

Fight for Your Right: Censorship, Selection, and LGBTQ Literature

Three authors collaborate in a powerful defense of teaching LGBTQ literature for the good of all students. The piece ends with a list of recommended titles.

The Silencing of LGBTQ Students (Jen Scott Curwood)

It was April 25, 2008. With just one minute until the school day ended, countless students were watching the clock, their eyes following the second hand. As the final bell rang at 3:20 p.m., the screams from over 60 teens reverberated throughout the high school. They smiled and laughed, knowing that it was the end of the annual Day of Silence—knowing that they had taken a stand.

Students at this Midwestern high school weren't alone: Over 7,500 middle schools and high schools participated in the twelfth annual National Day of Silence. Sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the Day of Silence calls attention to antigay name-calling and harassment.

In the past, this particular school's Gay-Straight Alliance had encountered protestors handing out religious flyers (careful to stay just outside the school grounds). This year, they encountered some of their fellow students proudly wearing "Anti-Day of Silence" stickers (Duwe). Earlier in the week, a school board meeting made it apparent just how deep homophobia was rooted in their community. A board member's wife questioned whether student clubs were taking over the education of students and suggested that certain clubs (namely, the Gay-Straight Alliance) were infringing on the rights of other students. One man voiced opposition to posters promoting the Day of Silence, adding that, "As a Christian, that's offensive [to me]." Another woman reported that she had seen same-sex kissing at the high school. "I just find

that disgustingly regretful to even watch,' she said" (Schultz).

None of this took Blair Mishleau¹ by surprise. As co-president of the school's Gay-Straight Alliance, he knows that homophobia is alive and well in many K–12 schools. In one recent survey, released in 2008 by GLSEN, 73% of all students responding reported frequently hearing words such as "faggot" or "dyke" used at school. In addition, 86% of LGBT students experienced verbal harassment and 44% experienced physical harassment at school on the basis of their sexual orientation ("2007 National"). Blair has witnessed such hostile discrimination. A talented filmmaker, this outgoing young man has been openly gay for years. I'm proud to say that he's a former student of mine. So why do I feel like I have failed him?

"The Curriculum Hasn't Changed at All"

Before coming to the University of Wisconsin as a doctoral student, I spent seven years as a public school teacher, mostly in high school English classrooms. I had tremendous control over my curriculum in the first district where I taught. Each year, I had a substantial budget to purchase books and other classroom supplies. This allowed me to integrate new units into my classes—particularly units that included writers of color, which had been notably absent. But when I took a position in a new school district (which was also in my hometown), I had no funds to purchase books and no classroom library. The process to add new books to the curriculum was lengthy and detailed; the school's reading specialist couldn't remember the last time it

had been done. At one point, another English teacher confided, “Jen, I don’t think the curriculum has changed at all since you were in high school.” I was disheartened to find that the English curriculum hadn’t evolved in over a decade. What did that say about us—and our priorities?

So I decided to do something about it. In my courses, students were required to read books on

their own outside of class. On the suggested reading lists that I distributed, I made sure to include gay-themed works by noted authors such as Alex Sanchez, Francesca Lia Block, and David Levithan, among others. Students also participated in literature circles. I could draw from our library’s wonderfully diverse collection

to suggest a wide range of books, including titles that touched on themes related to dating violence, death, sexuality, and identity crises. That was how Aidan Chambers’s *Postcards from No Man’s Land*, a Carnegie Medal-winning novel in which the narrator questions his sexuality, worked its way into my classroom literature circles.

