Carson Chodos offers commentary on the inherent limitations of reformist cis imagination and resulting education policy and linguistic failures. Specifically, within a project to create LGBTQ+ inclusive symbol iconicity for students with disabilities that primarily utilize AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) systems. Carson Chodos, a public-school teacher (a cisgender lesbian), reflects on (mis)applications of limited functional communication systems on her students. Directly participating in the positioning of students as both innocent victims and responsible neoliberal subjects for the tolerant liberal state, she initiated a special project through the Division of Specialized Education and Student Support to create inclusive symbolic vocabulary reflective of the realities of the students with disabilities she worked with. Until 2019 there was an incredible absence of all symbols within the core vocabulary packages that excluded LGBTQ+ identities, families, relationships, or gender expressions. Since her initial project, there are now a few ad hoc library banks of LGBTQ+ icons across proprietary AAC software programs. This is not a success but, instead, a call for decentralized, evolving vocabulary to reflect the queer relational understandings of disability and participatory languaging.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Symbols, Queer, Liberal, GSA, Augmentative and Alternative Communication, AAC

On the surface, teaching middle school students in New York City public schools would offer extensive opportunities for an educator to discuss sexuality, identity formation, relationship constructs, consent, and power woven throughout content disciplines; though in practice it is rife with challenges (Preston, 2019). Yet as a public-school teacher teaching adolescents in District 75, the New York City District for students classified, and often segregated, for their “significant challenges” explicitly named as ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ and other ‘Significant Cognitive Delays’ (NYCDOE D75, 2023) I found a profound universal silence around sexual and gender identity formation. My first class as a teacher was in 2014 in a 6:1:1 middle school classroom, the most restrictive self-contained classroom setting offered within a NYCDOE public school building. All of my students were institutionally categorized as having significant intellectual disabilities and therefore “Alternately Assessed,” following a non-standardized school curriculum. While my experiences are absolutely situated and not indicative of any larger trends, it is important to note the sheer scale of students within this district. As of 2023, there are over 26,047 students currently enrolled in District 75 settings across New York City (NYCDOE 75, 2023).

The assumption of the existence of youth sexuality, sexual identity formation, and queerness among disabled and/or autistic students is a research-supported assertion (Strang, et al., 2018) as well as a personal one. Additionally, autistic and neurodivergent/disabled students have higher rates of self-reported identification as transgender and nonbinary (Strang, et al., 2018). This declaration is discordant within a larger climate of infantilization of disabled institutionalized adolescents and a holistic denial of sexuality and sexual identity (Sellwood 2017; 2022). This placement of disabled students as “innocent victims” in all sexual and gendered interactions reinforces a carceral, rape culture, and heterosexist logic that denies agency, autonomy, and dignity to students. Since all public school teachers are operants of the State, and most precisely a liberal state, they are “protectors” of rights. However, I fell into a political fantasy in which governments and schools can be illiberally empowered to safeguard freedoms, understood as the simultaneous presence of liberalism, and scarce spaces of carceral safety or refuge. Within that framework the task then becomes for educators, myself included, to shape and discipline individual students to become responsible neoliberal subjects who can gain conditional access to refuge and safety.
Hackford-Peer’s (2010) work with a similar liberal “innocent victims” discursive framing around safety and “youth queer identity” perfectly parallels and reinforces institutionalized disabled sexual erasure. They posit that many teachers hold a relational personal identification as the “activist educator,” in contrast to the “innocent victims,” of queer youth. The safety offered by the institution? Gay and straight alliances (GSAs). Accessing, founding, and insisting on the presence of GSAs within D75 classrooms became my catalytic energy for the following communication and administrative disability access projects.

