ADOLESCENT LITERATURE AND THE POWER OF STUDENT PERCEPTION

AND VOICE IN GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES AND BEYOND

By

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Abstract

This research was conducted so that I could learn more about how students interact with texts, specifically focusing on how students who are members of their high school Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) interact with and respond to works of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer/questioning (LGBTQ) adolescent literature. The research was conducted during the spring and fall of 2013 at two local high schools, with Garden High reading "Perfect" by Jennifer Diemer and Donovan High reading "Am I Blue?" by Bruce Coville. The research questions I pose are: 1. What common themes or issues do students in GSA groups discuss when presented with different works of LGBTQ literature?, 2. How do students' perceptions of LGBTQ issues align or delineate from academic research conducted on LGBTQ issues?, and 3. How can the knowledge gained through this research help me as an English educator? I venture to answer these questions by using pieces of conversation about themes that were common during my time with both schools: the differences between boys and girls, adults and families, and generalizations made about certain populations. I also reflect on how engaging in this research has changed me as a student, researcher, and educator. I hope that my research will be useful for people who work with youth and are interested in incorporating LGBTQ literature into their own instruction.

Keywords: LGBTQ, GSA, literature circles, undergraduate research

Adolescent Literature and the Power of Student Perception

and Voice In Gay-Straight Alliances and Beyond

I have aspired to be an English teacher for as long as I can remember. What has been a more recent development in my future goals, however, is my desire to focus a considerable amount of my efforts on LGBTQ[1] students. During my own high school career, I had several friends and knew of countless others who were victims of homophobic bullying. I was lucky enough to attend a high school in which such behavior was not tolerated, and student groups, such as our Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA), were available for support. Still, walking through my high school and presumably many other high schools nationwide, "gay" was perhaps the most often heard and the most damning word a person could use to insult another. At the time, my core question about this issue was simple: Why? Why are my classmates so focused on using sexuality as a means of embarrassing or demeaning one another? For what reason do they feel "gay" is inherently bad, anyway?

Out of the innumerable ways a person can answer this question, I believe the two most obvious and pertinent answers are privilege and perspective. Privilege has been defined as "a social advantage that is both unearned and comes to people simply because they happen to belong to a particular social category" (Johnson, 2008, para. 7). These "social categories" can range from race to age to gender to sexual orientation. At this moment in the United States, there is a measurable and distinct amount of privilege afforded to heterosexual people. These privileges are institutionalized within our government, manifesting in limited access to legal

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[1] LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning. This term will be used throughout this paper as a way to describe the literature discussed in which the main character(s) are non-heterosexual and/or cisgender (individuals whose self-perception of gender matches that which they were assigned at birth).

marriage and adoption rights. Heterosexual couples are able to marry and adopt as long as the

necessary criteria is met at any time or place across the country, a luxury not necessarily

afforded to LGBTQ individuals or couples. It is, at least in part, because of institutionalized

privileges such as these that high school students that are inherently afforded "straight

privilege" feel superior to those who are or who they perceive to be outside of that realm of

privilege: namely, the LGBTQ community.

Another phenomena contributing to the high school homophobia I witnessed is

perspective, or the lack of exposure to and understanding of another. Brian Katcher speaks

directly to this phenomenon in his young adult[2] novel *Almost Perfect* (2009). This novel tells

the story of Sage, a high school student who is transgender, through the eyes of her

sometimes-boyfriend, Logan. After grappling with the dual forces of his prejudices against and

affection for her, Logan reflects: "Sage just wanted to be herself. To be something that half the

people on the planet become when they're born. She just wanted a little acceptance, a little

understanding" (Katcher, 2009, p. 319). LGBTQ students, like Sage, all want "a little acceptance,

a little understanding". Many students have no personal basis upon which they can construct

an idea of what it really means to be "gay". They do not consider themselves homosexual, and

may not have any close family members, friends, or adult mentors in their lives that have

identified themselves as homosexual. Because of this, they are left to use the pieces of

information given to them by their peers, parents, the media, and whatever other vicarious

sources could give them a sense of LGBTQ life. Unfortunately, the world in which we live has

historically painted a one-sided portrait of the LGBTQ community, and that portrait is generally

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[2] For the purposes of this paper, the terms "young adult" (sometimes abbreviated as "YA") and "adolescent" will be used interchangeably.

unfavorable. In recent years, however, the visibility of LGBTQ individuals has risen immensely. This trend permeates the United States from the government policies being implemented and enforced to the literature we read.

In reference to political policies, there has been an influx of reports related to LGBTQ individuals and collective rights as of late. In 2009, Congress passed an extension to the 1969 US Federal Hate Crime Law which includes "crimes motivated by a victim's actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability" (PBS, para. 52). The "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy – a policy which barred openly LGBTQ people from serving in the US military – was repealed in December 2010 (PBS, 2010, para. 55). As of December 2013, fifteen states – California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington, as well as the District of Columbia – perform same-sex marriage ceremonies, granting individuals in same-sex marriages the same legal rights as their heterosexual counterparts (Marry, 2013, para. 1).

All of these advancements are promising steps forward for LGBTQ individuals. As a future English teacher, I am also interested in what these advancements mean for the world of literature, specifically for young adults. Before entering college, I did not have much exposure to young adult literature as an instructional tool. For me, adolescent literature was always an escape from the books assigned by my teachers, which I often found dull and irrelevant to who I was and what I was experiencing. As an avid reader for pleasure, however, I found the literary identification I desired in the "Young Adult Fiction" sections in my local bookstores. While connections I made between myself or my peers and Gatsby or Hamlet often felt strained and,

on some level, impossible, such restrictions seemed not to exist while reading YA fiction.

Though I knew that I could never actually attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I

still felt a strong connection to Hermione Granger, the bookish, logical friend of Harry Potter

and Ron Weasley. The books I was reading were written in a time period I can remember with

characters that spoke, acted, and most importantly, *felt* as I often did. This is not to say that I

did not value or learn from those canonical texts of high school English; on the contrary, I have

these books largely to thank for my love of literature and my decision to pursue a career in the

teaching of it. This is just to say that there was some essential piece of myself that I could not

find in many of my texts in school, but could easily pull off my bookshelf at home.

The lack of YA literature in high school lead me to pursue research in that field, and the

same can be said for my focus in LGBTQ young adult literature specifically. In high school, the

closest I ever came to reading a novel with LGBTQ content were "possible homoerotic

subtexts," as they were referred to by my teachers. Text such as Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*

and Whitman's "Song of Myself" were pieces which began these conversations, but the validity

of homoerotic claims were constantly being disputed. I felt a discomfort around this that I

could not name at the time, but have since fully realized. It felt as though LGBTQ content,

which was almost always male homosexual, could only be discussed indirectly and in hushed

tones.

The lack of discussion surrounding real-life LGBTQ individuals and fictitious characters

was at odds with the world in which I lived. Many of my friends and classmates were taking the

courageous step of coming out, which was met by mixed reactions by the rest of our peers. It

occurred to me then that their lives and experiences were not being represented in my

education. Every piece of literature I was given as a student that included any type of romance

was between a male and a female, and I was bothered by the one-sided romantic narrative that

was being told again and again. It was not until college that literature dealing explicitly with

LGBTQ individuals was part of my curriculum, and this is when I began critically reflecting upon

the absence of it during my high school years.

The first LGBTQ YA novel I was assigned was *Love Is the Higher Law* by David Levithan as

part of my Adolescent Literature class (Levithan, 2009). This novel tells the story of Jasper,

Peter, and Claire, three teens whose interconnected stories focus on the events directly before,

during, and after the attacks of September 11, 2001. While reading this novel, what occurred

to me over and over again was the way Levithan represented the two gay male characters,

Jasper and Peter. Actually, what occurred to me is that *nothing special* occurred to me. I had

some sort of preconceived notion that these homosexual characters, who were supposed to go

on a date the day of the attacks, would somehow be inherently different than the heterosexual

teens I had read about time after time. In my opinion, Levithan created characters whose

homosexuality was an integral part of their identity, but was not by far the only part.

Love Is the Higher Law helped me to formulate my personal beliefs regarding what

LGBTQ adolescent literature should include. What I look for in an LGBTQ YA character is largely

what I feel Levithan represents in this book: multifaceted characters. Just as the YA novels

about heterosexual teens do not reduce those characters to their "straightness," it is my belief

that LGBTQ YA novels should not reduce their characters to their sexuality or gender identity

alone. Of course, the focus of many novels (Lauren Myracle's *Kissing Kate*, 2003, Ellen

Wittlinger's *Parrotfish*, 2011, Emily M. Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 2012) is

the realization or sharing of a young adult's sexual or gender identity with others. Even in these

novels, however, the characters are multidimensional and are not simply caricatures of what

many think of as "gay". By representing multifaceted LGBTQ YA characters, writers represent

LGBTQ young adults as they actually live in the world. Presuming to understand a person based

only on their sexual or gender identity diminishes the individual to a stereotype that cannot, by

definition, be entirely accurate. This same rule applies for fictional characters. I believe that

characters in LGBTQ YA fiction should mirror individuals who could conceivably live in the real

world, and so the only way to properly portray LGBTQ teens is by presenting them as

multidimensional characters.

My goal in proposing this research project was to analyze these beliefs in a context that

is directly affected by LGBTQ issues. The context that was most suitable was a high school GSA:

a group which is dedicated to the exploration of LGBTQ themes and issues. Through my

research, I was able to gain an understanding of which issues are important to LGBTQ and ally

high school students. I was also able to analyze my own values and beliefs in relation to

education and LGBTQ issues, each of which have helped me to become more critically reflective

of myself as an educator and a more conscious ally.

Purpose of Research

I began this research in order to answer a number of questions regarding LGBTQ

literature and adolescent readers:

1. How do students perceive LGBTQ adolescent literature?

2. How are these novels helpful as tools with which to understand and/or identify with

the characters and situations?

3. What are the limitations of these novels? Do the limitations detract from the positives?

4. Who would benefit from reading these novels?

5. What is the purpose of reading LGBTQ adolescent literature?

While conducting my research, it became apparent that these questions were focused mainly on the literature and not on the students. I have since revised these questions to place the students at the center of my research. The revised questions that I hope to answer are as follows:

1. What common themes or issues do students in GSA groups discuss when presented with different works of LGBTQ literature?

2. How do students' perceptions of LGBTQ issues align or delineate from academic research conducted on LGBTQ issues?

3. How can the knowledge gained through this research help me as an English educator?

Framing my research around these three questions has helped me to place the student at the center of the research and to examine myself as part of the research. By focusing primarily on the students instead of on the literature, I will be able to apply what I have learned to teaching other types of texts in the future.

As previously stated, my beliefs regarding LGBTQ YA literature have changed throughout my time in college. By talking to high school students about their perceptions and feelings regarding LGBTQ young adult texts, I began to gain an understanding of what they believe is important about this literature. I was also given insight as to how those students could connect to the literature and to one another during conversations about specific pieces of LGBTQ YA

literature. This research has given me new perspectives on LGBTQ young adult literature as well as the decisions I will make in my future profession as an English teacher.

I was able to visit two different high school GSA groups in order to engage in and facilitate conversations around some LGBTQ short stories written specifically for young adults. A GSA is "a student-run club in a high school or middle school that brings together LGBTQ and straight students to support each other, provide a safe place to socialize, and create a platform for activism to fight homophobia and transphobia" (Network, 2009, para. 1). GSA meetings often contain discussions about the members' personal experiences pertaining to LGBTQ experiences. I provided students with works of contemporary LGBTQ YA fiction and asked them to engage in conversations around those texts. The content of these conversations varied from the different groups who discussed different texts, but there were some strong connections between the two GSA groups. These common denominators are what will be explored and explicated in this paper and will be reflected on for the benefit of my future as an educator.

Literature Review

I have framed my research around different facets of YA literature, as well as educational facilitation of texts. These items will be discussed in relation to LGBTQ adolescent literature as a whole and the use of literature circles to facilitate conversation.

LGBTQ Adolescent Literature

In order to discuss LGBTQ adolescent literature, it first must be defined as a genre and validated as a purposeful form of literature. I will be discussing these issues as well as LGBTQ adolescent literature within the larger context of adolescent literature and as a specific genre.

