

Promoting Inclusivity of LGBTQ Students and Classroom Community through English Language Arts

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Abstract: This article addresses the need for early elementary educators ranging from kindergarten through fifth grade to include English Language Arts lessons that are inclusive of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ) topics, as well as methods on how to incorporate them. Research has shown that most schools lack curriculum that includes LGBTQ characters or topics. Supporting LGBTQ students has the potential to help their social-emotional well-being, as well as help their peers become more empathetic towards people who are different from them, thus positively impacting the school environment. Elementary educators can help foster inclusivity and encourage acceptance by implementing these lessons. Educators can use children's literature that includes characters and story lines that address LGBTQ topics and themes.

Introduction

It's likely that all educators want to set their students up for success. No one would get into this field to do otherwise. Imagine if a student walked into his or her classroom, though, and didn't feel welcomed? Would that student be able to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally in a classroom where they didn't feel like they belonged?

One student may come to class and realize that, despite the gender assigned to them at birth, in their heart, they feel different about who they really are. Would their peers accept them for who they are? Would the parents of non-questioning students allow their children to play with that child? Would the teacher be able to create an atmosphere that allows all students to feel accepted so that they can learn and bloom?

While statistically there may not be a large number of elementary students that identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ) at this age, there are still some who do. Because of these differences from their peers, these students may face challenges ahead of them academically and socially. While at school, these students may never read books with characters like them or see teachers who have similar characteristics as their own. They may never read books in which the family's dynamics are similar to theirs at home. They may feel isolated because no one understands what they are going through because all their classmates have one mom and one dad, instead of two moms or two dads.

For students who identify as LGBTQ, or students whose close family members fall into this category, they may not feel like school is a safe, accepting space. Educators can help build a sense of classroom community through English Language Arts lessons that include both characters like them and family situations like their own and encourage acceptance. These students can benefit greatly from the

support of their families, teachers, and peers. As they get older, school could quite possibly become a place that is stressful to them simply because of who they are. Setting these students up for academic success in a caring, welcoming environment will have lasting effects on their educational experience, as well as their emotional wellbeing, and will make it easier for them to learn and thrive. Implementing these practices also may help the peers of LGBTQ students become more understanding, accepting, and empathetic towards students that are different from them, which in turn will positively impact the school climate.

Impact of Negative Environments

As students begin to understand themselves, it is important that they also start to have an understanding and respect for others who are different from them. Elementary teachers can foster this and help students develop empathy for others. Approximately 1 in 8 students do not conform to “traditional” gender roles and face hostile learning environments more often than their peers (GLSEN, 2012). According to Rigby (2003), the stress caused by frequent harassment may affect a student’s ability to concentrate and typically results in a high rate of truancy and absenteeism. Students that identify as LGBTQ, as well as their families, can benefit immensely from support in their elementary classrooms. Research has shown that open support for these students using inclusive curriculum and building support with their family and school can help deter bullying and victimization. There is a lack of knowledge about how these supports can be used all together to support this student population and create a more suitable learning climate for all.

Since students spend a large amount of time in school, these students are at high risk for social, emotional, and academic challenges when schools do not create safe, inviting environments for them (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). It is important that schools work to promote their wellbeing. Feeling unsafe at school has a negative impact on their academic success (Johns et al., 2019). One survey of 5,730 LGBT students in the United States found that supportive educators had the strongest positive influence on the student outcomes regarding self-esteem, victimization, academic achievement, and school attendance (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016).

The consequences of a negative school environment can have an impact on the mental health of LGBTQ students. These issues can include anxiety, sleep or eating disturbances, engaging in high-risk behaviors such as using drugs and inflicting self-harm, emotional issues such as depression, and even suicide. This can also lead to a negative effect on academic outcomes, as these students may have limited access to their education and the unsafe environment at school can interfere with their ability to learn (De Pedro, 2018).

It is imperative that teachers create an inclusive, welcoming environment for these students. Having a positive relationship with their teachers is a strong predictor of school success for LGBTQ students. These students who have a relationship with at least one teacher have fewer difficulties and less depression and anxiety (Swanson, 2016).

Inclusive Curriculum

Results from the GLSEN 2019 National School Climate Survey found that schools in Ohio were not safe for students that identify as LGBTQ. This survey was conducted with LGBTQ youth in secondary schools throughout the U.S. Imagine if their peers were introduced to inclusive curriculum and their schools implemented supportive school policies at an earlier age. Would this help create a better atmosphere for learning? Research has shown that including LGBTQ topics in elementary schools has a positive outcome to the learning environment. In fact, 75.2 percent of LGBTQ students in schools that have inclusive curriculum said their peers were more accepting of LGBTQ people, compared to 39.6 percent of those without inclusive curriculum (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2018).

Introducing elementary students to LGBTQ topics does not have to mean talking about sex. Instead, it means addressing the diversity of families and relationships within communities including LGBTQ people (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2018). Some elementary teachers were hesitant to introduce inclusive curriculum to their students for fear of backlash from parents and administration. This changed as the age of the students increased, with secondary educators being more likely to participate in inclusive efforts at their schools (Meyer, 2019). This same study argued that because many lessons in Pre-K to grade 2 are structured around family units, then it is completely appropriate to address the diversity that some student families may experience. Not all students have a mother and a father in their family unit. This can be used as a teaching moment to show children that some families have one mother, one father, one grandparent, two grandparents, two mothers, two fathers, etc.

One of the best opportunities for teachers to incorporate inclusive curriculum is through English Language Arts lessons. There is now a plethora of children's literature available that include characters that are LGBTQ through both "mirror books" and "window books." The use of "mirror books" in inclusive classrooms allows students to see characters that are like themselves. These books allow students to see themselves, while "window books" give students insight to someone else's experience (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2018). Students should have exposure to both mirror and window books. There are also books that address the topic of gender stereotypes and expectations. Teachers can also read stories that represent diverse gender identities. These topics could also be helpful not just for LGBTQ students, but for those students that just don't follow the norm as there are cisgender boys that like pink and cisgender girls that like dinosaurs and trucks.

It is important, however, that when teachers do utilize inclusive lessons that they are used for relevance and not just to check a box. One study sought to find literature that would provide teachers with support to use LGBTQ-themed children's literature in academics. These findings would be helpful for educators to keep in mind when choosing how, when, and what to introduce to their students. The authors were able to narrow it down to three themes: teachable moments, curriculum relevance, and literary merit (Logan et al., 2016). Teachable moments are meant for times when a student reveals that they have parents of the same sex, someone uses a slur such as "that's so gay" to mean "stupid," or when a child dresses in a way that does not match their biological sex. Teachers must address that situation and not ignore it. