

“Would you want to read that?”:

Using Book Passes to Open Up Secondary Classrooms to LGBTQ Young Adult Literature

It is Monday afternoon and my methods class is in the middle of our first official book pass. Seated in pairs in a large circle that spans the width of the classroom, each student holds a single sheet of paper that has been divided into four columns: Author, Title, Topic, and Rating (see Fig. 1). On this piece of paper, they are quickly collecting information about the book I have just placed on their desks. In the two or three minutes they are allotted to assess the book, they look at its front cover and then flip the book over to read the synopsis or excerpt or quotes provided on the back. They quickly skim the inside cover of the book jacket and begin reading the first couple of pages.

I circulate around the room and listen to their conversations. “This could be fun,” Celeste says to her partner, Tom, as she skims through Jenny Han’s *Shug*. Tom looks pained. “There’s no way I would read that book,” he mutters under his breath and marks a big zero in his rating column.

To my left, Andrea and Mike are staring at the

cover of the book they’ve just received, David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy*. They take in the blue color and its simple design, the three candy hearts that comprise the title. “I don’t get it,” says Andrea. Mike opens the book and starts to read. “I think it’s about a gay guy.” Andrea leans over to look at the book more carefully. “Really?” She pauses. “Would you want to read that?”

I tell the students to wrap up their discussions and pass the books to the pair of students to their left. Andrea and Mike close *Boy Meets Boy*, write down their ratings, and hand the book to Jennifer and Melissa. Melissa and Jennifer dutifully note the author and title in the appropriate columns. The conversations begin again.

Establishing a Context for YA LGBTQ Literature

Despite increased public attention to and discourse about gay issues—gay marriage and the passing of

Title	Author	Topic	Rating

Figure 1. Book Pass Chart

Proposition 8 in California, the critical acclaim of such films as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Milk*, and the growing presence and visibility of Gay-Straight Alliances in many public high schools—the majority of middle and high schools in the United States continue to be unsafe spaces for today’s LGBTQ youth. According to the 2007 National School Climate Survey, produced by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 9 out of 10 LGBTQ students continue to hear homophobic remarks in classrooms and hallways, and the majority of LGBTQ students have experienced some kind of school-based verbal (86.2%) or physical (44.1%) harassment as a result of their sexual orientation. This harassment often leads to increased absenteeism, lowered educational aspirations, and ultimately decreased academic success.

While many secondary teachers may want to help—by intervening or advocating for their LGBTQ students—the majority of LGBTQ students surveyed by GLSEN (60.8%) stated that they chose not to report being harassed because they believed nothing would be done. And, according to the report, “nearly a third (33.1%) of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response.” Clearly something has to change.

According to the survey, supportive school staff who intervene when they encounter homophobic behaviors can make a significant difference in the experiences of LGBTQ youth and positively affect school climate, as can administrative efforts to systematically address anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment. Safe school policies, training for faculty and staff, and increased access to LGBTQ resources can also pave the way toward safer schools.

Unfortunately, LGBTQ resources, specifically LGBTQ young adult literature, is still either absent or invisible in most middle or high school classrooms and libraries. LGBTQ-themed texts are rarely mentioned, discussed, or taught. As a result, ongoing classroom conversations about sexual orientation that could support LGBTQ students, build understanding and empathy, and proactively challenge a hostile school climate do not happen. Teachers are reduced to intervening when violence erupts and these interventions, when they do occur, continue to play out on an individual,

LGBTQ-themed texts are rarely mentioned, discussed, or taught.

rather than institutional, basis. For institutional transformation to take place and for schools to become safe for LGBTQ students, change has to occur at the curricular level. All students must have access to LGBTQ literature.

To aid in this process, this article will provide specific titles as well as a methodological recommendation for middle and high school teachers interested in familiarizing themselves with available LGBTQ young adult texts and integrating them into their curriculum. In particular, I will examine how the book pass as an instructional technique is particularly well suited for this purpose.

