

Incorporating LGBTQ Young Adult Literature into the AYA ELA Classroom as a Means to Bring Representation to Underrepresented Groups

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Abstract: This article advocates for the incorporation of LGBTQ young adult literature into the AYA ELA classroom as a means to address the lack of representation of LGBTQ individuals in the curriculum. It begins by sharing statistics taken from a nation-wide survey pertaining to discrimination against LGBTQ students in classrooms around the USA. From there it argues for the importance of incorporating young adult literature in the classroom, and explores methods for incorporating LGBTQ young adult literature in the classroom. Finally, it discusses how to address the pressures that may be presented in response to the incorporation of these texts.

Introduction

“It is challenging to find representations of LGBTQ experiences in schools, libraries, local bookstores, or movie theaters” (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015, p. 97). In my own experience, Dodge and Crutcher’s statement could not be more true; through all my years of schooling, not once do I recall encountering a text engaging the LGBTQ community, not even encountering a single LGBTQ character in a novel or short story. As a student teacher, I saw that this remained the case in the school in which I was placed, in that it did not contain any LGBTQ literature.

This lack of representation is somewhat startling, because as one survey conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2018) in 2017 on high-school students in the United States found, 2.4% of students identified as gay or lesbian, and “8.0% identified as bisexual” (p. 8). That means approximately 10.4% of students are LGB and are not typically represented in the curriculum (this survey did not account for transgender or gender queer students).

Fortunately, there are movements underway to make schools more inclusive and representative of underrepresented groups. One movement is pushing for more representation of LGBTQ individuals in the curriculum (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015; Gallo, 2004; Boyd and Bereiter, 2017). One method of doing so is by incorporating LGBTQ literature in the Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. At present, however, LGBTQ characters are underrepresented in the various texts utilized in the AYA ELA classroom. Therefore, our curriculum must become more inclusive to represent those students that fall into this category.

Discrimination Against LGBTQ Students in Schools

Before focusing on how to better represent LGBTQ students in the curriculum, it is important to understand the problems that such students they deal with in school. Many LGBTQ students face discrimination in school, in the form of both

verbal and physical harassment. For example, Table 1 shows the range of harassment and assault faced by such students, according to the 2015 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016).

Clearly, this discrimination is not conducive to an effective learning environment. The effects of this discrimination can be observed in Table 2, which depicts the effects of discrimination by contrasting academic performance of LGBTQ students who faced discrimination with those who did not face discrimination. As the table demonstrates, LGBTQ students that are discriminated against suffered more psychologically and academically than those students that did not face discrimination in schools.

Table 1

Forms of harassment and assault against LGBTQ students in school settings.

| Type of Assault | Based on Sexual Orientation | Based on Gender Expression |
|---|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Physically harassed | 27.0% | 20.3% |
| Physically assaulted | 13.0% | 9.4% |
| Electronically harassed | 48.6%* | 48.6%* |
| Sexually harassed | 59.6%* | 59.6%* |
| Heard “gay” used in a negative way | 98.1%* | 98.1%* |
| Heard negative remarks about gender expression | 95.7%* | 95.7%* |
| Heard negative remarks pertaining to the LGBTQ community from teachers and other school staff | 56.2% | 63.5% |

*Data groups students together based on sexual orientation and gender expression.

Note: Compiled from Kosciw et al., 2015, p. xvi-xvii.

Table 2

Effects of discrimination against LGBTQ students.

| | Discriminated Against Based on Identifying as LGBTQ | Not Discriminated Against |
|---------------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| Missed school in the past month | 44.3% | 12.3% |
| Average GPA | 3.1 | 3.4 |
| Disciplined in school | 46.0% | 27.9% |
| Self-esteem | Lower* | Higher* |
| Rates of depression | Higher* | Lower* |

*Non-numerical comparisons were supplied in the source.

Note: Compiled from Kosciw et al., 2015, p. xviii.

The GLSEN survey also provided data pertaining to LGBTQ student achievement when an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum was utilized in schools. As Table 3 demonstrates, students hear more negative remarks and feel less safe at school when LGBTQ representation is missing from the curriculum. Conversely, students feel safer and hear fewer homophobic and negative remarks about gender expression when LGBTQ representation is included in the curriculum.

As can be seen in Table 3, an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum creates a more effective learning environment for students that fall into this group, as compared to a

non-inclusive curriculum. When such a curriculum is present, LGBTQ students feel safer, earn higher grades, and are more likely to attend school on a regular basis. As teachers, it is our duty to create a safe, inclusive, and effective learning environment for our students. In the AYA ELA classroom, doing so can take the form of including LGBTQ young adult literature in the curriculum.