Policy Implementation and Cisgender Limitations

Unfortunately, the limitations of this particular liberal imagination were immediately present. I attended training in September 2014 entitled “Starting or Strengthening Your GSA” offered by the NYCDOE LGBTQ+ Liaison Jared Fox. It focused on the Chancellor’s regulation A-601 Section E Process (NYCDOE, 2009) which states: “In order to receive a charter, each student club and/or organization must: be initiated by a group of interested students; have a purpose which is consistent with the school’s education goals [...].” This presentation posited a compliant neoliberal student properly utilizing procedures as a protective measure for the State against the specter of historically fascist transphobic and homophobic resistance (Martino, 2022). This archaic approach to queer respectability and the neoliberal citizen object was functionally and discursively impossible to apply to my D75 classroom students. Because the regulation requires student initiation and responsibility for the State it was and is incompatible with the predicated eugenicist misconception of disabled students as innocent, prompt-dependent wards of the State. This logic connects directly to the insidious control of the disabled bodymind through provider-created, applied behavior analysis (ABA)-informed, limited-functional-operant communication systems. Within this pervasive framework, nearly all child communication is clinically expected to be prompt-dependent or within the confines of vocabulary presented by educators or providers. It fundamentally precludes the possibility for disabled students within schools to communicate independently enough to protect the State from accusations of adult identity interference.

I found myself stuck within this discursive communication administrative paradox. How can one of my students “independently” request the support of a GSA student club within structurally limited communication when I, the functional speech partner, am queer? The lack of these requests before I began teaching was potential evidence for the litigious homophobic logic of the State to ensure that their communicative intent would be denied autonomy. Symbolically, the signifiers of my neurotypical queer provider presence supersede the existence of a disabled queer communicative agency. But it is also precisely the precarity of this relative legal and rights-based positionality to both students and the State that raises the stakes for all victim-objects within the expanded carceral State (Mayo, 2006). Therein lies the fundamental structural obstructions/discursive nullifications to “recognizable” and legitimated student communication to prove capacity to initiate a queer request within my presence.

This contradiction unraveled an entire set of trained fundamental assumptions around functional communication. As a teacher, I was enrolled in professional learning at Birch Family Services and other ABA-informed providers in CORE Vocabulary and PECS (Picture Exchange Communication Systems). Not only were my students unable to request a queer club, but they were also explicitly unable to identify as LGBTQ+ or express sexuality within the proprietary language banks I was to disseminate to my students. Many of my students communicated through a range of limited assistive and augmentative communication (AAC) systems including: teacher-created eye gaze boards with Core Vocabulary represented through Boardmaker symbols, iPads with picture-symbol software systems like LAMP, Boardmaker, Proloquo, or PECS. Within all the copyright-controlled corporate software systems I had access to at the time, there was not a single icon for gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. The only options were “boy,” “girl,” or “family” which presented what was visibly a heterosexual nuclear household (Figure 1).
The fantasy presented within the Chancellor’s Regulation A-601 Section E is that students would independently ascertain the applicable administrator at school, initiate a meeting, and communicate the benefits of GSA as queer youth for the larger educational goals of the institution. But, the devices denied them the opportunity for robust communication systems and limited them to ABA-functional “manding.”

That is not to excuse the real manifest violence of limited vocabulary access for disabled students who communicate primarily through AAC. Access to and rigorous provider and caretaker commitment to a robust total communication system for all people is paramount. I now understand a necessary ideological requirement of educators and providers to presume competence as a harm-mitigation strategy and offer strategies for authentic autonomous total communication (Porter & Burkhart, 2015). Unfortunately, at the time, I participated in the construction of “functional” or “core” vocabulary icons within many AAC pedagogies in schools that mirrored and reflected the resounding institutional white supremacist cultural values of compliance, inertness, and flattening of the student self as a productive discursive object. The CORE vocabulary for District 75 schools offers, at the most, reductive groupings of 4, 9, and 36 universal core symbols. At this most restrictive level, students have access to Yes or No, Help, Open, More, and Want (Figures 2, 3).
Even within a more robust communication system for a student, provided through school iPads and proprietary vendor software programs, the vocabulary reflected the hegemonic imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal values (hooks, 1984/200) of the schools (Figure 4).