The Literature Itself: Excitement and Apprehensions

Since the publication of John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* in 1969, a significant amount of young adult literature featuring LGBTQ youth has become available to teen readers (Day; Cart). Nevertheless, while some of the preservice teachers who enroll in my methods classes have read books with LGBTQ protagonists, most have not. They know these books exist, perhaps they have even heard of a title or two, but very few have purchased one or checked one out of a school or public library. Similarly, very few of my students have considered including LGBTQ literature in their curricula or recommending it to their future students. Therefore, when they encounter young adult LGBTQ books during the book passes, their reactions are often mixed. Some respond as Andrea did, with surprise and curiosity. They really don’t know if they would be interested in reading a book with LGBTQ characters and themes. Other students seem indifferent. If the book isn’t about a topic (or written in a genre) of interest to them, the genius of the plot won’t make any difference. Occasionally, students will reject LGBTQ texts outright, proclaiming to their partner that they would “never read a book like that.” Still other students respond enthusiastically—“Really? Awesome!” one of my students declared upon seeing Ellen Wittlinger’s *Parrotfish*; their enthusiasm often conveys both appreciation and relief.

In the case of *Boy Meets Boy*, many of the students in my classes rate it highly because the book is

genuinely romantic, and they respond positively to Levithan's breezy style and the depth of the two main characters, Paul and Noah. Other LGBTQ books my students consistently rate highly include *Pedro and Me*, Judd Winick's powerful graphic novel about his friendship with AIDS activist and *Real World* housemate, Pedro Zamora; *Hero*, Perry Moore's novel about a gay teenage superhero; *Luna*, Julie Anne Peters's groundbreaking depiction of a transgendered teen; *Hard Love*, Ellen Wittlinger's multigenre (and Printz Award-winning) narrative about unrequited love between two friends—one straight, the other gay; and *The Misfits*, James Howe's hilarious and poignant tale of four friends who decide to tackle their middle school's name-calling problem (see Fig. 2 for additional recommended LGBTQ Young Adult titles).

When I surveyed this particular class to see how many students would actually read *Boy Meets Boy*, about half of them raised their hands. When I asked them to talk about why, their responses varied. Some

students admitted to a general interest in romance, others liked the cover. One student said she heard a classmate mention that there was a character who was a drag queen, and several others commented that the book seemed like a “feel-good” book and they were looking for something “happy” to read. A couple of remaining students indicated that they had an interest in LGBTQ issues and were drawn to “that sort of thing.” When I asked the class whether or not they thought high school students would be interested in reading *Boy Meets Boy*, the majority of my students posited that it might have “serious popularity potential.” Yet, when I inquired as to how many of them encountered texts with LGBTQ characters or themes in their middle or high school English classes, only one or two indicated that they had.

As we begin, then, to consider why this is, why LGBTQ literature continues to remain absent from most middle and high school classrooms, we focus our attention on two things. First, curriculum—specifically, the way in which the texts we privilege in class, either by explicitly teaching them or by giving them face time in an activity such as the book pass, become meaningful. We examine how it is that our curricular and methodological choices determine what educational theorist Michael Apple calls “the official knowledge” of our classrooms. In the case of secondary English classrooms, this is the knowledge that sanctions

- whose voices will be included;
- which stories will be told;
- how these stories will be used;
- what questions we will ask of them and of ourselves as we read;
- whether or not these stories reflect those of the students in our classrooms;
- and finally, how we will respond to these stories—can our engagement with them build empathy and help us understand each other and our world in a more substantive and critical way?

I ask my class: What are the effects (on students, on school climate) when we accept a school's noninclusive or nondiverse curricula at face value? Why factors determine what books we teach in middle and high school classrooms? Would other books be better?

