



Josh Flores: Welcome to the official CEL Talks Podcast, brought to you by the Conference on English Leadership or CEL. CEL is the collaborative dynamic discussion-based form for literacy leaders organized under the National Council of Teachers of English, also known as NCTE. Every year and in every episode, we honor conversations around texts, speakers, and big ideas. We believe it's essential for leaders to maintain and move conversations. Welcome to the conversation.

Josh Flores: Thank you for subscribing and sharing our CEL Talks Podcast. I am Josh Flores, your host for season one. Each episode was recorded live at the 2018 CEL Annual Conference in Houston, Texas, and features speakers, keynotes and members of CEL, the Conference on English Leadership. We hope our conversations ignites and supports conversations with your colleagues at your schools or wherever you may be listening to this. It's a great PLC tool. If you want to introduce something different to your PLCs, I think it's a great support tool for that to start conversations that maybe you are already having or want to have, and we hope that you find all sorts of unique ways to use these podcast episodes. It's chock full of information. I had a lot of fun just talking shop about our profession with professionals this year, and I look forward to continuing this podcast series.

Josh Flores: Speaking of sharing and continuing conversations, if you would like to know more about CEL, you can find us on the Twitter at @NCTE_CEL or you can search for the hashtag #celchat, C-E-L-C-H-A-T and you'll find our members using that hashtag and sharing and having conversations. You can also visit ncte.org the NCTE main page, and then find us under the Groups tab. Here's where you can get all the information and get prepared for our 2019 fall conference. It's happening in November, 24th through the 26th, in Baltimore, Maryland. And get this, our theme this year, Creating Opportunity: Leadership to Ignite Movements and Momentum. I'm excited. So hope you enjoy that, and I hope you enjoy this inaugural podcast episode.

Josh Flores: Please don't forget to subscribe and share with a teacher friend that you love and give us some feedback. Keep the conversation going with us too. Engage with us on the Twitter. So thanks again and enjoy this episode of CEL Talks.

Emily Meixner: I had a lot of fruit and not enough pastries.

Josh Flores: Not enough pastries. Well, they have lots of pastries leftover. I'm sorry I didn't grab more.

Emily Meixner: Well, I felt like it would be rude to go get another one when I was listening to the keynotes. But I probably should have gone to get one.



- Josh Flores: That's so funny because I was thinking the same thing. Like if we had ... We should have just gotten up together.
- Emily Meixner: I know. Well, if I'd seen it ... well yeah, if I'd seen you go then I'd ... that's the problem of sitting in the front.
- Rachel Scupp: Right.
- Emily Meixner: That when you get up in the front, everybody sees you.
- Josh Flores: And that's so ridiculous. It's not like they're going to be like, "Oh, that pig."
- Rachel Scupp: They'd be like, "Oh, I've been waiting for somebody to make this entryway for me to go too."
- Josh Flores: Yeah. It's like, "Oh good. I wanted one too. Bring me one too." All right, perfect. I think it's working, so thanks for being here. Welcome to the CEL Podcast.
- Emily Meixner: Oh, thanks, Josh.
- Rachel Scupp: Thank you for having us.
- Josh Flores: Live from Houston, Texas, at CEL18. Can we just go around and just introduce yourselves please?
- Emily Meixner: Sure. I'm Emily Meixner. I'm an associate professor of English and the coordinator of the Secondary English Education Program at the College of New Jersey in Ewing, New Jersey.
- Rachel Scupp: And I am Rachel Scupp. I am an eighth grade English teacher in West Windsor, New Jersey at Grover middle school.
- Josh Flores: How do y'all know each other?
- Rachel Scupp: Emily was my professor during a teacher prep program. And now she and I ... Can I say this? We're colleagues?
- Emily Meixner: Yes, absolutely.
- Josh Flores: Oh good.
- Rachel Scupp: We coteach together in my classroom in West Windsor.