Defining LGBTQ Adolescent Literature. LGBTQ adolescent literature can be appropriately explored only after an understanding of adolescent literature is reached. Adolescent literature is characterized as being its own genre, independent from (though related to) the worlds of both children's and adult literature, and so it contains a distinct set of defining characteristics. Because LGBTQ is a subset of this overarching term, defining adolescent literature will help to situate LGBTQ literature within that world.

The term "young adult literature" started gaining widespread use around the late 1960s. At this time, it was in reference to "realistic fiction that was set in the real (as opposed to imagined), contemporary world and addressed problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to young readers aged approximately 12-18" (Cart, 2008, para. 2). This definition is no longer appropriate, however, because it is too restrictive given the array of YA texts that are now available in a multitude of subgenres. Such subgenres include YA fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, and LGBTQ. Each of these have a certain set of characteristics that place any particular work of fiction within the current framework of adolescent literature, yet outside of the definition offered in the 1960s.

The definition of YA literature from the 1960s reflected the literature that was being written at that time. For example, it was true that the YA literature of the 1960s were set "in the real (as opposed to imagined) contemporary world". This is no longer the case. Applying this definition to the YA literature of today would exclude a great number of YA titles, including the science fiction hit *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. In this novel, young adults ages twelve to eighteen (the same age range that appears in the 1960s definition of YA literature) are put into an arena and must fight to the death until only one person is left (Collins, 2008).

Applying the definition from the 1960s would make it impossible to call Collins' novel "young adult" because it is set in an imagined world. Because this novel *is* regarded as YA by today's standards, it is clear that the 1960s definition is out of date.

In addition to the changing perspective on what constitutes adolescent literature, which persons fall under the category of "adolescent" is routinely questioned. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services OPA (Office of Population Affairs) offers several options for ways in which adolescence has been classified, including a set age range and/or the ambiguous term "puberty," but they dismiss such distinctions. Instead, OPA states, "there is no one scientific definition of adolescence or set age boundary. There are key development changes that nearly all adolescents experience during their transition from childhood to adulthood" (Services, para. 1). Though there is no "scientific" definition, focusing on the "key development changes" that are experienced by adolescents provides a framework through which adolescence can be characterized. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) offer the following:

> To mark the distinction between the child and adolescent minds, developmental
> psychologists often refer to adolescent thought as *theoretical thinking*; it is
> thought rooted in assumptions about the way things work – assumptions that
> are then tested through real-world, trail-and-error experimentation…. In short,
> adolescents are in a near-constant state of constructing their lives (Nakkula,
> 2006, p. 2, 5).

Based on this definition, the construction of self is what characterizes adolescents themselves as well as adolescent literature. By assuming that this common theme – the construction of self

– is what is important in the development of an adolescent, it must also be assumed that this theme should be at the forefront of the definition of adolescent literature.

Such a definition of adolescent literature is provided by Brown and Stephens (1995) who define this genre as "a body of literature written for an adolescent that is, in turn, about the lives, experiences, aspirations, and problems of young people" (p. 6). This definition addresses both problems I have posed about the definition of the 1960s. In their definition, Brown and Stephens do not make barriers for the terms "adolescent" or "young people." Likewise, there is no stress on the "realistic" nature that was at the forefront of the 1960s definition. What this definition is concerned with, however, are the "lives, experiences, aspirations, and problems" that adolescents often face – in other words, the ways in which young adults construct their worlds.

Another distinction that was not in the original definition but is included in Brown and Stephens' is that adolescent literature is written both *for* and *about* young adults. As they explain in their book, "the term *young adult literature* describes the primary audience for these works as well as the subject matter they explore" (Brown, 1995, p. 6). What has remained consistent in both definitions, however, are the topics with which these books are concerned. What are called the "problems, issues, and life circumstances" in the 1960s are referred to as the "lives, experiences, aspirations, and problems" in 1995. These distinctions are supported by the OPA definition of adolescence, which points to the "development changes" of adolescence as a defining factor for the distinction of this age group and, consequently, their literature.

The definition as it is presented by Brown and Stephens is the one that will be used for the purposes of this research. Because young adults experience a variety of "lives, experiences,

aspirations, and problems," many subgenres have evolved out of the larger umbrella of young

adult fiction. One such subgenre was first recognized in 1969 with the publication of John

Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, a young adult novel in which the two main

characters, both adolescent boys, kiss and eventually agree "that the incident won't be

repeated and their friendship will continue" (Jenkins, 1993, p. 43). This novel gives its readers

insight into what it may have been like to be one of the adolescent boys, dealing with a budding

confusion about their sexuality and parents who, in that situation as well as others, are not

supportive.

Since the publication of Donovan's novel, adolescent literature containing LGBTQ

characters has changed and diversified dramatically. As Wickens (2011) explains, "A shift

toward more progressive inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning

(LGBTQ) characters began in the late 1990s, highlighting some of the sociocultural shifts

towards acceptance of LGBTQ individuals in this time period" (p. 149). One such "progressive"

attitude is the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy of 1993, which allowed people to serve in the

military regardless of sexual orientation as long as they did not admit to a non-heterosexual

orientation (PBS, 2010). While this is seen as are regressive by today's standards, it was a step

in a positive direction for the LGBTQ community of the early 1990s and helped to pave the way

for the LGBTQ YA literature that began to appear at a significantly higher rate later in the

decade.

Purpose of Young Adult Literature. Given this understanding of what LGBTQ YA

literature is, the purpose of such literature must be explored. Crisp (2009) believes that

"Children's and adolescent literature educates, teaches, and indoctrinates, and these books

serve as repositories for social values, revealing what a society wants itself to be" (p. 338). The

idea that young adult fiction is meant to teach something to its readers is a common thread

that can be traced throughout the discourse (Brown, 1995; Cart, 2008). More specifically,

scholars such as Brown and Stephens find it important that adolescents are learning about one

another. As they state, "Literature provides a powerful means by which we can 'walk in

another's shoes' and begin to understand what others experience" (Brown, 1995, p. 5). From

their perspective, YA literature can be used as a means through which an adolescent reader can

view the lives and experiences of adolescents that are different from their own. By doing so,

students are able to identify with their peers through the literature, leading to a better

understanding of one another.

Brown and Stephens offer a valuable tool for students reading YA literature, and their

ideas have been expanded upon to include identification with not only others, but also oneself.

Clark and Blackburn (2009) utilize the terms "windows" and "mirrors" to describe the ways in

which young adults can view characters in YA novels. Utilizing characters in adolescent texts as

"windows" are what Brown and Stephens advocate for – the ability to see a character as

different from oneself, and "begin to understand" what they experience. Viewing characters as

"mirrors," on the other hand, encourages a student to see oneself, not others, in the character

and to learn about themselves through the character with whom they identify. Clark and

Blackburn do not advocate for one approach over the other, but rather for a combination of the

two. They suggest "encouraging diverse students to consider texts as both possible mirrors and

windows" (Clark, 2009, p. 29). Brown and Stephens support the concept of adolescent readers

looking for "ideas, information, and values to incorporate into their personalities and into their

lives" as well as the ability to empathize with the characters or traits that are unlike themselves

(qtd. in Brown, 1995, p. 7). When adolescent readers adopt both the "window" and "mirror"

strategies, the desires to understand others and oneself are both met.

All adolescents are seeking "ideas, information, and values" to incorporate into their

lives. LGBTQ adolescents are seeking the same, but in a culture that does not make that

information as readily available. For example, Oklahoma state legislature passed a resolution in

2005 which encouraged its public libraries to "confine homosexually themed books and other

age-inappropriate materials to areas exclusively for adult access and distribution" (qtd. in Cart,

2008, pg. xvi). Such barriers make it difficult for young adults to find the answers or strategies

that their heterosexual peers may easily find in YA novels. Likewise, there are a series of state

laws that stigmatize LGBTQ youth in classrooms. Many of these laws pertain specifically to

sexual health education, such as an Alabama law which requires classes to "emphasize, in a

factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle

acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the

laws of the state" (GLESN). This is just an example of one of the bureaucratic barriers that are

stopping students from accessing the facts and information that they not only want, but need.

As Jenkins (1993) states, "Young adults have many questions and much misinformation

about homosexuality, and reading is one of the few private ways for adolescents to gather

information about this subject" (p. 44). While all young adults are looking for ideas,

information, and values, many can find reliable and supportive guidance in other realms aside

from works of fiction. LGBTQ teens have an ever-increasing amount of support and resources,

but far too many still struggle with finding the strategies they desire and need. If one accepts

the belief that the main goals of adolescent literature are to help an adolescent understand

his/her own experiences and the experiences of other adolescents, it must be assumed that the

goal of LGBTQ adolescent literature is to provide the same to LGBTQ adolescents and

heterosexual students seeking to familiarize themselves with the concerns, issues, and lives of

their LGBTQ peers.

Literature Circles

Literature circles have been proven to be effective in a number of classrooms

nationwide. Literature circles encourage choice, engagement, and personal connection with

the texts being read. Though neither of my group literature followed the literature circle

format exactly, it was with this framework in mind that I engaged in and facilitate group

discussions.

Why Literature Circles? Literature circles vary in their implementation, but the structure

of each literature circle consists of "small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have

chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book" (Daniels, 2002, p. 2). Members of

literature circles meet on a regular schedule to discuss the text in whichever way they seem fit,

focusing on the topics that they feel are the most important and interesting. Literature circles

are based largely on student choice, from which texts are read, to how discussions are

conducted, to how the literature circles are evaluated when implemented as part of classroom

assessment (Daniels, 2002).

Literature circles are an excellent tool for fostering "skillful readers," as they are

referred to by Brabham and Villaume (2000). They claim,

Skillful readers make predictions, construct visual images, create connections to

personal experiences and other texts, monitor their reading and whether it

makes senses, solve word- and text-level problems in flexible ways, summarize

as they go, argue with the author, and evaluate content and writing style…

Literature circles are important because they promote these active and

thoughtful stances toward reading (Brabham, 2000, p. 278).

By allowing students to choose their own texts, groups are formed based upon common

interests. When given the opportunity, students are likely to choose texts based on topics in

which they are already interested. This preexisting inclination shared by the members of the

group, in tandem with student-led discussions, are what encourage students to become skillful

readers.

The goal of utilizing literature circles to discuss LGBTQ YA texts is not only to foster

"skillful readers," but also to foster an environment that supports a growing social

consciousness. Noll (1994) saw this phenomenon occur when she implemented literature

circles in her own classroom. In reflecting upon her students' experience in literature circles,

Noll (1994) admits, "What I hadn't expected was the lesson that these students would teach me

about the power of literature and literature discussion to support adolescents' developing

social consciousness" (Noll, 1994, p. 88). In this experience, a group of students formed a

literature circle that focused on texts dealing with issues of child abuse. Reading these books

led the group to social action, finding out about different programs put in place for abused

children as well as talking to foster parents about their roles. The combination of the literature

itself and the literature circle format are what led the students to social action. Literature

circles provided these students as well as countless others with the opportunity to "find answers to their questions and to develop new perspectives on the social issues that were important to them" (Noll, 1994, p. 89). One of the goals of a GSA is to engage in social action within the school and/or community, and providing students with texts has hopefully assisted this social consciousness and engagement.

Choice in Literature Circles. Daniels (2002), a prominent voice in the world of literature circles, speaks to the importance of choice when creating literature circles. Ideally, students involved in literature circles would have multiple copies of multiple texts available; that way, students would have a variety of texts to choose from when forming their literature circles. What is more important than the quantity of available literature, however, is the quality of the literature. Daniels' suggestion for choosing literature to use in literature circles is simple: "You don't have to be an expert in children's or young adult literature to make some good book selections and get started with literature circles. The starting point can always be children's books that you love yourself" (Daniels, 2002, p. 94). Daniels argues that if the educator facilitating literature circles is in favor of a particular text, the likelihood of the students also enjoying the text is high.