Table 3

Differences in LGBTQ experience with inclusive and non-inclusive curricula

| | Non-inclusive Curriculum | Inclusive Curriculum |
|---|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Heard "gay" used in a negative way | 72.6% | 49.7% |
| Heard homophobic remarks | 64.1% | 40.6% |
| Heard negative remarks about gender expression | 66.6% | 50.7% |
| Heard negative remarks about transgender people | 44.5% | 26.8% |
| Felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation | 62.6% | 40.4% |
| Missed school in the past month due to feeling unsafe | 35.6% | 18.6% |

Note: Compiled from Kosciw et al., 2015, p. xx.

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Young Adult Literature: An Overview

Middle and high-school students generally relate well to young adult literature (YAL) because the characters portrayed in these texts share many similarities with our students. The main characters in young adult literature are typically close to the same age as our students and face many of the same challenges as our students because these texts bring up difficulties and realities faced by teenagers.

One traditional argument against teaching young adult literature is that YAL does not meet the standards set forth by the CCSS. However, this could not be further from reality, as a majority of it meets the standards quite well (Ostensen & Wadham, 2012). Ostensen and Wadham contend that YAL is:

a strong fit with the Common Core expectations because it can meet the standards for quantitative and qualitative measures of complexity at the same time as it meets the needs of readers and the tasks in which they must engage (p.7).

Another concern about YAL is it does not fit into the canon of texts traditionally taught in schools. However, in many cases YAL can be used as a stepping stone for many of the canonical texts utilized in the ELA classrooms (Bright, 2011; Rybakova and Roccanti, 2016). Table 4 illustrates this with three examples taken from Rybakova's and Roccanti's article on pairing young adult literature with the canon.

In order to break the cycle of poor writing ability, teacher education programs need to integrate writing instruction into their curriculum for all content areas, not

only ELA. This should include two foci: improving teachers' writing ability, and teaching techniques for writing instruction. Therefore, teachers will be prepared to teach writing in a heavily tested and standard-driven era. If teacher education programs change their curriculum to include more writing instruction, future teachers will be able to teach students how to write and the cycle of poor writing will end.

Table 4

Examples of young adult literature (YAL) and canonical literature pairings

| YAL Novel | Canonical Connection(s) | Connecting Element(s) |
|---|--|---|
| The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (Goodreads rating 4.35/5) | The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank Night by Elie Wiesel | Event: The Holocaust |
| Smile by Raina Telgemeier (Goodreads rating 4.12) | Little Women by Louisa May Alcott The Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor | Theme: Coming of age |
| Mockingbird by Kathryn Erskine (Goodreads rating 4.16) | To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee | Characters: Similar plot lines, characters, differing themes; references To Kill A Mockingbird several times |

Note: Excerpted from Rbakova & Roccati, 2016, p. 35.

As Table 4 shows, many canonical texts share thematic elements, character similarities, and other connections with YAL. Because of these similarities, and because young adult literature is generally easier for students to grasp and to relate to, YAL can serve as an excellent springboard when paired with canonical texts.

LGBTQ Young Adult Literature

Given the general effectiveness of using young adult literature in the curriculum, this same literature can also be used to effectively bring representation to underrepresented. In this case, young adult literature can be utilized to offer representation to LGBTQ students. As discussed earlier, LGBTQ literature offers teachers and schools one way to represent marginalized groups in our instruction. Incorporating LGBTQ young adult literature in our classrooms allows us to help all students relate to and empathize with the LGBTQ characters. This humanization consequently helps non-LGBTQ students relate to LGBTQ students. In effect, this can create a safer, more accepting environment for LGBTQ students. As Dodge and Crutcher (2015) explain, “[i]ntegrating LGBTQ YAL helps students question, discover, and discuss the multiple experiences of people in our society, creating a curriculum that promotes empathy and social justice” (p. 97).

One method of incorporating LGBTQ literature into the English language arts classroom is by tying works which contain LGBTQ characters “into themed units you already teach” (Gallo, 2004, p. 129). Gallo provides an excellent example of this incorporation:

I am currently working with a middle school on a bully unit. The generic term bullying covers all forms of harassment. Using literature circles, the students read six different books, all with bullying in them. The Misfits is one of those books.

Homosexuality is not the main theme in the book, or in the unit, but a character is harassed because of his effeminate ways, and that is discussed as part of the unit's main theme of bullying. (p. 129)

As can be observed in his example, Gallo ties in bullying experienced by a homosexual character in a novel into his unit on bullying. Not only does this humanize the homosexual character while fitting LGBTQ literature into an already established curriculum, but bringing in this novel also helps students see similarities between the variety of bullied characters whether they are LGBTQ or heteronormative characters within other texts read by the class. This helps students to sympathize with the homosexual character from the novel and has them consider the struggles faced by their LGBTQ peers.