- Josh Flores: You coteach. Coteaching is a ... something that we just spoke about with Matt is a really ... It's hard to find someone that you really are comfortable with doing that, that you can be vulnerable with, but you also just have that natural flow that kind of similar energy so you're not stepping on each other's toes or getting on each other's nerves. Like what do y'all have in common that help y'all ... or what is it that you don't have in common that helps y'all be successful coteachers?
- Emily Meixner: I think that since Rachel went through the program that I coordinate, I mean, she has a sense of who I am kind of as a teacher and where I come from and kind of what I hope to see in terms of best practices with most classrooms. So I think because we knew each other, and she was familiar kind of with where I was coming from. And I knew how she was as a teacher, having seen her as a student and then kind of watched her professionally, I felt like ... And we're friends. So I felt like it would be in some ways an organic collaboration.
- Rachel Scupp: I think also in the process of being in the classroom together, we can feed off of each other's energies. Like just in that little conversation flip, like as soon as she paused and I was like, "Oh, I have an idea," and just kind of interject, and that's how we, we coteach. I think for the most part is we kind of feed off of each other's energies and are conscious and present about what the other's doing.
- Rachel Scupp: I also think that we both bring our own expertise to the table. So Emily, in connection to the unit that we're specifically talking about that we coteach, is definitely the theory behind everything we're doing. She has these theoretical lenses that she's an expert in. She knows about how this practice should look. And I'm kind of the one putting it in place with my eighth graders, having taught eighth grade for the past six years.
- Emily Meixner: Yeah, it's great.
- Rachel Scupp: A lot of that came from her instruction, so it's pretty cool.
- Emily Meixner: Yeah, it's wonderful because I'll say, "I have this idea, do you think it'll work?" And Rachel will say yes, or she'll say no, or I'll show her something and you'll, she'll say, "Oh, it needs to look like this because this is how it would work with eighth graders." Yeah. So there are moments I think when we lead and I think that there are moments when we watch and observe each other, and so far, it's been really wonderful.
- Josh Flores: So you're really important Rachel, because we all have ideas, but we need someone to help us implement them at some point, and you have the guinea pig eighth graders we can go and play with, right?



Rachel Scupp: Yes. And it's pretty fun and I think for this journey that she and I have been on, with Emily, I was the one who I think was pushing a lot for this to happen, whereas Emily was a little nervous.

Josh Flores: Really?

Emily Meixner: Yeah. At first.

Rachel Scupp: And this had just come out of a conversation about something Emily had wanted to do about getting into classrooms, and I volunteered multiple times, like, "Pick me, my kids would do it!" And I think at first, being a realist, if you don't mind me kind of giving you that title, and I'm totally an idealist. Emily was like, "Well, we have to go through some hoops. I can't just come in and start taking over your room." And I was like, well, why not? Let's just, ask for forgiveness instead of asking for permission.

Emily Meixner: And Rachel and I had presented a lot actually before we started collaborating on this instructional project. And so we had a lot of experience in conference presentations, which in some ways is similar to what you see or do in a classroom.

Josh Flores: Oh, definitely.

Emily Meixner: So we had a lot of experience presenting with each other at conferences. And I think also that helped shape the way in which we were working with each other when it finally came time for me to step foot into Rachel's eighth grade classroom.

Josh Flores: So what is a unit that you're coteaching right now? Can you describe that?

Emily Meixner: So, I had mentioned to Rachel a couple of years ago, actually. It was at a CEL that we started having this conversation. And I had said to her that I was interested in developing middle level curriculum that focused specifically on LGBTQ youth. I had just taken a sabbatical where I was reading a lot of LGBTQ YA literature because I teach courses ... I teach methods courses, but I also teach courses in children's and young adult literature. And I have a special interest in LGBTQ YA. And so I had mentioned to Rachel that I was thinking about developing curriculum, and I knew that there was a little bit happening at the high school level, but there really wasn't much happening with middle schoolers.

Emily Meixner: And so I was really specifically interested in thinking about how some of the theoretical lenses I was using in some of the college courses that I was teaching could be made eighth grade or middle school friendly and how there were these



wonderful LGBTQ books that were being published for middle school age children and how all that stuff might come together and be productive, and we might be able to build some curriculum around it. And so I'd been thinking about it and reading about it, and thinking more about it. And I just mentioned to Rachel that I hadn't found a site. I hadn't found a teacher to work with. And that's when Rachel started raising her hand. And I was like ... uh ... I don't ... uh ...

