

Make Us Question, Think, Reflect and Understand: Secondary Students' Beliefs and Attitudes Towards the Inclusion of LGBTQ Themed Literature in the English Classroom

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There are innumerable subcultures within American society, all of which come to interact within the walls of a school and all of which should be recognized and valued by the classroom teacher. This article shares secondary students' beliefs and attitudes about reading and studying lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or questioning (LGBTQ) literature in the secondary English classroom. Students share their perspectives on why teachers exclude LGBTQ literature and offer advice to teachers on the inclusion of this genre in their curriculum.

October 20, 2011, would be a day that would change my teaching forever. Like any other Thursday morning, the bell rang promptly at 7:20 am, alerting students that class would begin in ten minutes. As I stood in the hallway greeting sleepy and sluggish students, I noticed something very peculiar. I stopped a student as she entered the classroom: "Why is everyone wearing purple?" I inquired.

"It's says so on Facebook" she exclaimed, pulling up her Facebook page to reveal numerous statuses that read, "Today is a national spirit day. Don't forget to wear purple to show your support!"

Students were prompted to wear purple as a sign of support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and or questioning (LGBTQ) students and to speak out against bullying. Thirteen of the twenty-five students in my class were wearing purple that morning; hundreds more roamed the hallways. The support was overwhelming - and so was my unpreparedness. I quickly ran into the classroom and looked through

the literature I had readily available in the hopes I would find works that included characters that identified as LGBTQ. I had none.

The bell rang precisely at 7:30 am, and I was not sure what to do. Thinking on my feet, I began the class by asking if anyone knew why students all over campus were wearing purple, believing my classroom was a safe place to have this conversation. This prompt led to classroom dialogue on LGBTQ culture and issues, our school culture, and bullying. Moments into our discussion, Sam (a pseudonym), "came out" to her peers. There was immediate ridicule. Hateful and harmful statements began to buzz around like bees whose hive had just been hit. Sam sunk into her desk, covered her eyes, and lowered her head, as if what she just revealed made her less human. My classroom no longer felt safe. Knowing my silence would only condone their behavior; I opened my mouth and spoke. What I said, no doubt, was not enough and may not have seemed all that politically correct. I used words like "ignorant" and "unacceptable" to

describe my students' behavior. I was appalled by their responses and walked away that day wondering what more I could have done to support this particular student. More specifically, I wondered why I was not prepared for this topic. I knew I taught students who identified as LGBTQ, and yet I never thought about reading and studying literature reflective of their culture or including discussions about LGBTQ issues. Furthermore, I never considered how important including LGBTQ themed literature is for those that don't identify as LGBTQ. That morning, my teaching and choice of classroom literature changed forever.

LGBTQ Themed Literature as Revision and Evolution in The Secondary English Classroom

Current secondary English language arts (SELA) content standards do not specifically call for the study of LGBTQ themed literature. However, within secondary English classrooms teachers have powerful opportunities to draw upon LGBTQ literature as both revision and evolution. Exploring LGBTQ themed literature encourages students to challenge their own and others' beliefs about the norms they so openly accept. Additionally, presenting LGBTQ themed literature as part of the SELA curriculum - not literature read in isolation - "students come to recognize, dialogue about, and reflect on their personal beliefs and perceptions about those who express identities outside of their own identities" (Author, in press). Yet, the study of LGBTQ themed literature continues to remain absent from many classrooms (Heartling-Thein, 2013).

Educators, parents, and policy-makers may feel LGBTQ themed literature lacks value in the classroom. Perhaps this view stems from ignorance, fear, or discomfort

with something foreign to their personal definition of normalcy (as phobia would imply). Whatever the case, LGBTQ themed literature has become the most challenged and censored form of literature used in classrooms today (Sanders & Matthews, 2013). As such, teachers need to be encouraged to become literary pioneers and challenge back. But how do we do this? Since I value student input because I believe student voices and perspectives matter most in the classroom, my suggestion: listen to our students!

Since the fateful day of purple attire, I have had the pleasure of speaking to several of my high school students, of all sexual orientations, about their exposure to LGBTQ literature in their classes. Conversations have led me to discover that few students have been exposed to LGBTQ themed literature. Students have explained why they feel their teachers have been afraid to incorporate this literature in their instruction. They have also provided advice on how they suggest teachers address this culture within their curriculum. I value student input because I believe student voices and perspectives matter most in the classroom. In this article, I share what I have learned through our classroom conversations.

Pretending Students Who Identify as LGBTQ Do Not Exist

Throughout their tenure in school, the majority of students I spoke with had virtually no exposure to or experience with LGBTQ themed literature or dialogue surrounding LGBTQ culture. One student named Beth (all names are pseudonyms) shares "the only time the topic was even brought up was as a passing reference in our conversations about Renaissance society in relation to Shakespeare's sonnets." Brian spoke of a time in his junior year that "we

discussed how authors like Walt Whitman were gay and how certain Shakespearean sonnets are almost blatantly a conversation between two men, but there were no books or texts where the main characters were LGBTQ or dealt with the issues related to identifying in anything I have been exposed to.” Sarah added” No. Nothing. Our school simply pretends that lesbians and gays do not exist.”