I felt unable to move forward with the practitioners at my school and unsure how to actively teach gender and sexual identities when my “agenda” as a queer educator held too much proximity to the needed instructional vocabulary and speech content. At the time, intending to leverage the white supremacist cultural value of “worship of the written word,” written text as weighted truth (Okun, 2021), my next approach was to leverage compliance to a new NYCDOE Chancellor’s guideline to ensure LGBTQ-disabled students have linguistic access to LGBTQ identities. This written solution would create the relational distance I hoped would ease advocacy for a more queer-inclusive limited communication system within the professional institution of schools. As a white cisgender educator, I moved through these possible solutions with a state of unconsciousness (hooks, 1994), as the process is often invisible to white people, which solidifies a lack of knowledge or understanding of difference, serving to perpetuate oppression. This normalization of whiteness primarily serves to
obfuscate cultural aspects of white supremacy culture. Naming these values and characteristics of the culture of white supremacy, even in reflection, allows educators to identify and combat cultural weaponization.

In June 2019, the New York City Schools Chancellor, Richard A. Carranza, announced Guidelines for Supporting Transgender and Gender Expansive Students for New York City Schools (NYCDOE, 2019). This affirming policy released during New York City Pride month was heralded by the Mayoral First Lady Chirlane McCray as ensuring public schools are a haven for transgender and nonbinary students (NYCDOE, 2019). The only mention of policy considerations for students with disabilities in the 2019 version of the released guidelines was under the section of records with the line “IEPs should reflect the gender and name change of the student.” With the utmost respect and appreciation for Christina Foti, the NYCDOE queer cisgender administrator who supported my “activist educator” policy project, I launched a summer project to create compliance policy procedures under the Division of Specialized Education and Student Support for Students with Disabilities. As entirely cisgender administrators, in hindsight, this project was an enmeshment of queerness and transness, a way to capitalize on the new trans policy impetus for cis-queer projects of representation and discursive access to sexuality and GSA “safe spaces.” As Barsczewski (2020) speaks to so eloquently in the article, “Shutting Up: Cis Accountability in Trans Writing Studies Research” my queer action research policy project failed because cis-queer methodology is not equivalent to trans methodology.

**Reformist Linguistic and Symbolic Representation of LGBTQ+ Identities Within Functional Communication Systems**

My queer activist educator policy project’s neoliberal aim was to appeal to social responsibility from private profit-driven AAC software vendors by leveraging the liberal State as the largest consumer to demand and create LGBTQ+-affirming and gender-expansive symbols in compliance with new City regulations. The explicit request emailed to Language Acquisition through Motor Planning (LAMP) and Tobii Dynavox was to “ensure that our students have access to LGBTQ+ terms to describe their own identities and those of their community members. Explicitly guaranteeing that the terms from the Chancellor’s Guidelines are included within the set.” While the presumed neoliberal consumer empowerment and interactive statutory mechanisms have obvious limitations, the responses from the graphic arts managers, sales managers, and education sales specialists were resoundingly accepting and open to the project. Within three weeks from the initial outreach in 2019, a set of 40 initial symbols were designed, approved by the NYCDOE team, and integrated nationally into the Tobii Dynavox’s symbol banks with celebratory social media posts (Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5.**
**EXAMPLE OF THE NEW SYMBOLS**

![Image of new symbols](https://example.com/symbols.png)
At the time, my positioning as a cis dyke activist educator and “ally” to trans and gender-expansive teens served as legitimization for categorically unacceptable representations. While the intent was a neoliberal capitulation for any representation as a move towards communication liberation for disabled queer and trans students, this lack of imagination belies the fundamental problems of my cis-queer allyship. Even among the most conservative understandings of abstraction levels for intellectually disabled students, a bald human wearing a yellow shirt thinking of the rarely utilized “nonbinary circle symbol” within the thought bubble so gloriously fails to communicate the lived experiences of nonbinary people. My willingness to compromise on these initial icons spoke to both a white supremacy cultural value of urgency and a tenuous grasp at respectability within the fundamentally erroneous logic of neoliberal capitalist social responsibility and State collusion (Jones & Okun, 2001). My return to the public school classroom was imminent. The images launched in 2019 and my role in the iconography vendor project ceased, but they still exist within Boardmaker banks online. I formed a GSA with the support of an ally principal and survived the Covid-19 pandemic.