Rachel Scupp: And the beauty is that I am really fortunate to be able to teach a human rights curriculum. I can teach social justice through literature. And so to me this was a no brainer. And I was just like, oh, come on and let's just do this. We'll just add in these texts. And of course Emily was like ...

Emily Meixner: And I did want to do it, and then I really got to do it. And so it was one of those ideas where you have what you think is going to be a great idea, and then all of a sudden someone wants you to do it, and then you have to figure out whether or not it is a really a great idea. And so thankfully, Rachel provided the space and the instructional room for us to collaborate and put this unit together and implement it. And we've been teaching it now for the last two years.

Josh Flores: Two years?

Rachel Scupp: Yeah. The really cool thing is like, this conversation, I think, happened when we were at Atlanta [CEL16].

Emily Meixner: Yup, uh-huh (affirmative).

Rachel Scupp: I think. And it was just kind of a ...

Josh Flores: I was there.

Emily Meixner: Right, in 2016.

Rachel Scupp: ... conversation. That was like the planning. Last year was like the birthing of this curriculum as a pilot. And then this year we're very fortunate to have had it adopted by the entire district, and now it's out there toddling around with all my colleagues where they're now teaching this across the eighth grade districtwide.

Josh Flores: Okay.

Emily Meixner: Yeah. And they've been tremendously receptive to it, which has been super exciting. Because it's one thing to try and do something and to not see a lot of kind of both administrative support but also local support from the teachers in



the district. But Rachel's teachers and Rachel's administration have been totally on board.

Josh Flores: That's fantastic! Yeah, you definitely, when you see a good idea, you implement it, you know it works. You want there to be interest in it. So first of all, I want to know what's your favorite book, since you said you took that sabbatical and read a lot of the literature, do you have a favorite that you recommend to get people started who aren't familiar with the genre?

Emily Meixner: I think one of my current favorite middle grade books is *Ivy Aberdeen's Letter to the World*. It's this wonderful story about this middle school girl whose family ... And well, their home is decimated in a tornado and so they ended up kind of having to move into a local bed-and-breakfast. But one of the things in the book that happens is in the chaos of all this, Ivy loses a notebook in which she's been kind of expressing herself in art and words and coming to terms with who she is and who she likes. And it goes missing. And so the book is about trying to find that notebook and trying to find herself and trying to come out and learning more about herself and her family and her friends. It's really heartwarming and it's wonderful. It's not a book that we have in our unit, but it's a book that I would highly recommend. It's one of my favorites. Yeah.

Josh Flores: Do you have a favorite?

Rachel Scupp: I do. I think my favorite is *Lily and Dunkin* by Donna Gephart. And *Lily and Dunkin* is one of my favorites because it has a dual perspective—one in the voice of Lily and one in the voice of Dunkin. And in that text, you have a transgender girl. So you're introduced to this new world of talking about transgender youth, and you have a character in Dunkin who suffers from bipolar disorder. And so they both have these struggles, and so there's great conversation talking about mental illness, really good conversation talking about transgender youth. Both of them have their own closets and their challenges. And I really love that text because it is this entryway to view some topics that some could say are sticky situations with such humanity. And we see this connection to a family who's trying to kind of wrap their brains and systems around this notion of transgender. And then this family who's struggling with this mental illness that is running in their family and how they deal with that. And it's really a beautiful text.

Emily Meixner: And the students love it. They love this book. Yeah.

Josh Flores: You said you went looking for this curriculum, you didn't find it and so you created it and you practiced it. Now it's going. So where do people find it? Is this something that others can ... ?