A book students had discovered on their own was Stephen Chbosky’s *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a modern coming-of-age story that touches on homosexuality, drug use, and suicide in a narrative style reminiscent of Holden Caulfield. When I decided I wanted to include it as required reading for all students, I approached our school’s designated administrator about purchasing a classroom set. I was told in no uncertain terms that such a book would cause an uproar among students, parents, and community members. A similar request to purchase Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* was also denied due to a rape scene—a fleeting part of the plot. Ironically, Laurie Halse Anderson’s novel *Speak* was an integral part of the curriculum—a book in which rape is a central theme. Why could students read about male-on-female rape in *Speak* but not male-on-male rape in *The Kite Runner*? In his essay “Creating a Place for Lesbian and Gay Readings in Secondary English Classrooms,” Jim Reese points out that institutionalized homophobia like this usually goes unchallenged (132). In retrospect, I feel that this is where I failed: I didn’t fight back hard enough.

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The Silencing of LGBTQ Literature

One of the key ways that schools condone homophobia is by failing to include LGBTQ literature in the curriculum. In a 2005 article entitled “Teaching Queer-Inclusive English Language Arts,” Mollie V. Blackburn and J. F. Buckley found that only 8.5% of responding schools indicated that they use “texts, films, or other materials addressing same-sex desire in their English language arts curriculum” (205).² For those that did, it was often a single text or within one class only. Why is that? Patricia L. Daniel suggests that, for many English teachers, gay and lesbian students are invisible in the classroom; that is why we haven’t “protected their rights, feelings, and self-esteem” (76). But issues of sexuality in literature don’t just affect gay students—they affect straight students, too. In fact, Alex Sanchez argues, “When we condone hurtful words and prejudiced beliefs based on ignorance, we are fostering an environment that tolerates aggression and undermines the safety of our schools for *everyone*” (48; italics in original).

For gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students, the world is often an unsafe space. Since 1991, Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church have protested at everything from productions of *The Laramie Project* to funerals of American soldiers (“Fred Phelps”). Their website, www.GodHatesFags.com, proclaims they have staged “over 34,000 peaceful demonstrations opposing the fag lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth.” In 2001, Jerry Falwell placed blame for 9/11 on the “pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians.” He soon apologized, but to many, his words rang hollow (“Falwell”). In the past five years, too, gay marriage and civil unions (and the related laws, bans, and court rulings) have made national headlines.

These controversies have been playing out in schools as well. In 2007, three of the ten most-challenged books addressed gay themes, from same-sex relationships to gay adoption—*The Color Purple*, *And Tango Makes Three*, and *Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Morales). That same year, the American Civil Liberties Union had to step in to defend a Virginia high school student’s right to wear a T-shirt featuring a lesbian pride symbol (“ACLU Demands”) and a Florida high school’s Gay-Straight Alliance’s right

to meet on campus after school officials claimed that their abstinence-only policy would be violated if the group was to assemble on school grounds (“Gay-Straight”). And in 2008, 14-year-old Brandon McInerney stormed into his southern California high school’s computer lab, armed with a small caliber handgun. He shot 15-year-old Lawrence King twice in the head, killing him. King was openly gay and professed to have a crush on McInerney, who was “tall, good-looking, popular, smart”—and who had rebuffed King, calling him a faggot (Broverman). This year’s Day of Silence was held in King’s memory, but how much has *any* of this affected our pedagogical practice?

For most teachers, this is the primary struggle for civil rights that we will witness during our careers. As Daniel points out in “Invitation to All: Welcoming Gays and Lesbians into My Classroom and Curriculum,” “we are in a position to promote social justice that includes gay and lesbian students” (76). We can do this in so many ways: including books with LGBTQ themes in our curriculum, supporting our school’s Gay-Straight Alliance, and creating a safe space within our classroom for *all* students—gay and straight alike. After all, we have the unique opportunity to be *proactive* rather than *reactive*.

