

RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note
Engaged Hesitancy as (Queer) Activism

by Caleb M. Chandler



PROTECT QUEER LIVES: OUR SPACES ARE SACRED BY MOLLY FAIR VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

“A right, everybody! Once you have chosen a book, come to the desk, and check it out,” I shouted softly from the circulation desk. Every teacher knows the voice you use when you need everyone’s attention but can’t raise your voice too loudly because your class is in the library. Soon after, Malachi, a pseudonym for one of my sixth-grade students, approached me wide-eyed with thrill in his voice exclaiming, “I can’t wait to read this one!”

“Oh, nice! What is it?” I asked. And looking down, I recognized that Malachi was holding Raina Telgemeier’s (2012) graphic novel, *Drama*. Without spoiling the plot, *Drama* follows a group of seventh grade theater students who are navigating their friendships and sexual identities. Knowing that the book features queer characters, I smiled, patted him on the back, and said, “That’s a great choice!”

Malachi presented as a more effeminate boy who shared interests with his mostly girl friends. While I knew that Malachi’s choices of friends or interests did not indicate his sexual orientation, at points throughout the school year, I did wonder if Malachi might eventually come out as part of the LGBTQ+ community. I am not interested, though, in speculating about Malachi’s sexuality then or now. Ultimately, I am not concerned with how his gender and sexual expression do or do not correlate with his sexual orientation, how he contributes to and/or resists the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). Instead, I am interested in my engagement with Malachi’s decision to read *Drama* and the subsequent consequences.

About a week after visiting the library, I received an email from the assistant principal: “Mr. Chandler, Malachi’s mother, Ms. Harrison, has requested a meeting with us later this week. Can you let me know when you are available?” Unsure of what this would be about, we scheduled the meeting for later that week. The day of the meeting, I walked into the conference room, and I saw *Drama* sitting on the table. I immediately knew where this conversation was headed.

Cue Confusion

Ms. Harrison asked why I felt the book was appropriate for middle school students. She asked why I assigned the book for students to read. She asked why it was relevant to the standards that would prepare Malachi for a state-mandated end-of-grade test. And finally, she insisted that my acceptance of his choice to read *Drama* was because I “had an agenda” regarding her son’s sexual orientation. My hesitance between her questions and final claim created space for Ms. Harrison’s increased interrogation. I explained to Malachi’s mother that I felt the book was appropriate by virtue of his interest in reading it, that I did not assign the book, that I was not interested in the book’s relevance to a standardized test, and that I was not determined to influence Malachi’s sexual orientation. Suffice it to say, we did not reach an understanding in the meeting, and Ms. Harrison returned the book to the assistant principal.

As much as I disagree with her, I believe Ms. Harrison sincerely thought she was doing right by her son. She had a particular agenda—a script she intended for her son and his

life—that she believed would positively affect him. Still, despite her desire to do what she deemed best, I was angry a parent could act in the way she did toward me. I was also angry that Malachi was in such proximity to her bigotry. I left the meeting wanting to ensure Malachi was supported in a way that would allow him to navigate his mother’s homophobia. However, in reflecting on this experience, like Boldt (1996), I realize that my intention and agenda of love and support for Malachi reflected “a modernist construction of the intelligibility of human lives” that, in some ways, was like his mother’s (p. 128).

While Malachi certainly deserved to know that he can become who he wants, I assumed I needed to provide some sort of support. In some ways, I anticipated difficulty and struggle for him when, in reality, he may experience and narrate his life quite differently. In fact, Malachi may not have identified as queer then or now. But what if he did then or would in the future? The justice-oriented teacher in me wanted to offer him books, conversation, and outright support in the face of his mother’s homophobia.