- Emily Meixner: So we've been presenting on it at NCTE and at Nerd Camp New Jersey. We've been talking about here in CEL for the last couple of years. We blogged a little bit about it on the CEL blog. Rachel's students actually collaborated with us on a reflection about the unit for the Nerdy Book Club Blog. So you can hear their voices there, and we're starting to write about it. So Rachel and I are planning to put some articles out there in the next coming year. And we're just looking for venues.
- Rachel Scupp: Yes.
- Emily Meixner: And we want to share the curriculum with teachers, which is why we're here at the conference, showing what we're doing and talking about the books and sort of sharing our process.
- Rachel Scupp: And it's been neat. In sessions that haven't even been ours, there's been moments in which I've been able to interject this knowledge about our curricular unit. And have talked to teacher celebrities about what we're doing, and we're hoping to eventually create this curricular document, wherever that will be housed. So if anyone's listening who would like to pick it up, we are willing to write for you.
- Josh Flores: Spread the word. I know there's interest out there.
- Rachel Scupp: And I feel the same way, and it's just been really wonderful to kind of be in a good place and have these connections. I mean, even recently I was talking to Emily about a possibility of bringing this to Montessori schools in Princeton through some interest about teachers wanting to teach this curriculum but not feeling comfortable and needing an avenue. And I feel that the curriculum we've developed is very, in a sense, user friendly and adaptable because it's dealing with close reading strategies using fantastic ideas while reading these LGBTQ texts.
- Josh Flores: I mean, this is truly a life changing curriculum. I know, speaking from all the research, everything, all the speakers we heard at NCTE and CEL and because, speaking from my own personal experience, being a minority, it's rough navigating adolescence when you don't see yourselves in media or whatever's thrown at you in school. And when you do finally find that one book or something to grasp onto, which for me, honestly, the two things I grasped onto as a child that were really impactful for me was one, *Aladdin*, because finally there's a brown guy. And then *The Indian in the Cupboard*, because, well, "Indian," close enough. But I never found that real Mexican connection, and I can't imagine how this curriculum must be just so life changing for some students out there.



- Emily Meixner: Well it's been interesting because one of the things that we asked the students to do at the end of the unit, the first time that we taught it, was to consider how they could take some of the ideas that they were learning about and mobilize them. So the kids decided to act in a variety of ways. Some of them put up bulletin boards in the school that provided information about terminology, about some of these critical lenses, about how to respond to homophobic behavior. And some of the kids developed some curriculum that they thought would be appropriate for younger students. And some of the students wrote proposals for a GSA at Rachel's school, which they hadn't had, because it needed to be something that students asked for, and no one had asked for it. And so a number of groups in Rachel's classes created formal proposals to put in place a GSA at her school, which they now have. And it's very active.
- Josh Flores: And they actually have it?
- Emily Meixner: They do. They actually have it.
- Rachel Scupp: They do. It was almost immediate. As soon as the students created these letters of proposal to the principal, to the superintendent, the GSA was created, and it has gone through a couple of changes, which is great, in great ways. So one, last year was just for eighth grade because they had to figure out how to find a meeting time in which students can kind of come to it. And I think they severely underestimated the number of students who would be interested. So it was just eighth grade. Now it is all three grade levels. They meet biweekly after school. There's about 35 kids who will show up to every meeting. They've even written a proposal to create gender-neutral restrooms. Where in our school we have teacher restrooms that are single stall, and for whatever reason when the planning of the school, they have one that's for men, one that's for women. And as teachers we've always used them as gender neutral because you have like two seconds to go to the bathroom in between and whatever one's open you go in. Well, the kids wrote a proposal to get more gender-neutral restrooms in place. So the administration acted, ripped down all of those placards differentiating between men and women in the single-stall restrooms.
- Josh Flores: No way.
- Rachel Scupp: Yeah, it's pretty extravagant.
- Josh Flores: Wow.
- Rachel Scupp: And they're going to be assigning one to start just to see how it works for students to use as gender-neutral restrooms. They're going to create placards that illustrate the gender neutrality of those spaces. And it's just amazing that



I have so much support in that school or we all have so much support in that school to kind of put these ideas into action.

Josh Flores: No kidding. Give them another shout-out real quick.

Rachel Scupp: Yeah, thank you to my administrators and teacher-leaders who are allowing us to do this good work for inclusion and for acceptance in our community.

Emily Meixner: And the students are on board, and they're incredibly articulate about the need for this kind of inclusion. And one of the things that always strikes me, I mean, in the two years that we've been doing this is how hungry kids are for vocabulary that they can use to talk about these issues, exemplars of how to talk about these issues, information that they want to know. They have such interesting, thoughtful things to say. And talking about heteronormativity, they feel it, they understand it, they see it. This just gives them a language and an opportunity to talk about things that they're already thinking about. And so they've been ... the kids have been amazing. The kids have been just amazing.