Many school districts have mission statements that promote multiculturalism and the celebration of diversity, both in the curriculum and beyond. But as Dean R. Smith pointed out in a presentation at the 1994 NCTE Annual Convention, we tend to “color code” multicultural issues. He and Christina Allan, in her article “Poets of Comrades: Addressing Sexual Orientation in the English Classroom,” both argue that we need to include sexual orientation as an aspect of diversity. For them, the term *multicultural* refers to more than just skin color: While we commonly use it to refer to racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity, it can also include issues related to sexual orientation and gender variance. Framed in this way, we need to make the time and space in our curriculum to address LGBTQ issues with students, both as they arise in the text and in the world around us. In doing so, students can explore these issues through open dialogue and reflective writing that is engendered by books themselves. If we don’t fight to include LGBTQ books in our English classes, we will have failed our students,

gay and straight alike. Is that something we want to live with?

Laying the Groundwork for Change (Megan Schliesman)

We are in the midst of sweeping social change with regard to the visibility and acceptance of lesbians and gays. The level of tolerance has increased dramatically in the past ten years, especially among younger people, even as discrimination, stereotypes, and real dangers still exist for LGBTQ individuals. Many people young and old still view anything other than heterosexuality as “wrong,” and anyone other than heterosexuals as “the other.” But one of the first steps every educator can take is to acknowledge that books with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning characters aren’t about “the other,” they’re about us—all of us. They’re about teens walking down the hallways of every high school, and about the people walking down the streets of every community. They’re about the world every teen, regardless of his or her sexuality, inhabits, and literature is one way to challenge readers to think critically about that world and their place in it.

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Influences on Selection

Barriers to teaching LGBTQ literature in the classroom may be internal, with a teacher’s response to the topic and books, and external, extending to circles of influence that are both real and perceived. Navigating these barriers requires honesty, courage, and fortitude. In the end, there are no guarantees, but if failure is not an option, then the response must be to try to advocate for including books that reflect LGBTQ experience.

Knowing that educators often refuse to consider a book for the curriculum simply because it has LGBTQ content is frightening. It’s a blatant form of censorship. And yet, as Jen found when she tried to adopt *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, it happens. There are no doubt countless teachers who have been in the same position in which she found herself, and countless others who were too fearful to even suggest an LGBTQ title. Some, like Jen, find

other ways to get relevant books into students' hands, such as supplemental or optional reading lists. Others may be limited by departmental, institutional, and/or district guidelines, or paralyzed by fear that a parent, community member, or administrator will descend with threats and anger. To some, including an LGBTQ book in the curriculum may seem like inviting a censor or outspoken critic to come calling. They may assume that they have no

allies in the community who will defend their curriculum choices.

In the article "When Reading Good Books Can Get Schools in Trouble," Barbara Miner asks, "If certain books are avoided because they are controversial, how does that undercut what should be one

of the central purposes of education—to help students learn to critically evaluate and make informed decisions about controversial issues so they can become full participants in this country's civic and political life?"

Teachers who approach selection reactively can become mired in "what if" scenarios that leave them second-guessing, agonizing, and rejecting anything they think of as unsafe. (The irony being, of course, that there is no such thing as a truly "safe" book.) It's a miserable, untenable position for any teacher to be in. Denying students the opportunity to read works because of what might happen turns all power over to an imagined "someone." The would-be censor doesn't necessarily have a name—may not even exist. Censorship—in the form of self-censorship—has already occurred.

Teachers who approach selection proactively focus first and foremost on their teaching goals, curriculum, and standards, and how the book they are considering fulfills all of these needs. They don't ignore potential concerns, but they consider them in the context of the work as a whole. In doing so, they can make an informed decision about whether to include or reject a book and develop a rationale for works they choose based on that informed decision. They have also done essential critical thinking toward preparing a defense in the event a book is ever questioned or challenged. NCTE/SLATE's "How to Develop a Rationale" and

other censorship resources on the NCTE website not only offer helpful guidance on censorship issues but also policy statements, such as the "Students' Right to Read."

Teachers can take their preparation a step further by practicing how to talk about their classroom and curriculum goals and how the books they teach fit into them. Practice with a colleague—casually or in more formal role-play scenarios that challenge you to respond to various types of questions. Practice in front of the mirror at home. Make it second nature to talk conversationally about why you teach what you teach. Along with the critical skill of listening to someone who has a question or concern about a curriculum choice, a calm, brief explanation of a book's role in the classroom and curriculum can sometimes defuse concerns, and even the potential for a challenge.

