"I Don’t Really Know What a Fair Portrayal Is and What a Stereotype Is”: Pluralizing Transgender Narratives with Young Adult Literature

As a teacher educator (Ashley) who strives to infuse my teaching with critical literacy at every angle, I frequently discuss controversial topics with my students and engage them outside of what, for many, are their comfort zones. This does not mean, however, that as a cisgender, White, Southern female, I am always within my own space of familiarity. Thomas Crisp and Suzanne M. Knezek note that we can learn just as much from our students as they can from us, that “students equally help us identify our limitations as critical multicultural readers and teachers” (76). This is why, when one of my students in my Young Adult Literature (YAL) course, Taylor, who identifies as a queer trans woman, shared with me that a book I chose with a transgender protagonist was not the most accurate depiction and brought to my attention a number of critiques, I listened. Not only did the novel use outdated language, but it also presented, as Taylor noted, only one person’s experience with identifying as transgender. Her thoughts reflected the assertion, “one text cannot carry the burden of representing a diverse population and our bookshelves must reflect a range of LGBTQ identities” (Crisp and Knezek 79). After this classroom experience, Taylor and I embarked on a study to survey current YAL that centers the voices of transgender characters, and together we designed the activity described in this article. Rather than perpetuate the portrayal of one unified transgender experience, we crafted a way to illustrate, through young adult texts, that there is not one transgender story, but many.

Teaching Context

This reading project occurred at a large land-grant university in the northwest region of the United States. The course, Young Adult Literature, is one of four required pedagogy classes for preservice teachers in secondary English education. Composed of 23 students, two-thirds identified as female and one-third as male. Approximately 40 percent were students of color, ranging identifications of Latinx, African American, and Hawaiian, while the remainder were White, and students shared their backgrounds spanning a range of social classes. Throughout the course, students read a variety of texts on critical topics and engaged in conversations on current societal issues such as police brutality, social class disparities, and bullying and suicide. Toward the end of the semester, after setting this foundation, Taylor and I introduced our study of novels with transgender characters to the students. We realized that although the students’ critical vocabulary was burgeoning, “most students see few if any models using LGBT-themed literature in curricula and hence, have limited vision and language for doing more explicit antihomophobia and antiheterosexist work as part of their teaching” (Clark and Blackburn 25). We hoped to address this dearth through our class reading project.

Focusing on Transgender: The Tension in Specificity

In 2013, Talya Sokoll wrote of “The Forgotten T” (23), lamenting the prevalence of books specifically focused on transgender characters amid the...
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growing body of LGBT literature. Although she noted publication of such titles was on the rise and has since been continuing to increase, we feel that examination exclusively of transgender experiences with students in English classrooms is limited. Some scholars have posited strategies for approaching texts that include those with transgender characters, such as William P. Banks, who emphasizes cultivating students’ critical literacies with such works, and Summer Pennell, who describes her reading of nonfiction memoirs by transgender individuals with her students noting that with a “wider perception of trans* communities, the classroom environment can begin to move away from harassment and bullying” (202). Despite these classroom examples, theorizing with reference to transgender novels continues to either be lumped under the LGBTQIA heading (Logan et al.) or is subsumed under the label “queer” (Blackburn et al. 13). In both classification schemes, then, transgender characters are seen as part of a larger entity.

While we feel this work is significant and appreciate the tools it offers practicing teachers, and while we do not wish to detract from criteria established for selecting queer texts, we do feel that an explicit focus on transgender is crucial. As Crisp and Knezek point out, “self-identifying as ‘gay’ is not synonymous with self-identifying as ‘lesbian,’ bisexual, ‘transgender,’ or ‘queer/questioning’” (77), and Bruce Parker and Jacqueline Bach write, “someone might characterize a transgender youth who is ‘transitioning’ . . . as ‘coming out’ when in actuality they are very different processes” (96). Not only do transgender communities have their own histories, terminologies, and stereotypes, but in our current cultural moment a great deal of attention is being paid precisely to transgender populations. It is thus necessary to focus on ways to have conversations in classrooms about trans-specific topics and related issues, about the personal and political implications of being transgender and being a democratic participant in a society that is inclusive and accepting of all transgender individuals. These conversations, for us, begin with our preservice teachers, who will be the ones to have similar discussions with their own students in the future, especially since “English language arts classrooms can be significant sites for combating homophobia and heterosexism” (Clark and Blackburn 25) and therefore can provide teachers “great agentive possibility” (Miller 39).