Rachel Scupp: They have. And the beauty is that we give them this language for systems that they've been observing but not realizing could be detrimental, like heteronormativity, and will go out into the world. There's one story that Emily likes to tell about a student who asked her mom to take her to Target, not for shopping, just to observe heteronormative structures in a space. And when she was walking around and saying like, "Why are all of these girl clothes pink?" Right? And "What are *girl* clothes anyway?"

Emily Meixner: Right. "And why are the toys organized in this way?"

Josh Flores: Well, they changed that, right? Shout-out to Target? Didn't they switch the gender bias in the toy section? I thought they did.

Rachel Scupp: I think the gender bias has been switched in the toy section, but the clothes were very much heteronormative in terms of the pink.

Emily Meixner: And that's true in almost any shopping space you go into, right? That there's oftentimes like a physical demarcation that separates the boy clothes from the girl clothes, and you have to walk across it. Right? And so yeah, it's interesting to me that ... And the kids are noticing things, and things that they're reading and they're thinking about other books that they're reading and they're thinking about movies that they're seeing. And Chris Lehman was talking about his Netflix queue and what's recommended to him, and the kids are noticing things like that. Like, "Why is that being recommended to me? Why is this being recommended just for girls and not boys?" And so the unit offers them a space



to talk about those issues as well as things about gender identity and sexual orientation as well.

Josh Flores: It seems like they took it to the next level and they're noticing all these underlying structures in place that they presumably don't have any control over. That's really ... man, that's great!

Rachel Scupp: Yeah, it's really...

Josh Flores: Kudos to both of you!

Emily Meixner: Thank you very much.

Josh Flores: And I guess I should bring it back around to this coteaching aspect though. Have you done a lot of the coteaching in the past?

Emily Meixner: I have not done a lot of coteaching in the past. I think because I teach at a college, I've invited people into my classroom to be speakers.

Josh Flores: Sure.

Emily Meixner: But I haven't cultivated opportunities in which I've been coteaching with faculty or with former students. I feel like I've invited, like I said, I've invited faculty back. I've invited former students back to share what they know, but it's never been in a coteaching situation. So this has been really new for me. And even when I taught high school, I didn't do very much coteaching. So this has been, yeah, this has been a growing experience I think for me.

Josh Flores: See, I feel like I relate a lot to you [Emily], but Rachel, I feel like you're really good at being a very charismatic extrovert. So have you done a lot of successful coteaching in the past? Because you jumped right onto this opportunity.

Rachel Scupp: Yes, I did. I have done some coteaching in the past. I wouldn't say that all of it has been ... What was the phrase that you had used?

Josh Flores: Successful?

Rachel Scupp: Successful. Not that it has been unsuccessful, but I've worked with inclusion teachers. I am currently teaching with an ESL teacher, and it is successful in the sense that we function really well in the space together. I think the issue, and this is something that a lot of teachers would probably nod their heads to is in order to be successful coteachers, you have to have the space and the time to collaborate to figure out how to function together. And I know that, just to be totally honest, I have not done that in order to be a successful coteacher with



my other colleagues, like my ESL component or with my inclusion teacher, to make sure that we are collaborating so we can collaboratively teach.

Rachel Scupp: I think coteaching in those other spaces unfortunately have looked like I'm teaching, my colleague will step in and kind of like do what she needs to do—and I'm using the pronoun *she* because both of them identify as female, my two coteachers—do what she needs to do in order to make sure that the population that she is specifically there for, although they're all our kids, are getting what they need instead of us collaborating in a space outside of that room and then coming in and doing the work like I do with Emily. So I would say the success is we feed off of each other's energies, my other coteachers and I really well, but I should probably take more of the time to collaborate.

Emily Meixner: Well, and it's time consuming too because I'm thinking about when we started working on this curriculum and we got approval from your administrator to do it, I mean it requires *work*, right? So there are documents I need to share with Rachel, and we need to do some brainstorming around texts that we want to use. And then when we actually started designing how the flow of the unit is going to go, I mean that takes time. And there were many days when we were texting each other and we had multiple...