Knowing the Policies and Procedures

Wisconsin school districts, like the ones where Jen taught, are required to have a board-approved policy for choosing curriculum materials. Around the country, the rules and regulations vary, but every teacher should make it a point to know and follow his or her district's official requirements for choosing materials for the classroom. Find out if there is a board-approved policy in place and what that policy says. Ideally, materials selection policies will also outline the procedures to follow in the event of a complaint about a book or other resource.

Often teachers are unaware of what their district selection policies state with regard to both guidelines and procedures for choosing materials and the process for reconsideration. Sometimes informal practices that have been in place turn out to be a far cry from what official procedures state. It's not a highly visible issue in most districts unless they have recently dealt with a challenge, and therefore not a high-priority issue that administrators emphasize. But in the event of a challenge to materials, it is the official policy that will—and should—matter, whether the request to remove the material comes from a parent, a community member, a colleague, or an administrator. Knowing what their district policy states puts teachers in a much stronger position for defending their choices, as well as the First Amendment rights of their students.

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Mary Tigner-Räsänen wrote about “meeting a censorship challenge” at Kellogg Middle School in Rochester, Minnesota. She not only talks about preparing rationales to defend the books but, perhaps more important, talked about what teachers and administrators learned about the importance of knowing, communicating, and understanding policies and procedures. An unclear policy created some mistrust that was addressed after the fact, and now everyone in the school is on firmer ground.

It’s possible that finding out what the district’s policy states may raise more questions than answers, especially if informal practices that have long been in place don’t clearly align with what is officially stated, or if the policy and related procedures are more inclined to support the status quo or put up barriers to change. Teachers should ask for clarification from supervisors and administrators, and work with colleagues to raise awareness of the need for a common understanding of what the district’s policies and procedures say—and what they mean.

Seeking Support

The context in which the selection process takes place can have a significant impact on its outcome. Obviously, departmental, school, and district policies affect how much freedom a teacher has in choosing her or his books for classroom teaching. But beyond the presence of policies and guidelines, there is the issue of atmosphere. Researcher Jane Agee of the Center on English Learning and Achievement conducted a study of 18 high school English teachers in New York and Georgia to see how censorship or fear of censorship affected their selection decisions. She found, not surprisingly, that teachers who feel supported by colleagues, supervisors, and administrators—and who feel that their judgment is valued and respected—are less likely to reject—or at least summarily reject—books they perceive as potentially problematic, and more likely to offer their students opportunities to engage with challenging texts.

In an ideal environment, teachers not only feel supported and respected, but they also have the opportunity to talk regularly with colleagues about selection and censorship issues. Conversations at the district, school, and departmental levels not only help teachers to understand policies that are in place

but also to learn more about the issues of censorship and selection, and how experienced teachers have developed effective strategies for dealing with them. Agee notes such conversations are especially powerful because they “break the usual silence and allay the kind of fearful self-censorship that occurs when teachers are isolated and uncertain.” She continues, “Understanding the perspectives of administrators and colleagues allows teachers to work with a greater degree of confidence within clearly defined support systems” (68).

It is in these conversations that teachers—and administrators, too—can find allies, work through fears, and expose barriers to incorporating LGBTQ literature into the curriculum. It is in these conversations that real, systemic change can begin. Individual teachers are leading the way as they find ways to incorporate literature that honors and respects all students. Their courage and commitment are the perfect launching point for the discussions that need to take place.

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Recommended LGBTQ Novels for Middle School and High School Classrooms (Kathleen T. Horning)

There has been enormous growth in LGBTQ young adult novels published in the United States in the past decade. While most of them have been about white, middle-class, gay male characters, we are beginning to see more diversity in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual expression. What follows is a list of books to consider for middle school (MS) and high school (HS) classrooms. In choosing these selections, we have paid particular attention to quality, currency, and diversity.