In addition to fostering empathy and understanding for LGBTQ students, incorporating LGBTQ literature into the curriculum, can also help teachers engage students in the higher levels of thinking on the taxonomic scale. This is addressed quite readily by a series of four questions created by Boyd and Bereiter (2017) that can be asked when engaging their students with transgender literature. These questions were discussed in groups of students with each group engaging with a different text and were as follows:

1. How do power structures (social institutions) affect the transgender characters in your book? (e.g., hospitals, schools, religion, family)
2. How did point of view affect your book?
3. How is masculinity presented in this book? (i.e., How do certain characters perform masculinity?)
4. How would switching the gender in your book (if it were trans female instead of male in *I Am J*, for instance, or trans male instead of trans female in *Almost Perfect*, for instance) affect the character's interactions with other characters or institutions? (p. 16).

Not only do these questions engage students in higher levels of thinking, such as analysis and evaluation while engaging students in critical thinking practices, but such questioning addresses the literature portion of the Common Core State Standards set forth in the United States.

In addition, like other forms of young adult literature, LGBTQ young adult literature can be paired with the canonical texts utilized in the English language arts classroom as a form of scaffolding. For example, Dodge and Crutcher (2015) implement all three elements in their text-selection practices, combining the higher levels of taxonomic thinking and incorporating LGBTQ young adult literature into the curriculum through a unit already utilized in the classroom. These two introduce the unit with an "essential question: How do country, culture, government, or socially enforced gender roles influence romantic relationships?" (p. 100). This question touches the taxonomic levels of both analysis and evaluation as it encourages students to think critically about the texts they engage with. They go on to offer a list of text titles, one being the canonical text *Romeo and Juliet* where two children are engaged in a forbidden love. They also placed an LGBTQ YAL novel on the list, *If You Could Be Mine* by Sara Farizan. This novel takes place in Tehran, Iran. In

this text, “Sahar is in love with Nasir, but because they are both female, their love is illegal and punishable by death” (p. 99). All texts in the list share thematic and character elements that can be addressed by the overarching question for the unit, but a LGBTQ YAL novel is incorporated into the text set which will assist to scaffold understanding when the students approach the canonical text by Shakespeare. By incorporating this LGBTQ text, Dodge and Crutcher are bringing representation to the LGBTQ community within the school setting. Such representation can be used to facilitate discussions among the students concerning the LGBTQ community and could help lead to a more accepting classroom and school environment.

Restrictions on Teachers

While there are several compelling reasons to integrate LGBTQ YAL into the ELA classroom, there are also many obstacles that can prevent teachers from doing so. As Dodge and Crutcher (2015) state, “teachers worry about the repercussions of introducing LGBTQ issues in their classrooms, from pushback from parents to concerns about losing their jobs.” They “also concede, from research and personal experience, that teachers may face communities, cultures, policies, and even laws that impede or prohibit inclusion of LGBTQ YAL or validation of LGBTQ experiences.” With all this in mind, it is hard to “imagine how novice middle and secondary teachers can do antihomophobia work without professional risk... This work is risky, and as long as heterosexism and homophobia are institutionally supported forms of oppression, it will continue to be so” (pp. 103-104). While these points are all true, and pose a real challenge for teachers, we must remember that as teachers, it is our duty to create a safe, inclusive, and effective learning environment for all our students.

Because parents, community members, and even members of school administration or other teachers often challenge the texts we select for use in our English Language Arts classrooms, teachers must have clear justifications for their text selections ready. Fortunately, Dodge and Crutcher addressed this in their article, offering a seven-step plan for being ready to do so. First, one should “think about existing unit themes, curricular goals, and anchor texts” being utilized in the classroom. After this, one should consider how to incorporate “experiences and identities of LGBTQ persons, particularly through high-interest YAL, multimedia, and popular and digital culture.” Third, one must explore “resources for identifying award-winning LGBTQ YAL, for strategies in integrating that YAL and other high-interest media..., and for addressing challenges from parents, communities, and policies.” Fourth, one needs to read these texts “and identify essential questions that can guide” one’s unit. Fifth, one should “research how the school and community need and support equity, and plan integration accordingly”; this could include familiarizing oneself with “school antibullying policies, multicultural/culturally relevant teaching policies, suicide prevention initiatives, Title IX, student organizations, LGBTQ community events, [and] social and political activism.” Sixth, one needs to plan their “unit using the Common Core, ...other text resources, and student prior knowledge, including learning from across the subject areas.” Finally, one must “plan for authentic, student-led, summative projects” (p. 103). While there might still be parent, community, and other forms of backlash when incorporating LG-

BTQ young adult literature into the curriculum, following these seven steps prior to incorporating these texts into the classroom may help diminish this backlash and will also allow the teacher to ensure that their own practices are justifiable, in order to prevent possible repercussions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, LGBTQ young adult literature should be incorporated in the adolescent and young adult English language arts curriculum. In general, students relate well to YAL to this age group, because they can identify with the characters and their struggles more than they can with characters from the canonical texts teachers implement in their classrooms. By incorporating LGBTQ young adult literature in the classroom, teachers can not only offer representation to this underrepresented group, but can also foster empathy and understanding for LGBTQ students. For this reason, the integration of LGBTQ YAL might help our schools become safer, more accepting, and more productive learning environment for LGBTQ students.

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