raised in homophobic contexts, to various degrees. That we have taken on some of those values is not surprising. It would be more surprising if we had not. It is imperative, however, to acknowledge them and strive to change them. Because we are all always learning, we must be prepared to make mistakes, reflect on them, learn from them, and improve on them. This is a valuable process, not an embarrassing one. We need to take pride but never be complacent in our learning.

For us, learning about our own biases and working to change them has happened most effectively with the Pink TIGers, a group that has been together for five years. In this teacher inquiry group, we took responsibility to name instances of homophobia, even though it was considerably more difficult when we saw it in one another than when we saw it in students, colleagues, administrators, or students' parents. Working together over time, we developed trust that our relationships could survive the difficulty of naming homophobia, among other forms of prejudice, in ourselves. As a result, we became a group that talked about efforts to combat homophobia in schools and through this talk came to understand our mistakes as well as alternative ways of doing our work. With this group in mind, we advocate for teachers to connect with colleagues who share similar commitments.

Just as important is our responsibility to make educational contexts more LGBTQ-friendly every day. The youths in our book discussion group, for example, talked about the risks of reading a book such as *Boy Meets Boy*, where the pink words of the title on the cover enclosed in three candy hearts make its LGBT theme clear. They discussed the harassment they endured because of reading such books in school. It is worth noting that after reading this book, they next chose Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a book with a stark cover that does not indicate in any way that a character in the book is gay. In these ways, the book discussion group reminded us that reading LGBT-themed texts in schools requires considerable and constant work to combat and prevent homophobia.

For those who cannot imagine how novice middle and secondary teachers can do antihomophobia work without professional risk, we empathize but cannot fully console.

As teacher educators, we have long argued that teaching cannot and should not be value-free, neutral, or apolitical. We return to our classrooms prepared to continue that discussion. For those who cannot imagine how novice middle and secondary teachers can do antihomophobia work without professional risk, we empathize but cannot fully console. This work is risky, and as long as heterosexism and homophobia are institutionally supported forms of oppression, it will continue to be so. But this risky work has the potential to dismantle such oppression, and this makes it worth doing. EJ

Notes

1. We recognize that our quoting of Hoffman implies a correlation between racial minorities and homophobia. This is not a correlation that we understand to be true.

2. We recognize that our description of Liu's students, based on Athaneses's article, implies a correlation between religion and homophobia. Although we understand the correlation, it is not one that we understand to be monolithically true.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION — **Traci Gardner, RWT**

Disrupt heteronormativity with "Alphabiography Project: Totally You," which asks students to write autobiographies modeled on the structure of *Totally Joe* by James Howe. Students do more than simply read a text with a gay protagonist in this activity. The voice of this main character becomes the model for their stories. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=937