Emily and Rachel: Google chats.

Emily Meixner: Google chats, Google Hangout sessions at night after dinner. And Rachel actually lives about a mile from me. And so, there would be times when I would drive over to her house or she would come over to our house. And I mean it's *time consuming*. And in the meantime, she's trying to do her job and I'm trying to do my job and, and so I think if people want to do this kind of work, they need the time to think through it. They need the time to plan it. And then when you're enacting it, because there's two of you, it's constant communication about, "Well how do you want to do this? Well, what about tomorrow? We thought about doing that. But what about..." and if you don't commit yourself to that, I think it can be very difficult. So structurally it's just, I think it's difficult in the way that schools are currently set up. You just don't have that kind of common planning time unless you...

Rachel Scupp: Make it.

Emily Meixner: Make it.

Josh Flores: Well see, I think that's really interesting because time makes it really hard to coteach, and I've never liked coteaching. I don't like copresenting. I just don't like having to worry about someone else's feelings. Until I found that I have a ... I've had a lot of success coteaching, copresenting with someone from the higher



ed faculty. Once I found like some ... because I am fortunate enough to run with a lot of higher ed professionals from Oklahoma. And one in particular was very, very much still concerned about high school, secondary curriculum. And that's my specialty. And so we would nerd out on that quite a bit.

Josh Flores: And well, not to say that what the other higher ed folks did was bad, but most higher ed is most concerned about higher ed. I'm worried about my students and the teachers I'm training and getting articles out to publish, which is all good, good to consider too. But this one was like, I want to know what's happening at the high school level and I want to be in there, and that helps me be a better professor to these new teachers coming in. And so I've found that that was helpful because, even though my time would be restricted, her time, she has office hours, she has a little bit more control of that time. So and then some days I have more control of that time so that almost helps out with that time issue. But if I was in the classroom, I'm on the same schedule with everybody around me, and that makes it hard to collaborate on a life-changing event like this.

Josh Flores: I want to say kudos to *you* [Emily] for still being so involved and concerned at the secondary level, because I do think that there are some teachers that believe that higher ed is just a separate entity and there is that ivory tower concept, and it makes them almost scared to ever approach professors. And then some higher ed are just too busy to ever think to go down and approach teachers. I say "down." That sounds bad, but one of my professors would say like, you shouldn't say... he doesn't like even the term *higher ed*, because it makes it seem like we're this above-level concept.

Emily Meixner: Yeah. Well, I teach methods courses, so almost all of my students are going to be teachers. The majority of them are going to be middle school and high school teachers. And so I'm in schools a lot because I'm doing observations every semester as they're implementing their units and developing lessons and having clinical experiences. But there's something to be said for being present and teaching in a school too. And so I'm really grateful. And I think one of my hesitations, my personal hesitations, was that I hadn't taught in my own classroom. I hadn't been a teacher in a middle school or high school in a very long time.

Emily Meixner: And so when Rachel said, "Do you wanna coteach with me?" I mean, part of it for me was about, I can talk about this and I can share stuff with my methods students, but can I still do this? Right? Do I want to be revealed as someone who can no longer do this? And so, having the opportunity to go back and to connect with her students and to teach her students and to talk with them and to kind of really feel like, well, yes, this is something that I still can do. And so, my thinking



about this and my teaching at the college level, it's enhanced by that. So that's been professionally really beneficial for me. And so, being-