As a teacher, I feel this is a most unfortunate occurrence. While I had never observed outright discrimination against students who identify as LGBTQ in my class prior to the day of purple, I cannot help but wonder if students who identify as LGBTQ ever feel left out from being able to connect with the experiences of protagonists in classroom texts. More so, what kind of message was I sending by not including LGBTQ themed texts in our studies?

Educators talk about the value in fostering a caring classroom community, but how are we going to accomplish this if we pretend part of our classroom community does not exist, or is not relevant, by ignoring their issues and culture? I believe part of being a teacher is recognizing that our society is changing, growing and expanding, and we need to keep up with the changes in our classrooms in order to make learning relevant and relatable for *all* our students.

A Choice to Exclude

As our conversation turned to teacher decisions to exclude LGBTQ literature, I noticed student dialogue fell into two distinct categories: how others would react and the teacher themselves. Jessica shared what she believed was teachers reason for exclusion, “I would imagine because of parents and community reaction. I mean being truthful, things have come a long way,

but not that far yet.” The majority of students argued that teachers were afraid of using LGBTQ literature because of school board members, administrators and parents. Amber elaborates, “Teachers are afraid of the backlash they may receive from other teachers, parents and administrators. They could possibly lose their jobs because a lot of people don’t agree with this type of literature. It’s taboo!”

The bottom line: Students perceive that teachers are scared to push the envelope due to the uncertainty of the outcomes or consequences that could arise. It is likely teachers are afraid because they fear the repercussions or reactions from parents and educational authorities for implementing such books in the classroom. In highly religious or conservative communities, books that imply promiscuous behavior between members of the same sex, would no doubt spark an outcry that could leave a teacher without a job.

Almost every individual knows and remains in contact with at least one gay, lesbian or bisexual person (transgender is still much less accepted and much more taboo, unfortunately). However, there is still a large population of people who feel, or demonstrate, some form of homophobia. Only a small percentage of this population would qualify as outright “gay bashers” - people who would act violently towards LGBTQ people. Still, there is a lot of subtle homophobia surrounding our students in today’s society. I’d venture to say the most common attitude demonstrated towards homosexual people today is one of acceptance without inclusion or invitation. By this, I mean that plenty of people have no problem with LGBTQ people in the workplace, in public social situations, and even voting for their political rights. However, many of these same people still

feel uncomfortable around the LGBTQ population and are yet to develop a true friendship with anyone who falls in any of these categories. Teachers are aware that parents who fall into the latter category are less likely to be overly concerned when their child reads LGBTQ fiction. Nevertheless, there still exists the risk that one or two parents will view LGBTQ literature through a discriminatory lens.

The second category of student discussion revolved around the teacher. Some students felt that teachers are too uncomfortable in their own skin to address topics of sexuality within literature. Other students shared they believed the primary reason teachers avoid these works deals with a sheer lack of knowledge. Brian communicated, “the teacher may not even know that these books exist” and Jessica chimed in, “I think some of my teachers are homophobic. If they are afraid or uncomfortable around gay people, they will definitely not give us books to read about if it has characters they themselves don’t like.” Kathryn added “I think teachers are afraid of teaching LGBTQ adolescent literature in the classroom because they think it has to do with sex and that makes it bad. Also, I think teachers are not informed enough about LGBTQ Literature so they are scared.”

Unless students outwardly assert their status as LGBTQ, the teacher may never know they are part of this culture and therefore see no need to include LGBTQ literature in the classroom. However, the number of students struggling with their sexuality may be greater than we realize. Therefore, I am left asking: why are we reserving this genre for only LGBTQ students? and just because the teacher may think that their pool of knowledge related to this culture at large is insufficient for them to fully and effectively implement such

literature, does that mean we don’t have a responsibility to our students to become educated on this culture?

Students Offer Advice

Advice is sometimes easier given than received, especially when it comes to the inclusion of LGBTQ themed literature in the secondary English classroom. When I first implemented this genre in my own classroom I was nervous and unsure of what would transpire. I was concerned about student’s reactions, parent’s reactions, and even my own reactions! Much to my surprise, I felt no different exploring this genre than I did when I first taught a novel written by a Native American male. As a Caucasian woman, my connection to the Native American community was much like my connection to the LGBTQ community – limited. But once I realized I had an ethical responsibility to expose students to literature from all cultures, the literature became more powerful for both my students and me. But not all educators feel the same. For those that don’t, students offered advice. This is what they said:

- I would say to not be afraid of what others think of the decisions you make regarding literature. If these stories or books are making a difference for students, making us question, think, cope, reflect or understand, how can you not use them?
- Be aware of your own biases and make sure they are kept out of the classroom. Ask us what we want to read and let us know that hey – today we are going to read a story that has a lesbian character. Let’s talk about that. Don’t be afraid to talk about it. You might be surprised at how mature we can be!