Choosing the Texts: Criteria for Trans-Specific Books

While we wanted to select texts that showed a range of transgender experiences, we also wished to avoid representations that reified stereotypes, used outdated language, or presented unrealistic depictions. To create a fluid yet trans-specific set of criteria to evaluate YAL and to help us include diverse examples in our class, we borrowed first from the work of transgender author and activist Julia Serano to name the archetypes that we wished to evade in the works we chose. The first of these is the “deceptive” (Serano 36) transgender archetype under which trans feminine individuals are seen as “tricking” others, notably straight men. An insidious danger inherent in this perspective is that it views transgender identity as “fake” and assumes cisgender identities to be “natural” and “normal.” The second archetype is the “pathetic” (Serano 36) transsexual, which positions transgender individuals as people to feel sorry for or to laugh at, but never as a person whom the audience could believe as a legitimate love interest or a complete, whole, and complex person toward which to experience the full gamut of human emotion. In addition, a third element we considered for aspects to avoid was the invisibility of trans masculine narratives. Society considers it logical and reasonable that women would want to become men due to the high social value attributed to masculinity in a contemporary Western context, hence the vitriol of the stereotypes present in representations of trans feminine individuals are not as prevalent. This essentially means that the vast majority of representation of transgender individuals, including YAL, is focused on the trans feminine experience, contributing to a cultural erasure of those on the trans masculine spectrum.

We were thus easily able to establish principles to illustrate what constitutes problematic narratives, yet we also developed in our criteria elements of positive representation of transgender characters. First, we looked to the degree of authenticity that the transgender character displayed by the end of
the novel, or the extent to which the character was able to eschew their expected gender roles in their assigned sex at birth as well as the often toxic gender ideals present in a hegemonic binary gender system. It was not a necessity that a trans character shed all binary expectations, but rather that gender was acknowledged as being on a spectrum, and the trans character freely chose non-damaging aspects of the hegemonic binary gender system to emulate because it was authentic to them as an individual.

Second, we looked for works that challenged cis-normativity, the pervasive assumption that all individuals assume the gender that matches the sex they were assigned at birth, as a structure. Rather than focusing only on learning about a transgender character, often at the expense of that character (Clark and Blackburn) or to develop empathy superficially and on an individual basis (Britzman), we felt that texts should challenge how cultural assumptions related to gender are built into the fabric of our daily lives. Third, we sought works with strong presentations of transgender communities, rather than of isolated individuals without support. Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins label this aspect “queer consciousness/community” (xx), noting that works with this feature highlight the potential of chosen family in the life of a queer person. And finally, we wished to ensure that the YAL narratives we incorporated used appropriate linguistic framing. Realizing that terminology is constantly evolving, we nonetheless sought narratives that precluded offensive labels, misnomers, or antiquated references to transgender individuals or related entities.

While these criteria do not fully cover every aspect of trans YAL narratives, they do provide instructors with a solid base from which to evaluate transgender texts and a place to begin discussions with students. The LGBTQIA umbrella is useful, but it is simply impossible to use the same codes for evaluating YAL texts that are concerned with sexuality versus YAL texts that are concerned with gender. Given the stereotypical archetypes and concerns that are so viscerally unique to the transgender experience, we assert that our work here is critical in the advancement of the representation of transgender individuals in YAL.

Reading and Discussing Multiple Narratives

Using the standards established above, we chose a series of young adult books with transgender protagonists and designed this reading activity to acquaint preservice teachers with a variety of narratives. We intentionally crafted their learning experience to ensure that students would be exposed to multiple stories to defy “the danger of the single story” (Adichie) while simultaneously presenting affirming, although different, representations of transgender individuals. We also recognize that, while it is ideal to read more than one novel with a class to avoid presenting an essentialized view of any group, it is not always possible to do that in classrooms given time and curricular restraints. To circumvent such limitations and achieve our goals, we designed small-group readings of three different books and orchestrated conversations and sharing among students on the books with which they engaged.

We chose three young adult novels that each fit our multiple criteria and that we felt would be representative of the multiple narratives we hoped to convey to the students. These were Chris Beam’s I Am J, Rachel Gold’s Being Emily, and Brian...
Katcher’s *Almost Perfect*. While the first two novels highlight characters realizing their authentic selves, the third presents a character living as a transgender individual. We provided a book talk on each novel, and students then self-selected the one they wished to read. We purposefully did not assign students to a book or group because we wanted them to choose the story and character that most appealed to them and in which they were therefore invested. The students formed one group composed of three members for *Being Emily* and two groups with four to six members each for *Almost Perfect* and *I Am J*. We felt it was critical to situate students as allies from the beginning, “refusing to position students as homophobes” to disrupt “the heteronormativity that is so typical in classrooms and challenge students to live up to the expectations of being supportive of queer rights and people” (Clark and Blackburn 28). In assigning the books, therefore, we expected all students to read and engage thoughtfully and respectfully with them.

For our in-class activities, we first set the stage for civil conversation by Taylor sharing terminology related to transgender individuals and, in particular, offering some phrases not to use. Students’ required blog posts prior to the class meeting overwhelmingly noted their lack of experience with this discourse, with one student divulging, “I don’t really know what a fair portrayal is and what a stereotype is.” We wanted ours to be an educative space where students felt welcomed to engage in conversation and even to make mistakes while we held each other accountable in a constructive way.