- Josh Flores: Well, kudos to the university for allowing and supporting this kind of collaboration.
- Emily Meixner: I don't know if they know that's what we're doing, but what I'm sure they would be supportive because, right. I mean, they want us to be impacting public good, and I think that's what we're doing as best as we can.
- Josh Flores: That's a great statement. I think you're definitely impacting public good, putting out more kind, more empowered individuals out there. I mean, they started this, they're recognizing it outside the school walls. Who knows what they're going to do next?
- Emily Meixner: Who knows?
- Rachel Scupp: Really wonderful things, I think.
- Emily Meixner: They're lucky to have Rachel as a teacher because I mean this really ... because I had an idea and Rachel provided the space for it. She provided the kids for it. She works in a school district that's very supportive about it and I couldn't do this work without her, so thank you, Rachel.
- Rachel Scupp: Well, thank *you*, Emily, because I have been on this journey with you, and before we decided to create this curriculum, I knew very little about the LGBTQ community or queer theory or LGBTQ text. And as much as I had touted myself as this social justice “renegade” in my classroom, thinking about the things that were absent, there was no representation for LGBTQ youth or LGBTQ characters. And I think in a way, I was this phony person. And so from your instruction and from all of your expertise, I was able to really become well-versed in the LGBTQ community, in the language and the text and the fact that representation was missing in my room. And now I feel that it is present. So, thank *you*.
- Emily Meixner: Oh, well, you're welcome. And I'm hoping your teachers feel the same way as they're imparting this and learning this curriculum and thinking about ways to make it their own. But I hope they're feeling the same way, that they feel empowered by it.
- Josh Flores: Well truly, there are teachers out there that would not be this brave or maybe the better word, this *compassionate* to want to change everything for the good of the students. And so, I mean, I know those words are triggers for some. They're like, “Oh no, we could never ... don't want to just deal with it. I don't



even want to deal with it. It could bring controversy. This could happen, that could happen.” You fearlessly jumped in.

Rachel Scupp: Yeah. And I think that speaking about people's hesitancy because of this controversial aspect. Most of that does not exist in the fear of parent backlash. I really truly believe that most of that hesitancy for the most part, and this could be a trigger for some, exists in their own misunderstanding or lack of knowledge in a topic. Because it can be challenging to ... I mean, think about when you get a new curricular unit and you have to teach this stuff. And a lot of teachers are hesitant to make that change because it's now something foreign to them that they have to implement, and they fear that perhaps I'm not going to be successful.

Rachel Scupp: And so I think some of that pushback is they don't have the knowledge and it's hard to find the time to learn how to teach these concepts. And so I'm grateful to Emily for creating that opportunity for me to have to jump in and immerse myself into this world. And I'm really grateful for my colleagues who have kind of been thrown into this mix and they, too, are now on this journey of understanding. And I still don't have all the answers. And I think that that's important for people to recognize that, even when you're working with this new content, as you're learning, you're going to constantly be learning, and you're going to make mistakes and you're going to have to come back and inform your students that what I told you was absolutely false and now here's how we should look at this differently. So that's when people have to just get out of their own way sometimes as teachers.

Josh Flores: So that's a brilliant observation actually. And so, then I want to kind of reframe my question from earlier. I asked you your *favorite* books that you read of this topic, but what is an entry-level book or maybe a movie or TV show that would help people just have understanding, like this is where you should start?

Emily Meixner: Wow, that's a tough question. Asking a teacher to narrow it down to one specific book. So the book that launched it for me was *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan, which was published in 2003. And that was sort of the first book that really made me think about what was missing in my own reading. And after that I started seeking out all kinds of books. So that was for me personally, but I think when I started to think about the possibilities of middle grade literature and what that could do and why this would be so important at that age, it was Amy Polonsky's book *Gracefully Grayson*, which is about a kid named Grayson who is making the moves towards a transition to her truer herself.

Emily Meixner: And that book is so beautiful, and I thought that this is a book that fifth graders and sixth graders and seventh graders and eighth graders can read. I mean, it's been followed by Alex Gino's book, *George*, which was published also for



elementary school kids. But there are so many beautiful options. So *Boy Meets Boy* and then *Gracefully Grayson*. Those are the two that I'll put out there.

Josh Flores: Those are great.

Rachel Scupp: And I would say for me, and this isn't my personal entryway, but I think it is a way to reach perhaps teachers who are hesitant to put this into their curriculum or readers who may feel uncomfortable with this topic up front for whatever reason, would be James Howe's, *The Misfits*. And that was published a while ago, but there is one gay character in the text, which is why we have it in our LGBTQ unit.

Rachel Scupp: And the beauty of that character is that they are not the central figure in the text. They're kind of surrounded by these other characters who are also marginalized for whatever reason in their own school. And it's this notion of all of them have their own individual closets of ways in which they are trying to come out as whatever it is that they're being picked on for. And so I think it's a really nice entryway to kind of give that book to a kid when it's talking about characters who are people who may not fit in, and why don't they and how they kind of come together in order to become allies for one another. And you can have a lot of beautiful, rich conversations using those lenses with a character in there who does fit into the LGBTQ strand as gay. And there's different representations of other characters who are picked on whether they have a different style or they are very outspoken. And so I think it's a really good entry text for that reason.