Those that advocate for the use of literature circles also advocate for the use of texts at multiple reading levels (Daniels, 2002; Noll, 1994). Daniels writes, "whatever grade you teach, you need multiple-copy sets of books at a wide range of reading levels – from relatively thinner, easy books, to thicker, harder ones. If you are giving kids limited book choices within themes, this is especially critical…. Simply: in literature circles kids must be reading books they can read" (Daniels, 2002, p. 95). Literature circles are founded on the idea of choice, which is meant to

enhance student enjoyment while reading. By providing students with texts at different

reading levels, students are able to choose the degree to which they wish to challenge

themselves concerning literacy. The goal of literature circles is not necessarily to challenge the

students with the material they are reading, but rather to challenge them to critically analyze

the material they choose to read instead of taking the text at face value.

What is most important to remember when creating and implementing literature circles

is one of Daniels' "Key Ingredients": the necessity for a "spirit of playfulness and fun" to be

present throughout every literature circle. "As we order these books and create these choices,

we may have to remind ourselves that literature circles are independent or recreational

reading" (Daniels, 2002, p. 95). Unlike other assigned texts, literature circle texts are based

upon student choice; therefore, the options available should be texts that the students may

have chosen to read outside of an educational setting. Providing such literature to students

should achieve two goals: first, to retain the "spirit of playfulness and fun" during literature

circles, and second, to keep students engaged in the texts by making the reading process feel

voluntary and recreational.

Methodology

The purpose of conducting any research study can be summed up as follows: "We

expect an inquiry to be carried out so that certain audience will benefit – not just to swell the

archives, but to help persons toward further understandings" (Stake, 1978, pg. 5). Through this

study, the audiences I hope to benefit are young adult students and educators of young adults.

This study will also benefit me not only as a fellow educator of young adults, but as an

educational researcher.

First, my research is concerned with the perceptions, emotions, and feelings of students in local GSA groups regarding LGBTQ YA literature. By providing students with LGBTQ YA texts and a structure for discussion, my goal was to give them a new platform to discuss issues pertinent to them through a personal lens as well as through the experiences of the characters. I believe the young adult students benefitted from discussions by hearing from their peers about their experiences and how those experiences have influenced their interpretations of the texts, as well as providing each student "windows" and "mirrors" through which they can interpret the texts on their own.

Secondly, educators of young adults may be able to benefit from the facts and opinions that have emerged from this study. Currently, "YA books are not widely used as curricular books," but rather "most YA books are used for outside reading or as part of literature circles" (Collier, 2012, p. 10). The frequency with which these texts are being used in classrooms is inconsistent with the fact that students are reading them. I hope that educators of young adults can see the benefit of utilizing young adult literature in general, as well as LGBTQ young adult literature specifically, to create "windows" and "mirrors" for the students in their classrooms.

Lastly, and most importantly, as a future educator, this study has informed my own approach to pedagogy. I am constantly reevaluating what I think it means to be a "good teacher," and I plan to continue this internal and external discussion throughout my years as a teacher. One "good teacher" characteristic that I want to emulate as an English teacher is the ability to connect my students to what they are reading on a personal and emotional level. By conducting this research, I have learned ways that students use literature as "windows" and

"mirrors" through which they can critically examine themselves, their peers, the ways they are represented in literature, and the world around them.

Phenomenology. The first lens through which I have based my research is phenomenology, which focuses on the question, "What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?" (Patton, 1990, p. 69). The phenomenon in question for this research is the experience of reading LGBTQ YA literature, the key word being experience. While students may feel inclined to comment on the mechanical aspects of reading, I am most interested to hear about how they felt while reading – whether the text made them feel confused, uncomfortable, shocked, happy, contemplative, excited, hopeful, etc. I am interested in their perceptions of the literature as a whole, and specifically the way characters and situations are represented in the texts.

Phenomenology is concerned both with the group and with the self. Patton (1990) suggests that "*we can only know what we experience* by attending to the perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness" (p. 69). While reading the texts, the students' initial reactions will be the result of personal perception. Assuming that the students are looking at the texts as potential "mirrors" and/or "windows," their feelings about the credibility of the LGBTQ YA texts will be largely dependent upon their own personal experiences as an LGBTQ or ally individual. That being said, the community of a GSA in which I conducted research is functional largely because of some commonalities among its members. Despite the personal sexual orientation or gender identification of its members, each student in the GSA has the common experience of being a member and exposure to common themes and issues that are discussed during their meetings. Because of this, I expected a certain amount of

overlap to emerge during our discussions about their perceptions, and this was sometimes the case.

Patton goes on to say that "Interpretation is essential to an understanding of experience and the experience includes the interpretation. Thus phenomenologists focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in doing so, develop a worldview" (Patton, 1990, p. 69). As research on adolescence has shown (Nakkula, 2006; Brown, 1995), construction of self and of ones' world is essential to adolescents. The students I worked with have some construction of what it means to be an LGBTQ adolescent, either through personal experience, interaction with peers, the media, or more likely a combination of these and a variety of other resources. One of the main goals of my research was to learn about those authentic experience and see if or how those experiences could be related to pieces of LGBTQ YA literature. I learned about those authentic experiences through the common themes that emerged in discussions among the two different GSA groups.

While I have analyzed the interpretations of the students through a largely phenomenological lens, I have also assessed myself in the same way. Patton (1990) claims that phenomenology is "a focus on what people experience and how they interpret the world (in which one can use interviews without actually experiencing the phenomenon oneself)" (p. 70). Each student has a unique perspective on the world based on their own experiences, and so do I. All experiences I will be reporting on are coming directly from the students to me. It is impossible for me to experience the literature through the eyes of a high school student in a GSA, never mind as each student individually. Because of this, my feelings and interpretations must be examined alongside those of the students in the GSA groups.

Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is concerned with the specific moment at which a text is written, as opposed to a "timeless" interpretation. Patton (1990) asserts, "To make sense of and interpret a text, it is important to know what the author wanted to communicate, to understand intended meanings, and to place documents in a historical and cultural context" (p. 84). All texts I am using for discussion are relatively contemporary. This choice was made because authors are writing to be read in the present; therefore, contemporary authors writing LGBTQ YA fiction are seeking to be read by the young adult readers of today. While these texts will inevitably influence those of the future, it is the contemporary audience that is likely at the forefront of the author's mind. These young adult readers have the best chance at discerning authorial intent because the moment in history that the text they are reading has come from a similar moment as they are living. Students proved to be able to make connections to the experiences of the characters and how they resonate within and against the students' own experiences of the world. The value of such an approach is advocated for across discourse on adolescent literature (Brown, 1995) and in regards to LGBTQ adolescent literature specifically (Banks, 2009). It is also reminiscent of the "windows" and "mirrors" framework proposed by Clark and Blackburn (2009) wherein students utilize characters in literature as lenses to view others as well as themselves. Likewise, because the students have exposure to LGBTQ content through their participation in the high school GSA, they were able to place the LGBTQ YA texts in the cultural context of what they believe it means to be an LGBTQ young adult.

Similar to the practice of phenomenology, I as a researcher must also interpret the ways I am interpreting the students. Hermeneutics demands that "one must know about the researcher as well as the researched to place any qualitative study in a proper, hermeneutic

context (Patton, 1990, p. 85). As the researcher, I must understand my role in the research as well as my relation to the texts personally and culturally. "If other researchers had different backgrounds, used different methods, or had different purposes, they would likely develop different types of reactions, focus on different aspects of the setting, and develop somewhat different scenarios." (qtd. in Patton, 1990, p. 85). Once again, my interpretations sometimes differed from those of the students because we are coming from different places in our lives with very different experiences, and my personal beliefs, biases, and interpretations must be studied just as critically as those professed by the high school students. Likewise, the language the students and I use to communicate our ideas is specific to the setting and purpose of this research, and this will be taken into account utilizing discourse analysis.

Discourse Analysis. Discourse analysis focuses on the use of specific language to create meaning and ways to explicate that meaning. This language is not confined to what is spoken aloud, however. "We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language," as Gee (1999) acknowledges, "but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing" (Gee, 1999, p. 11). Language does not exist in a vacuum, and is therefore connected to the speaker, the audience(s), and the situation in which the language is being spoken. The conversations I will be reporting on, then, must be examined in this light. The students as individuals, as far as my research can glean, must be taken into consideration. I must also consider the effects of the multiple audiences – their peers, their GSA coordinator/teacher, and myself, an outsider – on that speaker, as well as the situation: an after-school Gay-Straight Alliance meeting. The situation is also affected by the literature the

students are being asked to discuss. All of these pieces together create the specific

conversations that I facilitated, and it is entirely plausible to assume that the conversations

would have been quite different if one or more of these elements were altered in any way.

Intertwined with the belief that language is a source of "valuing, feeling, and believing"

is the idea of social justice. "Since different identities and activities are enacted in and through

language," Gee (1999) asserts, "the study of language is integrally connected to matters of

equality and justice" (Gee, 1999, p. 13). As explained above, language is dependent upon the

physical and social situation in which a person finds her/himself. Because certain people have

access to certain physical and social situations which others do not, the people who are on the

outside of those situations do not have access to the language of the insiders. The same can be

said for cultures. The students who will be discussing the literature I provide are part of a few

distinct classes of people: young adults and people who are or support LGBTQ individuals. For

this reason, it is likely that the language they use will be specific to both of these identities. My

interpretation of that language, too, will be effected by my distinction as a non-high school

student. Because I do not walk the halls alongside those students, my interpretation of their

discourse must be analyzed while keeping in mind my own social situation. This was done

largely through reflective journaling, a process through which my beliefs and values were

critically investigated with the guidance of my faculty advisor.

Equality and justice through language easily lends itself to another facet of discourse

analysis: social languages. Gee (1999) explains social languages simply to be "what we learn

and what we speak" (Gee, 1999, p. 25). This phenomenon is sometimes conscious, sometimes

unconscious on the part of the speaker. For instance, a person would likely make the conscious

decision to speak in a more formal manner to an employer than they would to their friend or

spouse. That same person, however, may speak to that friend differently than they would to

the spouse, which would likely be an act of unconscious linguistic shifting. Instances of shifting

ones' language to fit the social situation indicate the complimentary relationship between

language and social interaction: one is influenced by the other. As mentioned earlier, I am

aware when analyzing that the students' conversation as a whole and word choice specifically

are affected by my presence, either in person or through an audio device used to record their

discussions. These students were aware of me as an adult, a teacher, and in large part, a

stranger, and this has undoubtedly affected the candidness with which they may have spoken

otherwise.

In order to analyze the discourse, I utilized the methods of constant comparison and

marginal remarks. The constant comparative method is a four-stage process: comparing

incidents in each category; integrating categories; delimiting theory; and writing the theory.

(Glaser, 1965) By following these steps, Glaser (1965) claims that "The universe of data used in

the constant comparative method is based on the reduction of the theory and the delimination

and saturation of categories" (Glaser, 1965, pg. 442). Using the constant comparison method

has helped me to create clear and distinct categories through which I analyze the artifacts of

my research.

Marginal remarks are a method of coding texts in order to uncover patterns and

themes. As Miles and Huberman (1994) remark, the codes made while making marginal

remarks "suggest new interpretations, leads, connections with other parts of the data"

(Huberman, 1994,pg. 67). Making marginal remarks on the surveys and transcriptions of group

discussions have led to the themes through which I discuss my findings.

Methods

My study was conducted using literature circle and surveys in order to facilitate and

compile the thoughts and opinions of the students involved. I also documented my own

experience as a researcher in the form of a journal, which was a collaborative conversation with

my faculty advisor. I will begin by discussing the use of literature circles as a way of facilitating

conversation around texts.

Literature Circles. Daniels (2002) defines literature circles as "small, peer-led discussion groups

whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book" (p. 2). The

component I was most concerned with implementing is the peer-led discussion forum. I

wanted the students to discuss what they found to be most important, interesting, surprising,

disappointing, curious, or exciting. The nature of discussion required certain aspects of the

texts to be focused on more than others, and was interested to see what the students deem

more or less worthy of discussion.

Though literature circles vary in their implementation, there are some key elements that

should remain throughout. These elements are: student choice of reading material; small

groups reading different books; regularly scheduled meetings; note taking; student-driven,

open, natural conversations; teacher as facilitator; evaluation by teacher observation and

student self-assessment; spirit of playfulness and fun; and sharing with classmates at the

conclusion of a book (Daniels, 2002). Because I did not use literature circles to evaluate student

achievement, I made that omission to this formula intentionally. Due to the group sizes, time

constraints, and a number of other factors, many other aspects of literature circles were altered. Different pieces of the formula were kept and omitted in the different group discussions.