As they contemplate these questions, they consider the fact that they are legally responsible for en-

Bauer, Marion Dane (ed.), *Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence*
 Block, Francesca Lia, *Dangerous Angels: The Weetzie Bat Books*
 Freymann-Weyr, Garret, *My Heartbeat*
 Garden, Nancy, *Annie on My Mind*
 Hartinger, Brent, *The Geography Club*
 Heron, Ann (ed.), *Two Teenages in 20: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth*
 Holmes, A. M., *Jack*
 *Howe, James, *The Misfits*
 *Howe, James, *Totally Joe*
 Kerr, M.E., *Deliver Us from Evie*
 Levithan, David, *Boy Meets Boy*
 Levithan, David & Merrell, Billy (eds.), *The Full Spectrum: A New Generation of Writing about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Other Identities*
 Moore, Perry, *Hero*
 Peters, Julie Anne, *Far from Xanadu*
 Peters, Julie Anne, *Luna*
 Ryan, Sara, *Empress of the World*
 Sanchez, Alex, *The Rainbow Boys*
 Summer, Jane (ed.), *Not the Only One: Lesbian and Gay Fiction for Teens*
 Winick, Judd, *Pedro and Me*
 Wittlinger, Ellen, *Hard Love*
 Wittlinger, Ellen, *Parrotfish*
 *Woodson, Jacqueline, *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*
 *Woodson, Jacqueline, *The House You Pass on the Way*

*Books appropriate for middle school as well as high school students.

Figure 2. Recommended LGBTQ young adult literature to include in book passes

suring the emotional and physical well-being of their students, and that unsafe classrooms undermine and jeopardize student learning. They are also asked to consider the damaging effects of curricular exclusion and silence, particularly the lack of acknowledgement and empathy, the increased probability of misunderstanding and miscommunication, and the emotional, intellectual, and physical violence that can result from it. In doing so, they begin to acknowledge the importance of cultivating a classroom environment in which all of their students feel welcome, respected, valued, and safe. Yet, even though they “know” all of this, my students readily admit that using LGBTQ literature in their future classrooms makes them feel unsafe as well. Therefore, the second topic we discuss is their fear—their many apprehensions about opening up their classrooms to LGBTQ-themed texts.

Immediately, my student teachers raise concerns about student maturity and classroom management (“Yes, middle and high school students might want to read these books, but will they be able to handle them?”). And they feel uncertain about their own ability to talk sensitively or even knowledgeable about LGBTQ topics (“I’m not even sure what I would say.”). They are also terrified of the conflicts they imagine will ensue with parents and administrators over the appropriateness of LGBTQ-themed texts and topics. Incorporating LGBTQ literature into the curricula, they believe, puts them at risk for greater personal and professional scrutiny; ironically, it “outs” them by making them “political,” even when they’re not always certain what their politics really are (Meixner).

While I can’t assuage all of their fears—or the fears of middle and high school teachers who may share their apprehensions—we try to brainstorm solutions to many of these concerns. We also examine resources they can consult in order to make informed decisions about the texts they decide to introduce or teach, especially intellectual freedom information about First Amendment issues and censorship available through the American Library Association, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the National Council of Teachers of English. I additionally remind my students that in many states, they have at least some legal protection for their actions. In New Jersey, for example, the state in which most of my students will eventu-

ally be employed, they have recourse to a state nondiscrimination law and a safe school law that include a nondiscrimination civil rights statute and an anti-harrassment education statute, both of which include sexual orientation as a category, and both of which legally require them to ensure that their classrooms are safe spaces for LGBTQ students. (Similar information about other states is available in GLSEN’s 2004 State of the States Report).

The Book Pass

About the Methodology

As an instructional method, I use the book pass described in the introduction in virtually all of my English methods and Young Adult Literature courses. As Janet Allen explains in *Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading 4–12*, book passes are a quick and easy way to get a variety of books into secondary students’ hands and introduce them to authors, titles, and topics that they may not be inclined to seek out on their own. For students who don’t know what they like, what they are looking for, or where to find it, book passes provide a concrete and much-needed place to start. For students who have already developed more specific reading tastes, book passes expand their options and challenge them to try something new. In general, my college students love them. They love it when I arrive to class with an enormous bag of books that I display dramatically on the table at the front of the room. They love that I have done most of the work selecting “good” books for them. They love being able to handle the books themselves and talk about them with each other. And they especially love that they can accept or reject my suggestions without consequence. I have found these sentiments to be mirrored in middle and high school classrooms.

