

STRADDLING PARALLEL TRACKS

Diversifying Novels
in the ELA Curriculum
while Facing Book
Challenges about
Diverse Texts

Lindsay Cesari

LindsayCesari@gmail.com

Introduction

As in many districts across the country, my school, a suburban junior high in central New York, faced book challenges during the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years, as parents and members of the community expressed concerns about both classroom novels and library books. Although the experience was stressful and often contentious, it proved to be a catalyst for positive curricular changes.

In the spring of 2021, ninth-grade teachers faced the daunting challenge of selecting a new novel with the goal of diversifying the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum while simultaneously defending a diverse novel already in the curriculum. Although the experience was stressful, the juxtaposition of family concerns expressed during the book challenge and our conducting the selection process for new texts forced us to consider strategies to address both community needs and curricular demands. As a result, the district developed a formalized procedure for selecting new texts.

Book Challenges

Although the book challenge and text-selection process occurred concurrently, I'll start with the book challenge. Ninth-grade students in the district have been reading *All American Boys* by Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds for ELA classes since 2018. However, in January and February of 2021, ELA teachers began to observe a noticeable uptick in parent concerns about the text. Among the parents that contacted classroom teachers and building administrators, most mentioned that they felt the book negatively portrayed law enforcement and did not accurately depict racism. Additionally, there were concerns that

classroom teachers weren't doing enough to present both sides of a controversial issue.

In response, some families opted their students out of the *All American Boys* unit, and teachers provided alternative assignments. In March 2021 a parent issued a formal request for re-evaluation of instructional materials, and, as per board policy, a committee was formed in early April to review the text and its place in the curriculum.

Text-Selection Process

Simultaneously, in mid-February, the district's director of curriculum and instruction tasked secondary ELA programs with identifying new, diverse texts to add to the curriculum. Building librarians were asked to lead each text-selection committee. Like many districts around the country, our district has spent the last several years investing time and resources in developing its diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. This process included diversity audits of both the high school and junior high school libraries, and careful examinations of the short stories, poems, and novels read in ELA classrooms. The conclusions of these inspections revealed that students would benefit from additional exposure to diverse texts, especially those in which the character's diverse racial or ethnic identity is *not* the primary source of the novel's conflict.

Once the text-selection committee understood their task, they began to formalize a text-selection process, ultimately arriving at a six-step method. The outside response to this six-step process has been largely positive. A TikTok video providing an overview has been viewed more than 28,000 times and shared almost 300 times. Comments on the video include "This is an amazing process!" and "I so wish we could do this in my district!"

Before discussing specific titles or projects, it's important to instead identify learning goals.

Let's walk through the steps and the ninth-grade ELA team's experience during each stage of the process.

Step 1: Identify Desired Goals.

The first part of the process mirrors Backward Design Theory. Before discussing specific titles or projects, it's important to instead identify learning goals. This process requires participants to answer questions like 1) What big goals do we want to accomplish with this unit? 2) What standards do we want to address with a new book? 3) What skills are students expected to master? In answering these questions, participants will begin to develop a list of criteria for a new book.

Our experience: The concurrent community concerns that ran alongside the text-selection process informed much of the decision-making process. One overarching goal the ninth-grade team identified early on was a commitment to developing a text bundle that would allow parents and students to select one title from a handful of options. Rather than identifying just one novel to add to the curriculum, the department instead decided to focus on adding a minimum of four titles. Each student would work with their family to select a title. In addition to increasing family agency and participation in curricular decision-making, this strategy also aligned with building goals focused on increasing student choice and voice. Another overarching goal we

In determining developmental appropriateness, the committee reflects on their student population and the community.

WHAT MIGHT BE CONSIDERED APPROPRIATE IN ONE DISTRICT MAY NOT FLY IN ANOTHER.

identified was a desire to assemble a set of titles that was diverse in characters, authorship, and format. In selecting learning standards on which to focus, those associated with identifying text evidence, determining and analyzing themes, and examining text structure were prioritized. Additionally, because we knew teaching a variety of texts simultaneously would require students to work in small groups, we prioritized discussion skills.

After these goal-setting conversations, we were able to establish a few early criteria for the books:

- Nontraditional formats, like novels in verse and graphic novels, were a high priority
- We wanted stories featuring characters from traditionally marginalized groups, including socioeconomically diverse characters and immigrant communities, and representation of mental health-related considerations.
- All the books that were ultimately selected should share a common universal theme to unify class discussions.

Step 2: Identify potential titles.

In the second step, participants identify a list of potential titles that could be used to address the goals established in Step 1. Librarians should feel especially at home in this step as an immensely valuable resource to any team building a book list. In developing a list of potential titles, participants should consider book awards, book reviews, and recommendations from stakeholders, including classroom teachers, students, and community members.

Our experience: Working together, our team of six participants identified approximately twenty-five titles that met the criteria established in Step 1. Everything we put on the “to read”

list for the next step had to have been positively reviewed for a ninth-grade audience. Figure 1 gives you an idea of some of the titles we considered.

Step 3: Read the books.

During this step, a committee divides up the list of potential titles and begins reading.

Our experience: We were working with a compressed timeline, and with twenty-five books and a committee of six, that meant each person had to read four books in about a month. As we read, we kept our criteria in mind and made notes (see figure 2).

Step 4: Evaluate potential titles.

This step in the process requires committee members to consider a book’s developmental appropriateness and academic rigor. In determining developmental appropriateness, the committee reflects on their student population and the community. What might be considered appropriate in one district may not fly in another. In addition to using the ages/grades indicated in professional reviews, Common Sense Media is another valuable information source to consult. In determining academic rigor, evaluate a text’s complexity by looking at quantitative measures like Lexile scores and qualitative measures like structure, language conventionality, and knowledge demands (Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association n.d.). Additionally, during this phase, it’s important to consider the developmental appropriateness of a title.