I believe implementing a form of literature circles lead to honest, natural conversation which brought to light students' feelings and perceptions about being an LGBTQ or ally adolescent. As Noll (1994) states, literature circles have the power to "provide [students] with valuable opportunities to find answers to their questions and to develop new perspectives on the social issues that were important to them" (p. 89). By exploring the texts with one another as opposed to through my instruction, students were able to focus on the aspects that they found most worthy of discussion. Instead of having an "outsider," such as myself, provide questions or prompts what would have been influenced by my own interests or beliefs, the students were able to guide the conversation according to what was important to them. This has helped me to identify the issues that are most important and congruent between the two groups.

Surveys. While a large percentage of the information I gathered came from the group discussions, another portion came from surveys. I utilized surveys because "Survey research is a useful tool when researchers wish to solicit the beliefs and opinions of large groups of people" (Tuckman, 2012, p. 244). By administering the same questions to each of the research participants, I gained an understanding of similarities and variances in their interpretations. Analyzing the responses to these surveys has allowed me to gauge the "beliefs and opinions" of the students in the high school GSAs I have surveyed. Through examining these beliefs and

opinions, I have been able to make connections between the two groups of students, which

reveal the issues that are most important to students in GSAs as a whole.

As the methodology of my research is concerned with emotions, so too are the methods

through which I am exploring the emotions. Tuckman (2012) states, "researchers who conduct

survey research hope to infer the beliefs of the larger group from the representative responses

of this sample" (p. 244). The sample, made up of students in local high school GSAs, answered

questions on the survey about their responses and interpretations of the literature. By

discerning the patterns in these responses, I came to conclusions about the "beliefs of the

larger group" based on the responses of the students.

Much of this information was also apparent through the literature circles, but in a much

more personal, private way. Students were aware that the surveys and responses would not be

reviewed by their peers and were encouraged to answer them truthfully, despite the opinions

they may have heard from other group members. "By providing access to what is 'inside a

person's head,' these approaches allow investigators to measure what someone knows

(knowledge or information), what someone likes and dislikes (values and preferences), and

what someone thinks (attitudes and beliefs)" (Tuckman, 2012, p. 244). These three different

facets of what is "inside a person's head" are what will make up their interpretation and, by

studying that interpretation through administering surveys, I was able to draw conclusions

about the beliefs of the group as a whole.

Journaling. As a student, a researcher, and an educator, I kept a journal throughout the process

of conceiving, conducting, evaluating, and reflecting on my own role in my research. The use of

journaling is often to "chronicle the students' internal processes about a course, an experience,

a personal value, or a belief," and this is true of my journal (Hubbs, 2005, p. 61). The journal I

have kept focuses on my changing attitudes and perceptions on LGBTQ YA literature and the

research process. Hubbs (2005) utilizes the term "paper mirror" to refer to reflexive journals,

and this term suits the purpose of my journaling. Given my phenomenological and

hermeneutic frameworks, self-reflection is essential. I am only able to understand my research

by understanding the ways my perceptions are changing along with it, and keeping a journal

helps in this process.

Each of my journals were shared with my faculty advisor, Dr. Horwitz. Throughout the

process of journaling, Dr. Horwitz pushed me to question my motives, actions, and beliefs at

every step of the research process. As is true of reflective journaling as a whole, the journal

dialogue between Dr. Horwitz and I provided a "structured way for the instructor and student

to examine the student's thinking patterns [and] belief systems" (Hubbs, 2005, p. 64). Had my

journal been an insular process through which I simply expressed my thoughts and beliefs, I

would not have been pushed to evaluate those beliefs critically and adjust them when

necessary. The reflective journaling process, specifically due to the comments from my faculty

advisor Dr. Horwitz, encouraged me to become an active participant in my own research and

examine myself as an ally and an educator.

Procedure

I conducted my research in two different Rhode Island high school Gay-Straight Alliance

(GSA) groups. The first round of this research, which took place at Garden High, was conducted

at the end of the 2012-2013 school year, and the second round took place at Donovan High at

the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year. The methods used at both school were similar, but

those utilized at Garden High were analyzed and revised for use at Donovan High. This is

consistent with the cyclical nature of action research, in which methods are constantly

evaluated in order to be revised so they can be more effective.

Settings

Below is a sampling of the demographics of Garden High and Donovan High as of the

2012-2013 school year.

School	Population	% Eligible for Subsidized Lunch	% White	% African American	% Hispanic	% Multiracial	% Native American	% Asian
Garden	1853	41%	77%	13%	5%	3%	1%	1%
Donovan	1122	33%	72%	8%	16%	0%	1%	3%

According to a survey administered to students at Garden High, 86.6% of students

identify as straight, 3.5% identify as lesbian or gay, 5.6% identified as bisexual, and 4.3%

indicated that they were unsure. (Rhode Island, 2013) No such data was available for Donovan

High.

Meetings

Garden High. I first met with a high school teacher and GSA facilitator at Garden High in

February 2013. We discussed the possibilities for my research within her small GSA, which

contained about 5-8 students at any given meeting. It was not until May 2013 that I was able to

meet with students in the GSA and introduce them to the purpose of my research. At this

meeting, I distributed a pre-reading survey (Appendix A) which asked students about their

experiences reading LGBTQ young adult literature and their anticipations for what reading

LGBTQ literature would be like. I also distributed the short story "Perfect" by Jennifer Diemer to each of the students as well as consent forms to sign and return.

In May 2013, I attended Garden High's last GSA meeting for the school year at which the short story "Perfect" was discussed. This group consisted of five students, all of whom read the story before attending the meeting. I acted as a facilitator during this discussion, asking students questions about their opinions about the story and their personal experiences. At the end of our discussion, the students completed a post-reading survey (Appendix B) about their experience and perceptions of the text.

Donovan High. I met with Donovan High's GSA students in September 2013. During this initial meeting, I shared with students my intentions with their group: to ask those who were interested in doing so to read a short story containing a non-heterosexual young adult protagonist and discuss that short story in literature circles. Each of the students present at this initial meeting were receptive to the idea, and I distributed permission documents to be signed and returned the following week.

The following meeting was set to determine the literature circles and the short stories each circle would be reading. I verbally provided students with a brief synopsis of each story and students were asked to choose the story that appealed to them most. The intended outcome was for each group to contain 3-4 students each reading different stories. The size limit of the groups was not articulated, so the faculty advisor suggested that a larger group, which contained six students, split into two smaller groups reading the same story. The literature circles were decided as follows:

"Am I Blue?" by Bruce Coville	"Chili Powder" by Anna Meadows	"Running" by Ellen Howard
2 groups of 3 students	1 group of 5 students	1 group of 3 students

Students were asked to read the short stories outside of the GSA before the next meeting, which would be the following week.

After deciding upon the groups and stories, students were asked to choose which literature circle role they wanted to fulfill. Their choices were as follows: Character Captain, Cool Connector, Literary Luminary, Sensational Summarizer, and Queried Questioner (Appendix E). Lastly, the students were asked to complete a revised pre-reading survey (Appendix C). This survey was similar to that administered at Garden High, but was revised to include more specific questions about their experiences reading young adult literature as well as their involvement with the GSA.

The third meeting was designed for students to discuss the short stories they had read in their literature circles. The students informed the faculty advisor and me that most of them did not read the story. However, some had, so the faculty advisor and I facilitated two groups: one group discussing "Am I Blue?" and a second discussing "Running". We encouraged the students who did not read to take part in the conversation of either group, and so each group contained eight students. During these discussions, the faculty advisor and I visited both group discussions, which were taking place in separate rooms across the hall from one another. In both of the groups, the students lead the discussion with little input from me or the faculty advisor. At the end of the meeting, students were asked to fill out a revised post-reading survey (Appendix D). This survey, like the revised pre-reading survey, was similar to the original

survey administered at Garden High but asked questions that were more general so they could

apply to each of the stories.

Data Collection

Data collected from both of these high school GSA groups indicates the thoughts and

opinions gathered through pre-reading surveys, post-reading surveys, and group discussions of

each of the texts. At each of these GSA meeting, the student respondents, the GSA faculty

advisor, and I were all present. The chart below indicates the number of students that will be

discussed in regards to in-class group discussion of the short stories.

School	Story	Grades	# of Students	Gender
Garden High	"Perfect"	9 – 12	5	All female
Donovan High	"Am I Blue?"	9 – 12	8	4 male, 4 female

Responses to the pre-reading surveys from both schools include some students who did not

participate in the group discussions. Students from Donovan High who read "Running" by Ellen

Howard also completed post-reading surveys, and this information will be included as well.

However, the specific language used during their in-class group discussion was not

documented, so the group discussion of this group will not be included.

Findings

I will be analyzing the use of literature circles as a tool as well as the four themes that

became most apparent during my discussions at Garden and Donovan High: boys vs. girls,

family and adults, generalizations, and identification with characters. Findings are based on

pre- and post-reading surveys from Garden High and Donovan High as well as group discussions

of the short stories "Perfect" Jennifer Diemer at Garden and "Am I Blue?" by Bruce Coville at

Donovan.

Literature Circles. Much of the conversation at both Garden and Donovan High went beyond

the text that was being discussed. However, there are several instances where students

referenced the text directly in their discussions, proving that the literature did provide a

springboard for conversation. Likewise, students at both schools indicated that the texts we

read could be a valuable resource for a variety of audiences.

   Quoting the Text. Students at Donovan High talked at length about the suitable

situations in which the term "faggot" can be appropriated. That discussion stemmed from a

quote from Bruce Coville's "Am I Blue?": "Taking back the language is one way to jam the

grinder. My friends and I call each other 'faggot' and 'queer' for the same reason so many black

folks call each other 'nigger' – to take the words away from the people who want to use them

to hurt us" (Coville, 1994, pg. 10). One student at Donovan introduced this quote, prefacing it

with "I have to say that I actually really liked [this] part." These two sentences prompted the

students to discuss the validity of the statement at length. The students were able to analyze

their own relation to the appropriation of the term "faggot" and draw conclusions about if,

when, and for whom it was acceptable. It is important to note that the students were not

asked to relate that quote to themselves; they took it upon themselves as a group to connect

their own lives and experiences to the text they had read. This exemplifies one of the main

goals of a literature circle: to be able to make personal connections with a text.

   Students at Garden High had similar success in employing literature circles to discuss

Jennifer Diemer's "Perfect". One student quoted the following line: "Now I feel sorry for them

– Lana and Hillary. And everyone else who doesn't know there's so much more to life… than

perfect" (Diemer & Diemer, 2013). The student used this quote to conclude the following:

> "She just kind of explains it in that one sentence, that you don't need to be perfect to be
>
> happy."

Just as the student at Donovan was able to connect a direct quotation from the text to her own

life, this student was able to connect the quote to something she believed to be universally

true. The text allowed this student to make a connection to a belief she already had about the

relationship between perfection and happiness. She was able to validate what she believed

using the text as evidence, another goal of utilizing literature circles.

Room for Improvement. As was mentioned earlier, many students who participated in

the discussion about Coville's "Am I Blue?" had not actually read the story at the time of the

discussion. While these students did contribute to the conversation, their lack of prior

knowledge proved to be a hindrance as it limited the amount of conversation that was related

directly to the text. This was reflected in one of the student's final surveys in response to the

question "Did you enjoy working in literature circles? Why or why not?":

> "Not entirely, because it seemed like almost no one wanted to really talk about the
>
> story; instead, their personal lives (which had nothing to do with the story)."

If all of the students had read the story previous to the meeting, there is a better chance that

the conversations would have been concerned more directly with the story. However, I believe

this students' comment shows a fundamental misunderstanding about the purpose of my

research and the purpose of literature circles in general. While I would have liked to hear more

discussion about the story itself, I was also interested to hear about the "personal lives" of the

students engaged in conversation. This is consistent with Daniels' (2002) belief that literature

circles should be driven by natural, student-driven conversation.