For middle and high school students who are uncertain of their own reading preferences, book passes also provide an opportunity for teachers to model how it is that good readers make decisions about which

Immediately, my student teachers raise concerns about student maturity and classroom management

Even if they ultimately disagree with me, I want them to know enough about the genre to make an informed decision.

a book's content by examining the front and back cover or assesses a text's readability by skimming the first couple of pages and looking at text size and white space. Teachers can also show students that they draw upon their prior knowledge of an author's other works or that they use their own experiences to evaluate whether or not a book will sustain their interest (Beers; Tovani). The students are able to practice these skills over and over again as the books circulate around the room.

While both of these aspects of the book pass underscore its pedagogical value, what I appreciate most about this activity is that it is especially well suited for introducing high-interest texts with potentially contentious content. I will never traditionally "teach" the majority of books I include in my book passes; that is, these books will not be required reading for the entire class. Many are certainly teachable or teach-worthy, and some may be adopted by students for literature circles or research projects or other class assignments, but my main objective with each pass is not common knowledge. Instead, it is access and, of course, exposure—to texts, authors, genres, topics, ideas, world-views, values, questions, etc.—that expand the scope of a school's required or sanctioned curricula and open up classrooms to conversations about issues like sexual orientation and school safety that frequently don't occur without them. Book pass books are books that provide students with personal choices: to read or not to read, to investigate or to ignore, to question or to confirm. As such, they are "unofficial" books whose content, through presence and discussion, becomes an official part of the curriculum.

I'll be honest: part of my reason for using predominantly YA literature in the book passes reflects my belief that YA literature should be featured more prominently in middle and high school curricula.

books they will and will not read, skills it is often assumed secondary (and college) students already possess. Therefore, as a teacher explains how the book pass works, s/he can simultaneously demonstrate a variety of reading strategies; she can, for example, predict

I want my student teachers to be familiar with a variety of young adult titles and authors. Even if they ultimately disagree with me, I want them to know enough about the genre to make an informed decision. More important to me than genre familiarity, however, is the visible presence of LGBTQ youth in the texts that my students encounter, youth whose voices and stories are still too-often ignored, excluded, or forgotten in secondary schools. Through the texts I include, I can take a public stand about which stories—about whose stories—will be welcome in my classroom. As a result, the books I include in each book pass signify to my students who and what I value as a teacher and the kind of diverse, inclusive space I intend my classroom to be.

Learning to Meta-Process

Once the pass has been completed and the students have ranked each of the books, I ask them to spend an additional ten minutes discussing their rankings and reflecting on their preferences. This processing time is perhaps even more significant than the students' during-pass conversations as the books are circulating around the room. Freed from the possible pressure of conforming to their partner's assessment of a text, the pass debriefing allows them to revisit the books independently and on their own terms. Specifically, it provides them with an opportunity to review books they have already read, ask additional questions about books they rated highly, clarify book topics when they felt they did not have enough time to properly assess the book during the pass, identify why they were drawn to certain texts and not to others, and listen to their classmates' responses and recommendations.

For example, when I asked Andrea why she had doubts about reading *Boy Meets Boy*, she responded that she just couldn't get past the cover and the title. Its "prettiness," specifically the three candy hearts, were just a little too "cutesy" for her. Melissa immediately disagreed. "It's funny," she said. "That's *exactly* why I thought the book looked fun. The cover made me want to read more."

This exchange prompted another student, Megan, to raise her hand and ask her own question: "How would you feel if someone saw you reading this book?" After finishing the first few pages, she was interested, but she'd never read a book with gay characters before, and she wasn't sure what she would say

if someone saw her reading it and asked about it. “I’d just tell them it was a love story and let them jump to their own conclusions,” Jessica responded. Next to her, Julie shook her head. “Who cares? If they’re offended or not interested, they don’t have to read it.” “But,” she paused, “maybe it would be a good thing. Maybe someone else would want to read it.”