Emily Meixner: Yeah. And we also need to give a shout-out to Barbara Dee who wrote the book *Star-Crossed* who has been super supportive of us. Yeah, I came across that book, maybe at an NCTE event a couple of years ago. I'm not sure where I saw that book, and it's a beautiful book. But Barbara has been super supportive of this work and she's joined us at conferences and she's ... Yeah, she's been really great. So if you're looking for a really, really wonderful book, and it also has amazing Shakespeare and Romeo and Juliet in it. Barbara Dee's book *Star-Crossed* as is wonderful. And it's also one of the very few books that addresses bisexuality at the middle grade level in a very, very thoughtful, sensitive, inclusive way.

Rachel Scupp: And the beautiful thing about Barbara Dee, which we absolutely adore her, is she's one of those authors that listened to her readers. And so she wrote *Star-Crossed*. It was published. And in the text, she does not ever use the term *bisexuality* because in her first writing, she wasn't sure if this is the character who really wanted to give herself a name or a term to kind of associate. And my students read that current issue, and they've thought about it in a very thoughtful way.



- Emily Meixner: And talked about it too, right?
- Rachel Scupp: Right.
- Emily Meixner: Why doesn't she ever claim an identity? Well...
- Rachel Scupp: Right.
- Emily Meixner: She's not ready to yet.
- Rachel Scupp: And the beautiful thing is that they've talked about it in the sense of like, she's not ready to yet. And instead of being like, "Oh, okay, cool, let's just stop there." They're saying, but this illustrates that ideas of sexuality do not have to be concrete. And these are eighth graders talking about sexuality and this representation and knowledge of sexuality not having to be concrete is beautiful.
- Rachel Scupp: Well, Barbara had received letters from readers saying, why don't you ever use this term? Why don't you have the term *bisexual* or *bisexuality* in your text? And so with the paperback version, she added that word in there, and it's not used by the character, but it's used by her older sister. And thinking about this notion of the power of words and the power of having a name for something can be empowering itself. She decided to make that shift because of these letters that came in. And so I think that's a testament to authors who listen to their readers and the readers can make this change. And Barbara does that with her text.
- Josh Flores: Well, yeah, that makes me think of, you spoke about the vocabulary walls and the just the vocabulary PSAs your students made and generated. And I thought, man, how powerful would that be to educate them on the correct terminologies so they're more sensitive and they can speak eloquently and educated because they're hit with negative vocabulary on these subject matters, especially, very hurtful sometimes and aggressive and violent language.
- Emily Meixner: Right. And it's fun to watch the kids go, "Oh, *that's* what that means."
- Rachel Scupp: And then they start using the language, but they use it thoughtfully and they use it correctly. And, yeah.
- Emily Meixner: They even go out in search of additional terms where they know, I think, more about this topic now than I do even. And they'll say some other term that fits into the LGBTQ*QI kind of connection or collection. And I don't even know what those are. And I have to then, on my Chromebook, side research. And they've found articles about these identities that I've never even known.



- Rachel Scupp: Middle school kids are super smart. They're just super smart.
- Josh Flores: Well, that's a perfect age because they're really ... they don't know what's going on inside themselves. They really want to find out. And I think it kind of helps them along the way.
- Josh Flores: Okay. You're making me so emotional. This is beautiful. The results you've gotten from this, that's awesome. And we've definitely gone over 30 minutes and I could keep going I'm sure.
- Emily Meixner: Thank you for having us.
- Rachel Scupp: Thank you, Josh.
- Josh Flores: Thank you for jumping at the call and just... well, you're good at that, right?
- Emily Meixner: That's right, jumping in.
- Josh Flores: Just jumping on board, like I'll do it.
- Rachel Scupp: That's right.
- Josh Flores: So, yeah, let's go enjoy the rest of the conference. And thanks for listening. Until next time, take care of yourself, take care of your students, and take care of each other.