This student was in the minority, however, as most other students provided more

positive reviews of the literature circle format. To the question "Did you enjoy working in

literature circles?" these students responded:

AR: Yes I did, once the talking got serious it was very nice.

JR: Yeah because it gets more personal and lets stuff out.

MB: Yes I did! I liked getting my ideas out and discussing it with everyone. ☺

RL: I liked it because my group was smart and funny.

These students point to some of the most important aspects of a literature circle: working

together and the cathartic nature of free-form discussion. These students were grateful for the

opportunity to share their "stuff" and "ideas" with their classmates. As RL indicated, the

literature circle format also helped these students to learn about one another – namely, how

smart and funny their group members are. These student testimonials show the benefits of

literature circles for the individual student as well as the group as a whole.

Many aspects of an organized literature circle were adhered to during the discussion at

Donovan High; however, some other aspects were not. For instance, the students had not all

read the story before meeting to discuss it. Likewise, the students were given role sheets to

complete and bring to the discussion in hopes that these roles would help direct the

conversation (Appendix E). Students did not complete the role sheets; therefore, the discussion

was less structured than I imagined it would have been with the role sheets. While this did lead

to interesting and rich conversation, there were also some shortcomings. As mentioned earlier,

one student briefly mentioned how he believed that he doesn't "think bisexual exists with guys". One student quickly disagreed, saying, "It does". Because of the unstructured nature of the conversation, the students did not discuss this any further and moved on to another topic of conversation. Of course, there is no way to know whether or not this would have been discussed any further if the conversation had been more structured. It is plausible to assume that this topic would have not even come up if the students were using role sheets. However, I do believe that had this students' statement been made in the midst of a more structured conversation, the validity of that statement would have been challenged or accepted by other students.

    Text as a Resource. In both Garden and Donovan High, the students reflected on their experience with the text via a summative survey (Appendices B and D). At Garden High, the students were asked to share any additional comments they had pertaining to their reading and discussion of Deimer's "Perfect". One student responded to this prompt by writing, "Very good story to share, it may help to analyze for heterosexuals. Avoid homophobia tendencies." Another question that was asked on this survey was, "What do you think the author's purpose was for writing 'Perfect'?" This same student answered, "To provide a sense of LGBT security and versatility." Based on these two responses, it is clear that this student found a breadth of usefulness in this particular story for individuals both inside and outside of the LGBTQ community. She mentions both groups directly and attributes positive outcomes of reading the text for both groups. The rest of the students at Garden High had a more generalized response to the text. In answering the question about authorial purpose, the students responded:

    KR: To show people that no one is "perfect".

HC: So they can prove that anybody can be with anybody they want to be.

HL: Not to be ashamed of who u r.

For these students, the purpose they saw was not specifically for any group. Rather, they saw the text as an opportunity to experience a more universal truth that is not directly connected to the LGBTQ content of the text. Only one other student directly referenced this content, responding with, "To show a side of gay youth that is often hidden". I am not sure what "side" this student is referring to, but it seems as though by just telling a story about lesbian teens, a new "side" is being shown to readers of "Perfect". What is most important is that each of these students found value in reading the text, regardless of whether or not they connected that value to a specific group of people.

Students at Donovan High were asked to complete a similar survey. Instead of asking the students about authorial intent, I instead asked them, "Would you recommend this story? If so, who would you recommend it to and why?". Two students who had read the story answered as follows:

MB: Yes! Really to all my friends. ☺ It's an awesome/really informative and good story.

RL: I would recommend this story to anyone who feels like they are trapped or confused.

As with the majority of students at Garden High, neither student specified that the story would be beneficial for either LGBTQ- or non-LGBTQ individuals. However, both students did indicate that they would share the story with a wider group of individuals; for MB, her friends, and for RL, people who she thought felt "trapped or confused". Once again, these students point to the universal benefit of these stories for not only LGBTQ young adults.

Boys vs. Girls. Several different issues came up regarding the students' perceived differences between males and females. The distinctions made were concerned with generalized beliefs regarding heterosexual males, the difference in stigmas against gay men and gay women, and the experience of bisexuality for males and females.

The consensus among students at Donovan High was that homosexual males were stigmatized more harshly than homosexual females. Students also commented on their perception of their male heterosexual peers, who they perceived as different from heterosexual women due to their unwillingness to comment on the physicality of another male. This, too, is consistent with beliefs about young men policing their behavior in order to avoid being labeled as non-heterosexual. Lastly, one student at Donovan High voiced his beliefs about bisexuality – namely, that female bisexuality was valid whereas male bisexuality is a fraud. Once again, this students' perception is reminiscent of research done on the topic in which it was found that male bisexuality was considered "very unacceptable" by more than double the college student body who found female bisexuality to be "very unacceptable" (Elaison, 2001). What this shows is that the beliefs and concerns of this group of high school students is not specific to these students alone, but is consistent with and reminiscent of the beliefs of and research conducted with others on each of these three topics.

Homosexual Males and Females. Students at Donovan High discussed the differences between males and females inside and outside of the LGBTQ community at several points throughout the group discussion. One distinction that was drawn was the belief that homosexual men are stigmatized more than homosexual women. Such a distinction is exemplified in the following piece of dialogue:

RoL: It's like, not to be rude but usually guys would – would go like, "Ok, that girl's a

lesbian, that's hot" –

MB: That annoys me.

RoL: –but a guy can go, "That guy's gay, ugh!"

JH: I hate, I hate that bias! Like, two girls kiss and they love it, but if two guys kiss…

This short excerpt is representative of a lot of conversation around non-heterosexual men,

which the students discussed at length. The pervasive belief that gay men are stigmatized more

harshly than gay women extends beyond the confines of these students' beliefs, however.

Questionnaire and laboratory studies indicate that "Heterosexuals tend to express more

negative attitudes toward gay people of their same sex, with the pattern much more

pronounced among men than women" (Herek, 2002, p. 42). This unbalanced stigma is clearly

articulated by JH, who points to the "bias" of heterosexual men to negatively react to

homosexual activity between two men but not between two women.

"Straight Guys". Students at Donovan High also voiced the belief that heterosexual

male students would not comment on the physicality of another male. When the topic was

first breached, one female student simply stated, "Guys… guys *don't* do that." Other students

agreed with her, with one male student questioning "Why do straight guys get so homophobic

about it?" A third student voiced her opinion on the subject, claiming, "Straight guys need to,

start being able to like, openly admit, 'Ok, yes, um, that dude's hot – just like a girl can say 'this

girl is pretty.'" Both male and female students in this group corroborated this stance.

The tendency for heterosexual men to avoid such a conversation is an example of what

Pascoe (2005) calls fag behavior, which she believes is "fluid enough that boys police most of

their behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough

so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it" (Pascoe, 2005, p. 330). Pascoe's

words are echoed through one of the students, who plainly states, "The reason for that being,

in all honest opinion is because guys are so scared that – that they're gonna be labeled as gay".

The pervasiveness of this theory was indirectly challenged by a heterosexual male student in

the group, who claimed "I'm straight… I'm like, ok, you're gay, I don't give a shit". Though this

statement makes it clear that not all heterosexual male students believe in and intentionally

behave contrary to "fag behavior," the reality of the theory was accepted by all other members

of the group.

Bisexuality. The GSA Network is a national youth leader organization that specializes in

assisting GSA groups nationwide in a number of goals. One such goal indicated in their mission

statement is to assist GSA groups to "create safe environments in schools for students to

support each other and learn about homophobia, transphobia, and other oppressions" (GSA,

2009). Knowing this information, I was surprised to hear a self-identified homosexual male

student make the following claim in regards to bisexuality:

"With girls, I feel like it's different… But with guys I don't feel like there's anything

bisexual— I don't think bisexuality exists with guys."

I was under the impression that all of the students in the GSA would understand and support all

sexual identities, but this claim indicates a lack of understanding of that particular group for

that particular student.

While this response was shocking for me to hear, upon further research, I found that

this belief is not uncommon. A study designed to analyze the public opinion specifically about

bisexual males was conducted by Elaison (2001). In this work, Elaison (2001) points to the fact

that "people still view sexual identity as a dichotomous variable – that is, people are either

homosexual or heterosexual" (Elaison, 2001, p. 139). The bisexual identity does not fit into this

mindset, making it impossible for those who believe in a dichotomy of sexual identity to

entertain the validity of such an identity. This student's stance in such a belief is solidified by a

statement he made directly following the one above: "They'll be like, 'No, I like guys *more* but

like yeah, I still like girls.' And I'm like, 'No, you're gay.'" It is clear that the student cannot

imagine a male who is truly bisexual.

Still, a dichotomous view of sexual identity does not explain why the student expressed

a clear distinction in beliefs about male and female bisexual individuals. I believe there are two

possible ways to explain for this dichotomy: one which is research-based and one that is purely

situational. In her data collection, Elaison (2001) asked students to complete a questionnaire

about their personal beliefs toward a number of prompts pertaining to sexuality. One prompt

asked students to indicate the degree to which they found gay men, lesbians, bisexual men, and

bisexual women "very unacceptable". The results were as follows:

Bisexual men: 26% very unacceptable

Gay men: 21% very unacceptable

Lesbians: 14% very unacceptable

Bisexual women: 12% very unacceptable

This data helped me see the discrepancy between feelings regarding bisexual men, with the

highest concentration of negative ratings, and bisexual women, with the lowest concentration

of negative ratings. These beliefs are reminiscent of those expressed by the student who

fictionalized male bisexuality; for this student, it is plausible that the very concept of bisexual

men is "very unacceptable," while the concept of bisexual women is markedly less so.

The second explanation, as I have mentioned, is situational. This student's belief was

shared directly following the story of another student – a *female* student – told about coming

out to her mother as pansexual, a sexuality categorized by attraction to people of any sexual

orientations, gender expressions and biological sexes. It is plausible that the male student

claimed to believe in the possibility of bisexual females because he did not want to offend his

classmate. His claim was challenged briefly by one other student: the same heterosexual male

in the group who asked why "straight guys get so homophobic" about complimenting other

males. This was not discussed further as the other students in the group moved on to another

topic of conversation. I am left questioning this students' true beliefs about bisexuality, a

question I did not have the opportunity to answer.

Adults and Family. Students at Donovan High talked about their experiences not only related

to gender, but also in relation to members of older generations. This manifested in two ways:

first, the differences between themselves and adults in general, and secondly in relations with

their parents. Overall, students voiced the belief that members of older generations are less

tolerant and understanding of LGBTQ individuals and issues than their peers. Students also

reasoned that older generations' lack of tolerance is due to a lack of understanding, not an

intrinsic homophobia.

Adults v. "Kids". Students at Donovan High continually pointed to the differences they

experienced between the beliefs of adults in their lives and their peers, who they referred to as

"kids our age" or simply "kids". One of the most pervasive differences that the students

mentioned was their observations of homophobia amongst adults and teens. The statement

that began this discussion was:

> "I've also come to realize that most 'homophobes' [with air quotes] or people against
>
> homosexuals are actually adults rather than kids our age—"

Three students responded with an enthusiastic "Yeah!" immediately following this statement.

No students verbally disagreed with this statement, and most did verbally agree at least once

during the duration of the conversation. One student pointed to the fact that two male

students in the group – one homosexual and one heterosexual – regularly "act gay" with one

another. The two students who "act gay" with each other validated this statement by coyly

smiling at one another while the others giggled. Given that both of these students were

members of the GSA, this comfortable interaction did not come as a surprise to me. However,

this was mentioned in a conversation about adolescents in general. This leads me to believe

that the students observe other students who are not associated with the GSA expressing

similar, positive attitudes. The student who mentioned their joking relationship connected it to

the differences between adults and teens:

> "I think guys nowadays are more open…. Mainly because kids our age are so accepting
>
> with gays now. It's more the adults that people worry about."

As with the earlier statement, two students immediately validated this claim with an agreeable

"Yeah". Being that the discussion took place with a group of students, I had assumed that

discussions on homophobia would be concerned with a student or students that attended the

school as an example of homophobia. This seemed natural to me because I assumed that many

or all of the students would be able to point to a member or members of their school and relate

with one another about the effects of homophobia based on someone with which they were all familiar. Instead, though, the students focused not on a specific homophobic peer, but on a category of people that they all identified as generally more homophobic: adults.