Cameron, James. *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You*. New York: Farrar, 2007.

This singular, profoundly moving novel offers an in-depth portrait of a disaffected teen who is not only questioning his sexuality but is also fearful of moving into the future. (HS)

Felin, M. Sindy. *Touching Snow*. New York: Atheneum, 2007.

“The best way to avoid being picked on by high school bullies is to kill someone.” So begins a gripping novel about 13-year-old Karina, a first-generation Haitian teen, whose love for her best friend, Rachael, gives her the strength to confront her abusive stepfather. (HS)

Hartinger, Brent. *Geography Club*. New York: Harper, 2003.

Four closeted high school students are too scared to form a GSA, so they come up with the most boring club name they can think of to give themselves a time and place to meet twice a week. (MS)

Howe, James. *Totally Joe*. New York: Atheneum, 2005.

Over the course of six months, Joe’s essays for a seventh-grade English assignment (write about yourself from A to Z) reveal a lot about him, including the fact that he’s gay. Sequel to *The Misfits*. (MS)

Lazara Dole, Mayra. *Down to the Bone*. New York: Harper, 2008.

Sixteen-year-old Laura is outed at school, kicked out of her home, loses her girlfriend, and finds herself in this hilarious debut novel with an all-Latino cast. (MS)

Levithan, David. *Boy Meets Boy*. New York: Random, 2003.

A remarkable and hopeful fantasy that’s fresh and funny and that shows us a world where gay teens and straight teens are all just teens. (HS)

Peters, Julie Anne. *Luna*. New York: Little Brown, 2004.

Regan is the only one who knows that at night her older brother transforms from Liam to Luna in one of the few YA novels to feature a transgender character. (HS)

Ryan, Sara. *Empress of the World*. New York: Viking, 2001.

When 15-year-old Nicola Lancaster falls in love with another girl who is attending the same summer institute program for gifted students, her feelings surprise her because she’s only ever had crushes on boys in the past. One of the only novels for teens that explores bisexuality. (MS)

Sanchez, Alex. *So Hard to Say*. New York: Simon, 2004.

Thirteen-year-old Frederick experiences culture shock after a move from Wisconsin to Los Angeles, making it even more difficult for him to come out, until he is befriended by a lively group of Latina girls at his new middle school. (MS)

Tamaki, Mariko. *Skim*. Illus. Jillian Tamaki. Toronto: Groundwood, 2008.

Kimberly Keiko Cameron (nicknamed Skim) is a Japanese American Wicca-in-training who feels out of place in the Catholic girls’ school she attends and is not sure what to do about the crush she has on Ms. Archer, her English teacher. This serio-comic graphic novel delves beneath the superficial everyday activities in high school to show the innermost thoughts and feeling of a single outsider student who is struggling to endure it all. (HS)

Trueman, Terry. *7 Days at the Hot Corner*. New York: Harper, 2007.

A sports novel takes an in-depth look at homophobia from the point of view of a straight teenage boy reacting to the news that his best friend is gay. (MS)

Wittlinger, Ellen. *Hard Love*. New York: Simon, 1999.

A high school senior falls in love with a fellow zine writer named Marisol before he even meets her, and continues to love her—hopelessly—even after she tells him she is a lesbian. (HS)

Woodson, Jacqueline. *After Tupac and D Foster*. New York: Putnam, 2008.

A deep and tender look at friendship and growing up, this novel spans almost two years in the lives of three African American girls in the mid-1990s. Homophobia, particularly in the African American community, is deftly handled by exploring the girls’ feelings about a beloved older brother who is a flamboyant gay man. (MS) 

Notes

1. Real name used with permission.
2. Editors’ note: See also Caroline T. Clark and Mollie V. Blackburn’s article in this volume.

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