Conversations such as these force students to attend to their own values as well as their own thinking as they select or dismiss each book. For students already comfortable making independent selections, listening to each other’s comments and questions pushes them to consider texts they might have originally dismissed. For struggling readers, hearing how other students make choices—what they look for, what turns them on and off, what questions they have about the book once the pass is completed, how they know a book might be too easy or too difficult—teaches them how to make better choices on their own. Participating in the book passes provides the entire class with ongoing opportunities to examine and discuss literature they might never encounter otherwise. Finally, for teachers, book pass discussions are an incredibly useful tool for assessing and addressing students’ (personal and reading) needs as well as for engaging students in evaluative conversations about the literature itself: Why aren’t these books “taught” in school? Should they be? Is the content (or language or perspective or topic) appropriate? Why or why not?

Evaluating the Method

To conclude the book pass, I require my methods students to spend a final ten minutes assessing the activity as an instructional method. As mentioned previously, they typically enjoy it as students. As future teachers, they also find it valuable because, having experienced it first-hand, they are able to imagine how they might use it:

- to teach pre-reading strategies such as predicting or inferring
- to preview upcoming required texts
- to generate interest-based literature circle groupings
- to make independent reading recommendations
- to highlight the work of a particular author
- to introduce students to a particular genre
- to incorporate more nonfiction into the curriculum
- to provide students with additional information and reading options following a themed or topical unit

- and to differentiate instruction by introducing books that vary according to their students’ unique interests and reading levels

In terms of the book pass as a viable site for the inclusion of LGBTQ young adult literature in their future classrooms, even though many of my student teachers remain uncertain about the reception they and the books would receive, they recognize its merits. Incorporating LGBTQ books in the pass sets a tone of open-mindedness, acceptance, and inclusivity. It puts LGBTQ texts in the hands of students who need them, and because these books are not necessarily required reading, it allows other students to either pursue or dismiss them based on personal preference.

Including LGBTQ texts in book passes acknowledges what we, as teachers, must also acknowledge: that the voices of LGBTQ youth are not only present in our classrooms, but also contribute to the learning that occurs there.

Incorporating LGBTQ books in the pass sets a tone of open-mindedness, acceptance, and inclusivity.

Final Thoughts

It has been my experience as a teacher in both high school and college classrooms that while students often enjoy and appreciate particular activities or methods, they rarely take the time to say so. Book passes are different. Students stop me after class to tell me how much fun they are, they comment positively on them in my course evaluations, and they occasionally email me to tell me that they read a book on their list or gave the entire list to a loved one “just in case they didn’t know what kind of a present to get me.” I also have alumni (former students, now teachers) who contact me to tell me that they used these passes with their students or recommended particular books they first encountered in my class. Last year, after using several book passes in my Literature for Younger Readers course, many of which incorporated LGBTQ YA texts, a student who had no interest in teaching and who came out to me in his course evaluation, sent me the following note during winter break:

Hey, Dr. Meixner,
I just wanted to say a quick thank you for the books you

shared with us in class. They were important to me and I thought you should know that.

For this student and the many other LGBTQ students like him who are looking for support from their teachers and to see themselves in the curricula they encounter in school, my answer to the question Andrea posed as she sorted through her feelings about *Boy Meets Boy* is always, “Yes. They would want to read that.”

Emily S. Meixner is an assistant professor of English and coordinator of the Secondary English Education Program at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, New Jersey.

Works Cited

- Allen, Janet. *Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading, 4–12*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2000. Print.
- Apple, Michael. *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do: A Guide for Teachers, 6–12*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002. Print.
- Cart, Michael. *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2006. Print.
- Day, Frances. *Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. Print.
- Donovan, John. *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*. New York: Dell, 1969. Print.
- GLSEN. *National School Climate Survey, 2007*. *glsen.org*. GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. 8 Oct. 2008. Web. 22 April 2009.
- . *State of the States Report: The First Objective Analysis of Statewide Safe Schools Policies, 2004*. *glsen.org*. GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. 1 April 2005. Web. 22 April 2009.
- Han, Jenny. *Shug*. New York: Aladdin, 2007. Print.
- Levithan, David. *Boy Meets Boy*. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2003. Print.
- Meixner, Emily S. “Teacher Agency and Access to LGBTQ Young Adult Literature” *Radical Teacher*. (76) (2006): 13–19. Print.
- Tovani, Cris. *I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2000. Print.