Parents. As students discussed the differences between adults and teens, some students offered examples from their own lives, many of which were concerned with the beliefs and opinions of their parents. One student, who identifies as straight, explained that her mother "believes that I have, that I'm having difficulties with my 'sexuality' [with air quotes] even though I know that I'm not". This student goes on to say that she does not mind that her mother thinks that:

> "It's one of those things where I'm not gonna get upset about it, 'cause then it'll be
>
> labeled as, like it's an insult, but it's not. So, I don't really care."

Based on what this student says, it is clear that she values a positive perception of non-heterosexual sexualities more than her mother's perception of her daughter's sexuality. For this student, it is more comfortable to allow her mother to believe that she is questioning her sexuality than it would be to defend her straightness.

Another heterosexual student had slightly different feelings about being perceived as gay at home. This male student said the following on the topic:

> "At school, I don't care if people think I'm gay, I'll just tell them that I'm not, but at
>
> home – if anyone in my house thinks I'm gay… They will label me it."

While he never defines the difference between being "thought of" as gay by his peers and "labeled" as gay by his parents, the difference is clear. The idea of being "labeled" as gay by his family seems to be a much more damning and arguably permanent identification, whereas

being "thought" to be gay by his peers is much less threatening. Later in the conversation, this

student responded to a comment made by another student about how her mother believes in a

binary view of sexuality. Her mother, the student stated, believed that people were either

heterosexual or homosexual and that there were no other valid sexualities. The student who

feared being "labeled" at home responded with "That's the same with my dad" before the

conversation moved in another direction. This leads me to believe that this student's father,

like the other student's mother, has a dualistic view of sexuality: homosexual or heterosexual.

Given this context, it makes sense that this student would fear being "labeled" as gay in his

home. Even though it can be assumed that his father sees homosexuality as a "real" sexuality,

given his father's lack of understanding of other sexualities and the student's anxiety

surrounding being "labeled" as homosexual, it can be assumed that homosexuality would not

be openly accepted within his home.

As mentioned earlier, one student at Donovan High briefly recounted coming out to her

mother as pansexual. This student explained how she told her mother what it means to be

pansexual, but then her mother did her own research on the topic and came up with a less

favorable definition: namely, that pansexual individuals "like to have a lot of sex with a lot of

people no matter what their gender was". The student explained that her mother got her

information from an unreliable online source, which she had taken as fact. The students then

had a brief conversation about the implications of such readily-available misinformation.

MB: I cannot express to you enough that like, it's – I don't think it's that adults don't

accept it, I just think that—

J?: They don't understand it.

MB: They don't understand it, exactly.

MB, the student who came out as pansexual, goes on to explain that her mother believes

"you're either gay or you're straight, and anything in between, you're confused". She tells the

group that her mother "didn't understand what pansexuality was", then goes on to relay her

mother's opinion of a sexual dichotomy in the present tense. Given this information, it can be

assumed that her mother not only *did not* understand what pansexuality was, but she currently

does not understand it, despite her daughter's explanation.

While discussing her mother's beliefs, this student presented her mother's confusion as

outside of the norm. She understands that her mother is not familiar with terms such as

pansexuality, and therefore is understanding of her mother's ignorance. However, the student

does not present ignorance as the norm for all, but normal for her mother's generation. This is

shown by her summative comment on the subject: "I don't think it's that adults don't accept it,

I just think that…. They don't understand it, exactly". This student connects her mother's

ignorance to the ignorance of all adults. In making this distinction clear, she also implies that

such ignorance, while normal for adults, is not the norm for her peers.

Generalizations. During conversations at both Donovan and Garden High, students spoke in

generalizations. I have already discussed some of these generalizations, such as the generalized

beliefs surrounding "straight guys" or adults. The generalizations in this section are more

broad, however, and deal with the utilization of certain terms, public opinion, and the media.

Appropriating Terms. The text that was being discussed at Donovan High, "Am I Blue?"

by Bruce Coville, prompted a discussion about the appropriation of offensive terms. The

students focused on the word "faggot" and many of them provided personal examples of

utilizing the term in their own lives in non-offensive ways. One student went as far to say that

"people don't take it as an insult anymore", and another student validated this statement by

saying he laughs at it. I was interested to know whether or not the majority of students agreed

that appropriating the term "faggot" was okay, and so I asked the group: "Do you find that

across the board?" With this question, students began listing specific criteria for what were

and were not acceptable uses of terminology.

Through this discussion, students came to a few unofficial consensuses about the

contexts in which certain terms can be used. While some students, such as one heterosexual

male student, claim that they personally do not appropriate the term "faggot," no students

voiced concerns about others doing so. However, this same student went on to include a

different concern of his. He claimed, "I get mad at people when they call something stupid

gay". This was a source of anger for many of the students in the group, including one student

who said "You can say faggot or anything like that, but when it comes to that extent, that's

insulting". Once again, I wanted to have a clear understanding of the difference, so I asked the

student to explain why. Many of the students collaborated to form a response to this question,

which was that using the word "gay" in place of stupid implied "that gays are stupid".

Likewise, students clarified that the appropriation of "faggot" has its limits. One student

explained it in this way:

"I call [another student] a faggot but she knows I don't mean it…. But if someone

literally was saying it to *insult* her, that'd be a different story."

Based on this, it can be assumed that, at least for this student, it is not the term itself that is

offensive, but the intent behind the term. This is at the heart of appropriation: the ability to

take the power from an offensive word by using it in non-offensive ways. While malicious

intent behind a homophobic term is seen as an unacceptable use of the term, Donovan High

students still expressed a lax reaction to the term being used to insult them. These reactions

include:

> **MB**: You can be like, "Hey, you're such a faggot!" "Hey, you're a white boy." Wow.
>
> We're getting some amazing ground.
>
> **JH**: Yeah, and so is the food I'm eating, and so is my book bag, and so is this watch.
>
> **RaL**: I can't even take them seriously anymore.

Based on these reactions, it can be determined that these students do not see being called a

"faggot" much differently than being called "gay". In the fictional scenario of being called a

faggot, both MB and JH accepted the label of "faggot" instead of correcting the speaker in favor

of a different term. MB retaliated by pointing out what she deemed an equally obvious and

uninteresting fact, while JH extended the label to the inanimate objects he was using. These

reactions, as well as RaL's response prove that these students are not greatly affected by

"faggot" being used in an attempt to insult them.

The nonchalance with which these students view the term is not consistent with the

aforementioned research on the "fag discourse". During her research, Pascoe found that the

students she interviewed indicated that "'fag' was the worst epithet one guy could direct at

another" (Pascoe, 2005, pg. 335). The variance in experience can be attributed a number of

variables. Pascoe's research was conducted in 2005, while this research was conducted in

2013. Likewise, Pascoe's research was conducted in California while mine was conducted in

Rhode Island. The differences in time and space between these two students are small

indicators that likely contributed to the differences in responses; however, I believe the differences can mostly be attributed to the differences amongst the population surveyed. The students Pascoe interviewed were not part of a group dedicated to normalizing LGBTQ individuals and identities, but were students across the general population of a suburban high school. The students I interviewed have a comfort level around the term "fag" that other students do not. They use the term to refer to themselves and their friends, and because of that, they are able to dismiss it when used as an insult. For students who do not appropriate "fag" in their daily lives, however, there is no comfort around the term. They have only heard the term used in order to insult another, and so that is what the term is for them: insulting and offensive to the furthest extent.

Despite the fact that the term faggot does not hold weight for many students in this group, they still understand and respect the fact that, for many, the term is still considered offensive. One student mentions that "You shouldn't just walk around being in the streets, like, saying that to people," and another validates this by stating "You gotta *know* when to use it". It seems that these students have an understanding of the power of that term and the necessity to utilize it only in appropriate settings: mainly, with friends and family that also feel comfortable with appropriating the term.

One student at Garden High also touched on the appropriation of certain terms. Instead of the term "faggot," however, this student focused on the term "dyke". This student stated that "I know that I call myself a dyke," but went on to explain how those labels cannot apply to everyone:

"That's basically like labeling all the tomboys or anything, or even like the girly-girls who just wanna wear a T-shirt and jeans, that's like labeling all of them dykes and all of the girls that wear dresses femmes."

Just as the students at Donovan understood that the acceptability of the term "faggot" is subjective, this student at Garden High understood the same is true for the labels "dyke" and "femme". While this student indicated that she felt comfortable using the term to self-identify, she also acknowledged that applying labels to others is not acceptable. Students at Donovan and this student at Garden clearly have an understanding of the societal implications of terms such as "faggot," "dyke," and "femme," and use those understandings to inform their own appropriation of those terms.

Public Opinion. Students at both high schools discussed what they believed to be universal truths about how the public perceives homosexuality and non-heterosexual identities. At Donovan High, the a few students voiced the belief that homosexuality is not taken seriously.

MB: "Being gay isn't at the point right now where people take it seriously. Which kind of *upsets* me 'cause people are looking at it right now as, ok, um—

TG: It's being looked at as a trend.

Based on this, it seems that the students feel that most people discredit the validity of a homosexual identity, instead believing that the identity is fleeting, as trends tend to be. However, a little while later, a different opinion emerges.

RaL: It's a disease. Like, that's what people think.

MB: Yeah! People treat being gay as a disease and no, it's not even close to being a

disease whatsoever.

This opinion is both similar to and different from the first. It is similar because trends and

diseases are both, in a sense, contagious. By being around people who engage in a trend or are

afflicted with a disease, an individual is likely to also follow the trend or catch the disease. The

main difference, however, is choice. Deciding to buy the newest pair of shoes in order to follow

a trend is a conscious decision. If homosexuality is being compared to following a trend, then

those making that comparison must believe that homosexuality is a choice. A disease,

however, is caught unintentionally and is often difficult to eradicate. If homosexuality is viewed

in this way, the person making the comparison must believe that homosexuality is not a choice.

One of the students in this conversation, however, agreed with both of these comparisons. It

would be of interest to ask this student which she believes to be true: that most people believe

being gay is a choice or that most people do not.

Students at Garden High also talked about public opinion surrounding members of the

LGBTQ community. One student mentioned used her own experience as an "out" lesbian to

describe the misconceptions she has heard:

"Oh, since you're a lesbian, that means that you like every single girl you see, and that

means that, if I walk by you, you're just gonna be like [gawks]".

A second student corroborated the story, saying that she has heard similar comments. This is

reminiscent of the discussion at Donovan concerning straight males' refusal to compliment

another male. According to the students at Donovan, complimenting one male would lead

others to believe that the male in question was attracted to all males. In this same way,

students at Garden explain that by expressing interest in females in general, others believe it

equates to interest in each female specifically. These statements are similar in that they expose

the imbedded belief that those who experience same-sex attraction are less discerning in their

interests than those who experience opposite-sex attraction. They are different, however,

because the students at Garden High are discussing females who have identified themselves as

lesbian, while the students at Donovan High were speaking of males who were expressly not

homosexual.

One student at Garden High made a comment that I have been thinking about ever

since. In the initial survey that was given, the students were asked "Do you think this purpose

[writing for adolescents] is different for authors of LGBTQ adolescent literature? If so, how?"

One student answered:

> "I don't think the purpose is different, but since LGBTQ youth mature a lot faster I do
>
> think the content is a lot heavier."

While I could not locate information that pointed to whether or not LGBTQ teens actually do

mature more quickly than their non-LGBTQ peers, there are a number of indicators that show

that they often are made to deal with "heavier content" in their own lives. A study carried out

by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) surveyed students ages 13 – 17 and organized that data

to show commonalities amongst the LGBTQ teens and non-LGTBQ teens surveyed. For

instance, HRC found that LGBTQ students are two times more likely to experiment with drugs

and alcohol than their non-LGBTQ peers. Perhaps what is most telling, however, are the

problems that the students indicated as the most important to their lives right now. For non-

LGBTQ students, the top three stressors were as follows:

1. Classes/exams/grades: 25%

2. College/career: 14%

3. Financial pressures related to college or job: 11%

For LGBTQ-identified teens, this list was drastically different:

1. Non-accepting families: 26%

2. School/bullying problems: 21%

3. Fear of being out or open: 18% (HRC, 2014).

The distinctions between these two sets of worries illustrate the point that the Garden High

student made about LGBTQ maturity. While their non-LGBTQ peers are worrying about their

professional and academic futures, LGTBQ teens are forced to worry about factors that are

disconnected from school. They are not primarily focused on securing a happy and secure

future by preparing for college or careers, but are instead focused on their day-to-day safety in

their own homes and at school. For these reasons, I can understand why a student would

believe that LGBTQ teens are forced to mature more quickly than non-LGBTQ teens.