Next, we tasked students with meeting in their groups and responding to four questions, placed on large, poster-sized sheets hung around the room. The prompts included the following:

1. How do power structures (social institutions) affect the transgender characters in your book? (e.g., hospitals, schools, religion, family)
2. How did point of view affect your book?
3. How is masculinity presented in this book? (i.e., How do certain characters perform masculinity?)
4. How would switching the gender in your book (if it were trans female instead of male in *I Am J*, for instance, or trans male instead of trans female in *Almost Perfect*, for instance) affect the character’s interactions with other characters or institutions?

We asked the students to discuss and record answers to each question on their poster while reading the responses for other texts and, if applicable, by groups of the same text. We provided students approximately 30 minutes for this task, and they moved from poster to poster at their discretion.

As students engaged with their peers at each station, we overheard a number of interesting conversation points. Some voiced their lack of knowledge before reading the text; others heatedly debated their disdain or understandings of the characters they felt were unsympathetic; still others discussed their desire to know more. The latter response was particularly relevant in the case of *Almost Perfect*, where students noted that the story as told from Logan’s point of view excluded an intimacy with Sage that their colleagues in other groups stated was extremely helpful. The discussions also led to being able to see how the parental figures in each text reacted to their child and how, as one student noted, a rejection of the protagonist made the book “hard to read” because their empathy for the character led them to perceive how devastating that denunciation must have been. Considering masculinity and flipping the gender of the main character led students to ponder the potential differences in acceptance and visibility of trans males versus trans females in society. Institutions such as religion and heteronormativity were dissected and their normalized status called into question. We provided the questions, but the students did the hard work of plodding for answers. Seeing what their peers had written about their books often pushed them to more deeply consider their own.

Once the students finished the poster activity, we then asked them to develop, as a group, a summary of their book and a spokesperson to share the summary with the class. We decided as a large class that spoilers were acceptable, following Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson’s recommendation.
that, as preservice teachers, they cannot read every potential book for young adults but should know about as many as possible. Groups that read the same book combined to work out key elements to share with the class. Students then relayed their synopses, and, as a whole class, we discussed the elements that each text had in common and those that were different. Students noted the centrality of parents in each novel but also emphasized the different stage in the development of each character. The presence of support systems was discrepant in each, as J runs away from home and finds a school where he is accepted but Sage and Emily continue to live in their hometowns. We then asked students what they had learned from reading the books, and the conversation erupted. One student divulged that he had not known anything about being transgender and was uncomfortable commenting on the topic previously but felt this reading experience and discussion had given him a small glimpse into a different world. Another student shared that she knew in the past she was a person that just thought people could “get over it,” or “act differently,” but the book she read showed her how much “on the inside” being transgender is, how deeply uncomfortable in their body her protagonist was and how much this helped her learn about transgender individuals.

We concluded the discussion by asking students to consider how these readings illustrate that not all transgender experiences are the same and how this does or does not reflect the way society treats transgender individuals. We also asked what questions the book left students with—not necessarily so that we could answer them, but so that we could incite their commitment to continued learning and growth. We ended by noting the lack of transgender YAL with characters of color, a point we wanted to make sure to share with students given our attempt to reflect a range of diversity in the readings. Finally, we thanked Taylor for working with us and for sharing her own experiences. Careful not to send the wrong message to students, I reminded them that Taylor’s educational platform and our research relationship brought her to us in our classroom. We explained that bringing in an “expert” on a topic is not, by any means, the necessary way to teach oft-considered controversial issues but that, through a teacher’s self-education and open and honest dialogue with students, similar pedagogic goals can be achieved.

Further Considerations

Inclusion of literature with transgender characters in our English curriculum is a first step. For, “when such literature is excluded from the curricula, all students learn that queer persons are not worth mentioning” (Logan et al. 39). Yet, when only one narrative is present, the consequences can be just as damaging. Students, especially those lacking experience with individuals who identify outside of the gender binary, might be led to think that all transgender stories are the same. Even if they identify with the narrative they read and develop an understanding, as we would hope, they may feel that they now know all there is to know. Instead, we should seek to complexify and diversify the narratives with which students interact so that they can discern the multiplicity within them. We also suggest, as an extension of our activity, bringing in informational texts on current events to read in conjunction with the narratives. This might help students further identify incongruities in societal understandings, stereotypes, and policies.

The model we propose here of reading several narratives to exemplify the range in trans experiences has implications for English classrooms spanning secondary to university contexts. Many of us desire to address myriad social justice topics with students and to challenge them to think deeply about those. Time, however, often precludes us from being able to delve as deeply as we wish while trying to address all that we want. Our method here is one way to approach this dilemma, and we believe that the opportunities for choice and peer teaching bolster its efficacy. We do, however, offer caution about the texts chosen for such an activity. Those that avoid stereotypes and embrace community should be selected. Despite our search and our confidence in the three we selected, we still felt the books we used relied heavily on White characters. The field as a whole is in desperate need of trans narratives from the perspectives of people of color. Although I Am J teeters precariously on fulfilling such a call, it is not