Present and Future(s) of Languaging and Imagining Disabled LGBTQ+ Youth Resistance

A cursory overview of the LGBTQ+ iconography available in 2023 within the AAC software systems used by my students paints an evolution worthy of further research, analysis, and feedback from trans and disabled researchers with lived experience. Donnie TC Denome explicitly identified this violent erasure of sexuality and identity in their 2020 blog post, “How do you symbolize intimacy? For many AAC programs, not particularly well.” The inconsistent languaging and imaging of LGBTQ+ identities within the larger software banks present obvious opportunities for a critique of the violence between a non-disabled communication partner and a disabled speaker. They address the divorce of vocabulary icons from lived experience. To note some particularly salient and egregious examples within my own work with the software as a teacher and communication partner, Boardmaker (see Appendix) maintains the family folder as heterosexual-appearing nuclear families but now includes “same-sex parents” in the sexual identity folder. Pensises are labeled as “male part.” “Affection” is represented as thick line drawings of gay and lesbian characters hugging. “Coming Out” is an egghead person speaking about male and female circle symbols and the slur “transvestite” is included under the “sex” folder. The failures of ally/straight imagination to create a visualized iconicity for the myriad queer identities are manifested in the discomfort of cis-heterosexist educators and NYCDOE providers.

Without discursive framing or a logic of liberation and identity, many of my colleagues were unwilling to introduce any new queer vocabulary to our adolescent students, thereby undermining the entire impetus for my original project! The logic followed that since the queer identity vocabulary was not already pervasive and present within the functional communication system, the act of introduction was itself an action of perceived “grooming.” As I toured D75 schools in August of 2019 and in 2020 to speak with speech providers about the expanded icon options, I was told on multiple occasions that identity was “extraneous” and “not functional.” The “more important” goals for speech were requests for material objects. My cisgender and mainly straight colleagues saw no function in transness or queerness.

What possibilities exist within queer and/or disabled resistance and imagination? Denome (2020) expressed frustration with the scale of decentralized vocabulary adaptation and the burdensome individual responsibility it puts on the communication partner or speech provider. This can and often does create an unconscionable identity gatekeeper against the disabled speaker. I assert that liberatory projects must resist the fungibility of identity as a token within compliance-based functional communication systems. The history of ABA and LGBTQ+ eradication and conversion is too direct to find liberation within socially responsible corporate AAC vendors or ad hoc liberal representation and compliance reformist State projects. Because my failed language access project operated in ways that minimized colonial and racial differences as implicitly cis, white, and settler, it presumed a form of disability-belonging woven through the experience as a dual-axis form of heterosexist and ableist minoritization.
Instead, I now posit that liberated communication and relational languaging by politically marginalized identities are fundamentally threatening to the State and should not be compartmentalized and “taught” by agents and providers. This argument extends beyond the speech pathology philosophy of “total communication” advocated by Gayle Porter, which has incredible merit but I believe misses the revolutionary and destabilizing reality of autonomous languaging as structurally queer and outside of hegemonic State linguistics. There are realities of contingent separatism in communication liberation such as “Black Language” studies (Baker-Bell, 2020), the State repression of Rachel Jeantell’s critical testimony at the trial of George Zimmerman (Rickford & King, 2016), and the emergent Nicaraguan Sign Language created by deaf youth categorized and legitimated by white semiotics researchers such as Shepard-Kegl.

I am left holding the multitude of communication realities within oppressive ideologies and structures. I am no longer compelled as an “activist educator” and I will not construct any communication systems for the disabled “other.” Instead, I will affirm and provide increased clarity that valuing total self-determination, autonomous communication spaces without gatekeepers, and easy dissemination of information can create basic access for queer and trans-disabled possibilities. The shared queer and trans practices, frames of meaning with actions and interactions, create quite functional potentialities of disabled youth cultural resistance, even in the public school classroom.

Appendix

SAMPLE COLLECTION OF LGBTQ+ ICONS AS OF MARCH 2023 AVAILABLE IN BOARDMAKER 7
References


Endnotes

1 The gay conversion “therapies” undertaken and overseen by the father of ABA, Ole Ivar Lovaas and his prodigy George Rekers are well documented (Gibson & Douglas 2018).