Media. One student at Garden High was especially concerned with the portrayal of

LGBTQ characters in mainstream media. The first question on the initial survey asked, "What

do you expect your reading experience to be like? How do you anticipate authors may present

LGBTQ material?" Her response was:

"I love to read stories that pull me in on an intellectual level. I love Poe and Lewis

Carroll. When gay people are represented in media sometimes they are gay and that's

all. It envelops their personality."

This student made similar comments on the final survey as well. When asked which aspect of

the short story "Perfect" by Jennifer Deimer she particularly liked, if any, her response was, "I

liked that the characters' identity didn't revolve around them being gay," next to which she

drew a heart. She also made a comment during the conversation about "Perfect" that echoes

these statements:

> "I liked that the characters weren't *just* gay…. Because like, with a lot of gay characters,
>
> they're gay and that's it. You know, they're just flamboyant and fabulous."

During the conversation, I asked the student to provide an example of media that she felt did

portray a gay character as "just flamboyant and fabulous," and she offered the television series

Glee. Wolf and Schweisberger (2013) explore one of the main themes in *Glee*: that each of its'

main characters are, for one reason or another, outcasts. "Because the narrative is predicated

upon the fact that the lead characters are social misfits, the nonconforming aspects of their

identities are continually highlighted throughout the course of the show," a tendency that

forces *Glee* to risk making "broad and sweeping statements about social identities" (Wolf and

Schweisberger, 2013, pg. 157). What Wolf and Schweisberger call "broad and sweeping

statements," the student at Garden High calls being "*just* gay". The sentiment in both cases are

the same: characters who are meant to exemplify a certain social "type" are often reduced to

the stereotypes that creators believe most clearly portrays that type of character. The danger

in these generalizations, as the Garden High student indicated, is that those characters are

portrayed as "flamboyant and fabulous" instead of multi-dimensional people with whom many

people, LGBTQ- and non-LGBTQ, can identify.

My Perspective: Student, Teacher, and Researcher.

From the conception of this research until the very end, I had been journaling about my experience as a student, teacher, and researcher. This journal was shared with my faculty advisor for this project, Dr. Horwtiz, and through the back-and-forth dialogue between us, I was brought to realize and analyze a lot of the preconceived notions I had about nearly every aspect of developing and implementing my research. I was asked to question my assumptions and reflect upon my work, all of which helped me to grow as a student, teacher, and a researcher. I interrogated the choices I made for which texts I brought into the GSAs and why I found those texts worthy of study. The skills I learned through engaging in a reflective journal are skills that will help me to become a more conscientious, reflective, and effective educator.

Text Choice. When I first began journaling in January 2013, I was reading a lot of LGBTQ young adult novels. I was in the planning stages of this research and I had intended to use novels instead of short stories with the GSA students. As I began trying to figure out the logistics of acquiring enough texts for the students and speaking with the GSA coordinators at both schools, it became clear that using novels was not practical. At first, this realization was disappointing because I had familiarized myself with a number of quality YA texts that I thought could foster some engaging and exciting conversation. However, once I began reflecting on the research in the context of a recreational, voluntary after-school group, it became clear that short stories were the best choice. Short stories required much less of the students' time, so even students who do not regularly enjoy reading would be (and were) more likely to choose to participate. Likewise, the groups were each able to meet and discuss the short story during the course of one meeting. If novels had been used, it would have been a much larger time commitment for the students and for the GSA coordinator to accommodate a number of

meetings dedicated to text discussion. Reflecting on this, I can confidently say that using short

stories was the right choice to make. This change in medium also reframed the way I thought

about the study. Instead of thinking of it as reading books with students, I began thinking of it

as asking students to respond to texts. This was the first step in putting the students, not the

text, first.

The first journal I wrote was a reflection on a comment I had made to Dr. Horwitz the

day before. I had casually mentioned that I was finding it hard to stay away from "depressing"

LGBTQ literature. I had subconsciously made the decision that "depressing" literature did not

have a place in the type of research I wanted to conduct, but Dr. Horwitz urged me to think

more critically about the stance I was taking. I wrote:

> Upon further reflection, I don't think this outlook is possible or particularly productive.
>
> The majority of texts I've read in this genre have the sexuality or gender of the
>
> protagonist as the main conflict, if not the only conflict. Adolescents feeling at odds
>
> with this "change" in themselves is, in reality, a hurdle. Communities, families, and the
>
> individual often do not feel comfortable or accepting, and this is what is reflected in
>
> these novels.

Before reflecting on my statement in my journal, I had assumed that bringing literature that I

thought was depressing would be a hindrance to the group. I thought it would make students

uncomfortable to read about adolescence who have faced tough times because of their

sexuality, and I did not want to be responsible for creating that situation. Also, if that situation

did occur, I did not know how to handle it. However, in examining the reality of the literature

and the situation of the students, I came to realize that bringing in literature that did not

contain some less-than-ideal situations would be even more irresponsible. The conclusion I

came to was the following: "I do not want to choose texts that romanticize the LGBTQ situation,

nor do I want to choose texts with futures that seem relatively bleak". I chose texts that

presented what I believed to be a realistic representation of LGBTQ teen life, with some

troubling components but with an overall message of hope and positivity. Explicating my

assumptions about what would be appropriate helped me to come to a more critical

conclusion, and I believe this helped my research immensely. Likewise, I forced myself to come

to terms with the fact that uncomfortable conversation may arise in response to the text or

conversation surrounding it. Though this did not happen at either school, accepting it as a

potential reality allowed me to choose texts that I thought had the *best* content as opposed to

the *safest* content.

Group Discussions. From the beginning, I knew that I wanted to foster discussions in the form

of Daniels' literature circles (2002). As I wrote about what the discussion may include, I realized

the possible implications of such conversation. When I first submitted my paperwork to be

reviewed and approved by the IRB, they posed the following obstacle: "Asking youth to discuss

issues that may arise when reading literature about LGBTQ youth may trigger issues that are

distressing for the participants". I realized the first half of this statement – in discussing LGBTQ

literature, the students would likely make connections to their own lives and share their own

experiences. However, the second part of this statement had not occurred to me. I reflected

on this realization in my journal: "My assumption was that, because the students are part of the

GSA, they would be comfortable having these types of conversations. However, IRB bringing up

this point is making me rethink this assumption. I don't think it's fair to assume that students

will feel comfortable talking about their personal experience, and I need to make sure that they

understand that's okay".

      Had this journal not been shared with my faculty advisor, I likely would have stuck to

this decision and repeatedly reminded the student participants that they did not have to share

if they did not want to. However, because this journal was shared with Dr. Horwitz, I was

encouraged to rethink my position. She asked me if it truly *was* okay that students did not

share their thoughts, experiences, and opinions. Upon further reflection, I realized that I

wanted to encourage conversation that would allow students to share their unique insights in a

safe environment. Instead of limiting the conversation before it began, I decided instead that

my responsibility was to make sure the students felt safe and supported in the environment I

created. When I met with students, I encouraged them to share their perspectives. Instead of

reminding students that they did not have to share if they did not want to, I reminded them

that I was there specifically to listen to their unique voices. By valuing their individual input, I

did my best to create an environment in which the students felt valued, appreciated, and not

judged, which encouraged them to share. It was only after I made this shift that I was able to

see the potential dangers of my approach I originally proposed. I realized that I was viewing the

students as fragile and in need of protection. After interrogating this initial stance, I realized

that I was not doing anyone any favors by thinking this way – the students or myself. Instead of

protecting them by giving them romanticized stories, I gave them stories that talked about real

issues in convincing ways and prepared myself to catch them if they fell.

      My Role in Discussions. The role I took in the group discussion changed dramatically

from Garden High to Donovan High. Immediately following the discussion at Garden High, I

reflected on my assumptions of what I thought would happen and what actually did happen. I

wrote, "I assumed that the students would take the lead in the discussion and I would be little

more than a silent observer, but the reality was that I was involved in the conversation, and I

don't necessarily think that was a bad thing". At Garden High, I felt as though the students

were expecting me to guide the conversation, and that is what I did. Unfortunately, because I

had not planned on the conversation working that way, I was not adequately prepared, and the

conversation suffered as a result. I reflected on this as well: "If the same circumstances arise

and I am part of the discussion again, I want to have clear talking points to bring up that the

students could talk about, instead of speaking broadly and receiving broad answers". As my

faculty advisor pointed out, this was an important realization not only for the decisions I would

make at Donovan High, but also as a teacher facilitating discussions about texts in a regular

classroom setting. I realized that, even as a teacher in future classrooms, I do not want to be

the person constantly providing discussion points, as I was at Garden High. Because I am most

interested in student voice, I realized that discussions should start with their voices, not mine.

I decided to change my approach at Donovan High to avoid a situation similar to that at

Garden High. I encouraged one of the students, the GSA president, to recap the story for the

group, and I left the room for a brief time. In doing so, I gave the students an opportunity to

discuss and joke with one another without either my presence as an outsider making them feel

uncomfortable or my presence as a figure of authority making them rely on me to guide the

conversation, which is what happened at Garden. The parts of the discussion I was not present

for were still recorded, however, so I was able to hear what I had missed at the time. When I

did reenter the conversation, the students were already engaged in discussion and continued as

if I was not present. Instead of being the leader of the conversation, I was a member. This

mindset relieved a lot of the pressure I had put on myself at Garden High to be the facilitator of

conversation. It also made my presence in the room less authoritarian and therefore created

more room for the students to discuss without feeling pressured or judged. I made the

conscious decision to speak as little as possible, but I did occasionally ask the students to clarify

or expand on a statement they made that I was unclear on or wanted to hear more about.

       If I had the opportunity to engage in another round of discussions, I would want to take

an approach somewhere in between what I employed at Garden and at Donovan. I would like

to have more of a voice than I chose to have at Donovan to keep students returning to the

story. At Garden, I feel that the students were not able to discuss their own experiences

enough because I was constantly bringing them back to the story. Through these two

experiences, I have learned that students require some guidance to keep their conversations

on-track, but that allowing the students interests and personal narratives drive the

conversation allows them to engage more critically with that text than responding to questions

given to them by me.

Purpose of the Study: Revisited. When I initially proposed this project, I did so from the

perspective that the literature would be at the forefront of my research and the resulting

discussions at Garden and Donovan High. In my proposal, I wrote:

> As Brown and Stephens state, the goal of adolescent literature (and, arguably, all
>
> literature) is to be able to allow the reader to imagine life from another perspective. I
>
> hope that this study allows me to pinpoint the ways in which this is true as well as the
>
> ways in which literature is limited in order to inform my use of all texts as a means of

relating character experiences to real-world experiences in the future. By presenting

students with novels that are supposed to be written *for* them and *about* them, I will

learn the ways in which these novels (and literature in general) allow readers to

embrace *Almost Perfect*'s creed – a little acceptance and a little understanding.

The goal I initially set out to accomplish through this research remained a central factor in many

of the decisions I made along the way. I was interested to see how students could relate their

own experiences to the literature they were reading through using texts that were meant to be

representations of the young adult LGBTQ experience.

Through my reflective journaling, I expanded upon this purpose. In one of my earlier

journal entries, I wrote about my first meeting with the students at Garden High:

I told the students that my goal was to hear what they have to say about LGBTQ young

adult literature because, as a future teacher, I find it important to take the opinions of

my students into consideration when choosing texts. I also let them know that I decided

to focus on LGBTQ specifically because I felt it was something that was missing from my

education until I got to college.