Our experience: Because of the community criticism surrounding *All American Boys*, we focused extra attention on this stage of the process. In narrowing down our list of finalists, we automatically discarded any titles that were not reviewed for a



Figure 1. ELA teacher posing with some of the books evaluated.



Figure 2. A chart that helped us as we narrowed our field of candidates.

ninth-grade audience by both professional journals and Common Sense Media. Should the community have future concerns about the appropriateness of these titles, we wanted to be able to demonstrate that the titles were age-appropriate by multiple measures.

Step 5: Think about instructional considerations.

Once the list of finalists has been narrowed on the bases of academic rigor and developmental appropriateness, the next step is to further weed titles based on the potential for student engagement and a text's ability to address local and national conversations in the context of our students' needs. When considering engagement, one aspect is to determine if the title provides mirrors, windows, and sliding doors, reflecting students' personal experiences and/or helping them learn about others' experiences (Bishop 1990). A fantastic tool for this stage of the process is the "Reading Diversity Model" published by Learning for Justice (Learning for Justice n.d.). Available in both a "Lite" version and a more extensive version, this tool walks educators through criteria such as an accurate reflection of lived experiences, author's promotion of inclusion and equality, gaps and silences, and connection to student interests. In this stage, consider not only diversity in general, but also traditionally marginalized groups of special significance to the local community.

Our experience: In further narrowing our list of finalists, we went through each title and applied the "Reading Diversity Model." We also considered the *type* of diversity represented by each book. It was important for us to consider books that included conversations about people living with mental illness, as members of this population often face unfair stigmas. Based on our own student population, we knew this topic would provide a mirror for many students. In addition to mental illness, we also prioritized nontraditional family structures as an important diversity lens, as many students in our community are being raised by grandparents and extended family members.

At this point, if creating a text bundle that allows for student choice, participants can begin to think about how different titles work together.

Step 6: Finalize title selection.

Now that participants have weeded an initial list of candidates based on academic rigor, developmental appropriateness, student engagement, and community needs, they have a tidy list of books that align with their instructional goals. At this point, if creating a text bundle that allows for student choice, participants can begin to think about how different titles work together. Considerations at this stage include creating a balance among the works, including a mix of male/female/non-binary protagonists; a variety of text formats, including graphic novels, novels in verse, and traditional prose; and titles that present a range of diverse identities and reader challenges. Participants wishing to tie the text bundle together with a common theme would also mix and match final titles as appropriate.

Our experience: In the end, we had approximately ten titles that met all our criteria, and we chose to further narrow it down to four, a number that we thought would allow for an appropriate range of options without overwhelming a classroom teacher. We also wanted to connect the texts thematically and chose to focus on those dealing with parent/child relationships. Ultimately, the final four titles we selected were *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo, *Hey Kiddo* by Jarrett J. Krosoczka, *Darius the Great is Not Okay* by Adib Khorram, and *This is My Brain in Love* by I. W. Gregorio.

THE ADDITION OF A FORMAL BOOK SELECTION PROCESS HAS MADE IT EASIER TO DEFEND THE TITLES AND HARNESS A PORTION OF THE COMMUNITY AS VOCAL ADVOCATES FOR THESE WORKS.

Status Update

As I write this, the district is approaching the one-year anniversary of the initial challenge to *All American Boys*. The committee appointed to review this book ultimately recommended that it be retained, and it continues to be taught in the ninth-grade ELA curriculum. The four new books chosen by the text-selection committee were approved by the school board, purchased by the district, and integrated into the ELA curriculum.

Ideally, it'd be fantastic to be able to say that the new titles were embraced by the entire community without any controversy, but that isn't the case. Specifically, concerns were recently raised about one passage in *The Poet X* deemed "explicit."

Although our selection process hasn't silenced criticism, the process we developed *has* made it easier to defend the new titles. At a recent school board meeting, when parents raised complaints, board members were able to remind the audience that the book in question was one of at least four options students had to pick from, and ELA teachers had invited parents to be part of the decision-making process in selecting their student's text. As the controversy continued on social media, one community member posted the following: "It sounds like a big theme in the use of these texts is choice, non-required reading, and encouraged family involvement in book choice" (Baszto 2022). So although book challenges continue, the addition of a formal book selection process has made it easier to defend the titles *and* harness a portion of the community as vocal advocates for these works.



Lindsay Cesari is a school librarian in central New York. Her recent publications include "The Benefits

of Esports in the School Library—and How To Start a Team," published in 2020 in *School Library Journal*, and "Using Alternative Data Sources to Develop Programming for Parents," published in 2017 by *School Library Connection*. In 2021 she presented "Building Community & Information Literacy with Esports" as part of ALA's *GameRT* webinar series and at the New York State Library Association (NYLA) Annual Conference. In 2019 she and Rebecca Fletcher presented "Save Your Space! Harnessing Student Voice for Game-Changing PBL" at NYLA's Section of School Librarians Annual Conference.

Works Cited:

- Baszto, Sarah. 2022. "It sounds like a big theme in the use of these texts is choice." Facebook (Jan. 11).
- Bishop, Rudine S. 1990. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6 (3): 9–11.
- Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association. n.d. "Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: New Research on Text Complexity." <www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Appendix-A-New-Research-on-Text-Complexity.pdf> (accessed March 3, 2022).
- Learning for Justice. n.d. "Reading Diversity." <www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/reading-diversity> (accessed Jan. 16, 2022).