- I think you should not be afraid and should try and learn about the subject so they will be excited about teaching it. I think that you should read LGBTQ literature and learn to be an advocate for the LGBTQ community, because you will always have someone in your classroom who is questioning their own sexuality - no matter where you teach.
- My advice for using LGBTQ literature in the classroom would be to get to know students in the classroom as people instead of desk inhabitants. We need these conversations!

Meeting ELA Common Core Standards Through the Inclusion of LGBTQ themed texts

Through my conversations with students, the absence of LGBTQ themed literature in English classrooms was attributed to teacher's lack of knowledge and exposure to LGBTQ themed literature. It was their belief that educators are unclear on ways in which they can incorporate these texts into their current curriculum. Current SELA Common Core standards provide English educators with many opportunities to explore LGBTQ themed literature. What follows are two examples of how SELA educators might include LGBTQ themed literature within units of study while meeting English Language Arts Common Core Standards.

The worlds depicted in fairy tales often represent socially constructed norms, expectations, and expressions as influenced by the cultural beliefs of the time period and society in which they were written. The realities presented within each tale define what it means to be male or female or

masculine or feminine in that culture. But what if these realities were challenged? Common Core Standard RL.11-12.7 calls for the analysis of multiple interpretations of a story (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). If students were to study a fairy tale such as Cinderella through this standard, they could potentially explore the many issues surrounding gender roles and stereotypes presented within the tale as told from different cultural perspectives and across different time periods. Students could begin this exploration through the examination of Perrault's original version *The Little Glass Slipper* (Perrault, 1697) and segue into other cultural versions such as the Irish adaptation, *The Irish Cinderlad* (Climo, 1996), an African variation, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* (Stephoe, 1987) and an LGBTQ themed young adult novel rendering, *Ash* (Lo, 2010). *Ash* is a modern twist on Cinderella in which Cinderella identifies as a lesbian. Through its inclusion within this unit of study, teachers allow for a deeper exploration and dialogue about individuals who identify as LGBTQ, including those who are gender creative or gender flexible.

How does society influence and shape perceptions of individuals and/or cultures? This guiding question lends itself to the study of marginalized cultures in literature. Common Core Standard RL.10.2 reads "Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). One commonly taught text in the SELA classroom is *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1982). In this text,

members of the African American community are rendered victims of social injustice because of their race. But marginalization is not limited to race. Social injustice can include the marginalization of cultures based on their religion, gender or sexual orientation. Coupling this canonical text with an LGBTQ themed text such as *Shine* (Myracle, 2011), the story of one girl's search for the truth about what happened to her gay best friend that put him in a coma, and *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Sheppard* (Newman, 2012), a book of poetry exploring the impact of the death of Matthew Sheppard, students can explore social injustices based on sexual orientation as presented in both classical and contemporary literature.

Discussion

Teaching novels that include characters that identify as LGBTQ puts teachers at the forefront of an important move towards equality and acceptance of others. I know the parallel is a bit nuanced and probably overly stated, but in many ways it does remind me of the civil rights movement. I imagine it must have been difficult to begin including works of literature in school that portray African Americans in a positive and/or highlighted the injustices they've faced. I imagine there were plenty of people wondering what effect such books would have on society and identity. It is important, bold and meaningful work to include LGBTQ themed literature in our curriculum.

Don't behave bitterly towards detractors. It may seem like some people's minds are made of pure concrete, but with time and effort, people will begin to open up and be more accepting. The more teachers can find a way to show how much LGBTQ themed young adult novels have in common with mainstream novels, the better. It's important

to show that LGBTQ themed literature is valid and worthy of study. As we encourage and educate people to begin to see this validity, my hope is they will stop viewing it as an alien text form with an agenda. For teachers who do provide students opportunities to "study, unlearn, and relearn about LGBTIQ issues and culture, they move students toward greater acceptance, affirmation, and recognition about preconceived and hostile beliefs" (Greathouse, in press).

"Too often, current teaching of literature in American classrooms tends to assume that lesbian and gay content is not there, that lesbian and gay students don't exist, that lesbian and gay experience is invisible" (Greenbaum, 1994, p. 71). However, in remedying this problem, recognizing the presence of students who identify as LGBTQ is not enough. We must ask ourselves what we can do as teachers to combat such a stigmatic social issue whose repercussions can be life altering and damaging for any adolescent. As English teachers, I believe we have as much responsibility to use LGBTQ literature in the classroom as we do to use works by female, black, and all other authors. There are innumerable subcultures within American society, all of which come to interact within the walls of a school and all of which should be recognized and valued by the classroom teacher. It all boils down to being a truly multicultural educator and providing an access point by which each student can connect with the content of a course – no matter what sexual orientation they are. Though I may not personally identify with the experiences of characters in a novel, this does not mean that reading an LGBTQ themed text would not create a life-changing experience for one of my students. In providing literature that allows readers to explore sexual identities and orientations

along side gender, race and ethnicity, educators begin to break a silence about the LGBTQ culture that has existed in our classrooms for too long a period of time (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005).

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