Looking back on this statement, I have realized that it is not entirely true. I am not simply

interested in the opinions of my students. The reality is, as a researcher in this project and as a

teacher in my classrooms, my students will not always have the chance to offer their opinions

for the texts we read. What I actually want to hear is their reflections about the texts during

and after reading so that I can use those perspectives to inform my pedagogy going forward.

Likewise, saying that I chose to work with LGBTQ literature and student groups because I did

not have the opportunity to in high school are simplistic. While this is true, it is far from the

only reason. I also chose LGBTQ content because it has limited visibility not only in my

educational past, but in the present field of education and American society at large. LGBTQ

visibility and discussions about LGBTQ issues are becoming increasingly less taboo, and I

wanted to be part of this movement.

I believe that students should read texts that include characters that accurately

represent the population of the society in which the students live. Reading about LGBTQ

individuals, fictional or otherwise, is not only important for LGBTQ teens and allies, but for all

students. When I met with students at Donovan High, I articulated this reasoning much more

directly. I believe the richness of discussion at Donovan was due in part to my full

understanding of my own relation to the research, which was articulated largely through my

reflective journaling. Likewise, I believe the students responded positively to the candidness

with which I spoke to them. I realized that articulating purpose was immensely important in

validating the work the students were doing, which is true of recreational groups such as the

GSAs as well as my future classrooms.

Focusing the Conversation. Through my journaling, I was also able to come to concrete

decisions about what exactly I wanted the students to share with me in their discussions. I

wrote, "I am more concerned with how they feel about the mechanics of the story, not the plot

points…. I want to know how they feel about the portrayal of characters and situations and

whether or not they believed the *portrayal* was good or not". This lens is clearly reflected in

the questions I asked in the post-reading survey distributed at Garden High (Appendix B). Each

of my questions included the phrase "experience of reading" instead of simply "reading". It

was my hope that the students would reflect on the process of reading, not the text itself. Still,

my questions lacked a very clear direction, and many of the responses I received were broad and vague, just as my questions were.

I believe this was a good place to start thinking about what I wanted to know, and this also evolved. I revised my post-reading survey for use at Donovan High so that I was asking questions that were more specific and appropriate to the types of answers I was hoping to receive (Appendix D). I still focused partially on the "portrayal of characters," as I wrote in an earlier journal entry. In reference to the Donovan High post-reading survey, I wrote: "Questions 1 and 4 are designed to gauge the authenticity of the characters in the story, which is what I was first concerned about when I proposed this project – whether or not the characters and stories felt 'real' to the young adult reader". These questions were more direct than those on the Garden High post-reading survey while still being broad enough so that students could answer in a variety of ways. I also expanded the questions I was asking in order to ask about more than the authentic feel of the stories. In my journal, I wrote that two of my questions, numbers 2 and 3, were written in an attempt to gauge what the students perceived as authorial intent, another point that I was very interested in at the beginning of this project. As my research evolved, I did move away from this focus in favor of what the students were getting from the stories, but I still found it valuable to ask the students what they thought they were *supposed* to get from the stories.

Question five was written to "gauge the effectiveness of the method chosen for this research and whether or not the students enjoyed the process," as I wrote in my journal. I am very glad I asked this question because it helped me to reframe my research in the context of becoming an educator. I would like to implement literature circles in my future classes, and

hearing student feedback about the process has made me realize that students also like the literature circle format. I was happy to hear that the students not only had fun engaging in discussions with their peers, but also were intellectually stimulated by their classmates, as one student reflected in her response, writing that her group was both "smart and funny". Many students also wrote about the cathartic nature of the discussion, saying it was a productive way to "get ideas out" and "gets more personal". These are goals I had not only for this research, but for my future classes, and asking students to reflect on this reinforced assumptions I had about the effectiveness of literature circles.

Transition from Student to Teacher. The earlier portions of my journal were very focused on the research itself: the logistics of meeting with the GSA groups, what types of assumptions I had, and how to make the best use of my time with the students. Toward the end of my journaling process, however, I paid a lot of attention to my experience not only as a student researcher, but as an educator. While engaging in this research, I was moving forward in my education and making the transition from student to teacher, a process that I am still working on and will continue to work on.

I first began to make connections to myself as a future educator when reflecting on the group discussions at Garden High. I wrote, "I want to hear what is important to *them*, not to hear them respond to what is important to *me*". While I was talking about this in the context of this research, this statement still holds true for the pedagogy I plan to employ in my future classrooms. I believe it is important that students get the opportunity to share what they feel is worthy of explication, and literature circles are an excellent way to encourage students to find value in and trust their own voice in an academic setting.

As I mentioned earlier, many students at Donovan High did not read the text prior to meeting for discussion. I reflected on this in my journal: "I don't know why this surprised me. I mean, really, who am I to them? They know that there are no consequences if they do not read, such as receiving a bad grade". This was an important realization for me to make at the time, because it really helped to put into perspective the immense favor the students who *did* read did for me. Also, it is important for me to come to this realization because the truth is, even if there were consequences for not reading, I feel confident in assuming that some students still would not have read. The faculty advisor for the GSA at Donovan High candidly told me that she was not surprised by the outcome, saying something along the lines of "Welcome to being a teacher". Students not reading assigned texts is a reality that I will have to deal with. At Donovan High, I asked one of the students that did read to recap the story for those who had not so all students could participate in discussion. This experience showed me that, while assigning texts for homework, I need to be aware of and prepared to deal with this reality. My goal is to make reading outside of class not seem like a chore so that students will be more inclined to do so and to have procedures in place so that the class does not come to a halt if the students are not completely prepared. This taught me the importance of being flexible and the reality that I will be working with teenagers, not English majors who love reading.

Connecting Researcher and Teacher. In one of my last journal entries, I reflected directly about how being a researcher and being a teacher are similar in a number of ways. I wrote:

One of the things I've realized while going that I've realized…. Is just how much of this type of research is done behind the scenes by the researcher…. As a student, I would never have pictured the amount of preparation put into making that one, one-hour session [group literature discussion] take place. I think this is very similar to being a teacher. There is so much preparation to be done before the lesson that the lesson itself seems like a piece of cake, especially in the eyes of my students. I did not realize how much work went into every aspect of every lesson until I began creating my own.

As I mention above, I had no idea about the amount of preparation good teachers put into everything they present to their students. Likewise, I did not anticipate just how much I would be putting into this research. What I have found is that through this extensive preparation, I have grown immensely as a teacher. Engaging in this research in general and the act of reflective journaling specifically forced me to name my assumptions and explicate them in order to be a more conscientious researcher and teacher. In cataloguing my experience and being pushed by Dr. Horwitz, I have come to realizations about my beliefs about students and about teaching that will affect my pedagogy indefinitely. Reflecting on my process was invaluable in becoming the teacher I am now and it is a process I will employ so that I can continue to be a conscientious educator. Likewise, experiencing the positive effects of reflection first-hand has solidified my belief that reflection has a valuable place in the classroom, and I plan to use it regularly with my students.

Concluding Thoughts. When my research proposal was accepted, I was told that there was a good chance that the focus of my research would shift over the course of the project. I can now confidently say that this is the truth. When I first proposed and began working on my

project, I placed the literature as the central focus. I wanted to know what the literature I was

introducing could do for the students I was introducing it to, how helpful it would be for

creating "windows and mirrors" for the student readers. As I look back at my journal, I can see

a distinct shift that moved literature from the spotlight in favor of the real center of this

research: the students. Instead of focusing on what the literature could give to the students, I

realized that the real reason I was engaging in this research was to hear about the students

themselves. I wanted to know about their beliefs, opinions, and experiences with the literature

as a framework to guide the conversation. Instead of focusing on the literature, I began

focusing on the students.

This is the lesson I plan to employ moving forward in the teacher education program at

Rhode Island College and beyond. As a middle and secondary educator in English, I will have a

focus on the content, the literature with which I will be asking my students to engage.

However, this project has shown me that the literature should not be first place in my

classroom. Instead, the students – the individuals with whom I will engage in discussion, as I

did with the students at Garden and Donovan High – will be placed above all else. I hope to

create as many opportunities as possible for students to share what *they* find most important

and how they personally feel about the texts we are working with. Engaging in this research

has shown me the necessity of creating a student-centered classroom in which the students'

voices are not only heard, but valued and appreciated. In creating classroom environments

that regularly validate the power of student voice, I will be able to achieve the other goals that I

will have for my students. While I have always superficially believed in the importance of

putting the student first, I have now had experience in what that looks like in practice, and I am

excited to employ this pedagogy into my future classes.

Appendix A – Garden High Pre-Reading Survey

Name: _____

1. Have you ever read any LGBTQ literature?: _____

   If yes, please list authors/titles on the back of this sheet.

2. What do you expect your reading experience to be like? How do you anticipate authors may

present LGBTQ material?

_____

_____

_____

3. What do you think an author's purpose is for writing for adolescents?

_____

_____

_____

4. Do you think this purpose is different for authors of LGBTQ adolescent literature? If so, how?

_____

_____

_____

5. Do you have any additional thoughts, concerns, or comments before beginning this process?

_____

_____

_____

Appendix B – Garden High Post-Reading Survey

Name: _____

1. What was your experience of reading "Perfect" like? Was it similar/different to what you

expected?

_____

_____

_____

2. What do you think the author's purpose was for writing "Perfect"?

_____

_____

3. Was there any aspect of "Perfect" that you particularly liked? What was it and why?

_____

_____

_____

4. Was there any aspect of "Perfect" that you particularly disliked? What was it and why?

_____

_____

_____

5. Do you have any additional comments on "Perfect" or this experience?

_____

_____

Appendix C – Donovan High Pre-Reading Survey

Name: _____

1. Why did you join the GSA?

_____

_____

_____

2. Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

3. Have you ever read literature with LGBTQ characters?: _____

If so, please list authors/titles on the back of this sheet.

4. What do you think an author's purpose is for writing for young adults?

_____

_____

_____

5. Do you have any additional thoughts, concerns, or comments before beginning this process?

_____

_____

_____

Appendix D – Donovan High Post-Reading Survey

Name: _____

1. Thinking about the representation of LGBTQ characters in your story, discuss your feelings,

the representations, and your reactions.

_____

_____

_____

2. Would you recommend this story? If so, who would you recommend it to and why?

_____

_____

3. I would like you to think about the writing of the story. What do you think of the writing?

_____

_____

_____

4. Which characters do you identify with in your story? Which do you struggle to connect

with? Explain your answers.

_____

_____

_____

5. Did you enjoy working in literature circles? Why or why not?

_____

_____

Appendix E – Donovan High Roles

Each student was given a sheet for the role they chose. Those sheets included the explanation

of the role, written below, and lines on which to record their thoughts and findings. Roles were

taken from Daniels (2002).

1. Character Captain: Your job is to describe the main and minor characters from the reading. Select three adjectives that describe one or more of the characters in your story. Write your description of the character(s) in complete sentences. Part of your description of the characters should be what <u>you</u> think about the character. Write down the page number and sentence/paragraph that supports your thoughts about the characters.

2. Cool Connector: Your job is to find connections between the book and you, and between the book and the wider world. This means connecting the reading to your own past experiences, to happenings at school or in the community, to stories in the news, to similar events at other times and places, to other people or problems that you are reminded of. You may also see connections between this book and other writings on the same topic, or by the same author.

3. Literary Luminary: Your job is to locate a few special sections or quotations in the text for your group to talk over. The idea is to help people go back to some especially interesting, powerful, funny, puzzling, or important sections of the reading and think about them more carefully. As you decide which passages or paragraphs are worth going back to, make a note why you picked each one. Then jot down some plans for how they should be shared. You can read passages aloud to yourself, ask someone else to read them, or have people read silently and then discuss.

4. Sensational Summarizer: Your job is to prepare a brief summary of today's reading. The other members of your group will be counting on you to give a quick (one- or two-minute) statement that conveys the gist – the key points, the main highlights, the essence – of toady's reading assignment. If there are several main ideas or events to remember, list them below.

5. Queried Questioner: Your job is to write down a few questions that you have about this part of the book. What were you wondering about while you were reading? Did you have questions about what was happening? What a word meant? What a character did? What was going to happen next? Why the author used a certain style? Or what the whole thing meant? Just try to notice what you are wondering while you read, and jot down some of those questions either along the way or after you're finished.

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