On a Monday just a few days later, Malachi walked toward my classroom door with such a smile on his face. He excitedly exclaimed, “Guess what, Mr. Chandler! My mom signed me up for a football team!” My heart sank with assumptions while Malachi also seemed genuinely enthusiastic. In that moment, my mind was spinning, and I could not muster much more of a response than an “Oh, wow!” I wanted to pull him aside and ask if he really wanted to join the team. Again, though, his excitement seemed genuine, so what if he really did want to play football on the weekends and hang out with the girls and do “their” things at school? Although less common, it would certainly be possible.

And More Drama

It was not but a few weeks after this when I was walking around my classroom, and something caught my eye. Sticking out of Malachi’s bookbag, it was *Drama*. I got a funky feeling in my stomach because I was not sure how this would all unfold given the prior circumstances. After all, his mother believed me to have a set of particular intentions. These intentions were not entirely untrue: I was not intent on her son coming out as part of the LGBTQ+ community, but I was intent on promoting that as possible for him—and all of my students. As an advocate for Malachi, I wanted him to read the book if he wanted to read it. I hesitated for a few days, deciding whether to alert the assistant principal or whether to say something encouraging to Malachi privately. In the end, I chose to do neither.

For some time, I experienced some guilt around that decision. I always prided myself on being an outspoken advocate for kids and “activist” teacher regarding issues of social justice: I was not particularly hesitant when it came to speaking up for kids. In reading other texts, though, I have found a sense of comfort with how things unfolded with Malachi.

I want to preface any further discussion by saying that I do not support or encourage teachers who idly and unresponsively stand by as their students navigate social

and personal issues. At the same time, as Blackburn (2014) notes, “writing and rewriting one’s self into the world as an activist in different ways in different contexts [...] might be exactly what is most needed” (p. 12). More often than not, I adopted what Blackburn (2014) describes as LGBT-inclusive discourses to combat homophobia (and other injustices) “by being seen and heard” (p. 10). In this instance, though, I did not—and, in some ways, could not. Some might interpret this as a failure in terms of activism, but to engage in queer activism for our students, we do not always have to put our own bodies on the line (Blackburn, 2014).

Engaged Hesitancy

From Malachi, and from Boldt (1996), Blackburn (2014), and Butler (1990), I have learned that my activism should be context-dependent and never one-size-fits-all. Sometimes raising hell and waving flags is just what is needed—for me and for my students. And other times, remaining somewhat hesitant might also be what is best—for me and for my students. Because sometimes I wonder if, in putting my own body on the line, I actually put my students’ bodies on the line. In some ways, by adopting LGBT-inclusive discourses as opposed to queer discourses of activism, I might have placed my desire for activism and perception of justice above my students’ actual, immediate needs.

Boldt (1996) taught me that “no solution is unproblematic, and that I must constantly reassess [my activism] with each new child and each new situation” (p. 129). With Malachi, I did not know (and do not know) how he identified in terms of his sexual orientation. Although I had inclinations, I hesitated to act upon those assumptions. His sexual identity was largely unintelligible to me, and in retrospect, I realize that I hoped it would become intelligible so that I could provide a specific kind of support. However, maybe that was not what he needed. Regrettably, maybe that is what I needed. Maybe I needed his identity to fit in a box, to make sense.

In the end, although I acted, I also hesitated: I hesitated in attempting to persuade Malachi not to be excited about football, and I hesitated in drawing positive attention to his choice to read *Drama* again. While these hesitations initially caused me guilt, Blackburn (2014) noted that one might also be read as an activist when they are simply kind, accepting, and helpful to (queer) students. In no way am saying I know that I got things “right” with Malachi because even if there was a way to get it “right,” I probably will never know. Malachi’s situation, however, has compelled me to reconsider what an activist approach looks like in the classroom with and for my students. I am learning that an engaged hesitation can also be activism, especially if that is what is best in that moment, both for ourselves *and* for our students.

Works Cited

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Caleb M. Chandler is a doctoral candidate pursuing a PhD in Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia. His research agenda broadly aims to center the voices of youth regarding issues of social justice. More specifically, his current research examines how youths’ literacy practices contribute to their understanding and expression of gender and sexuality.



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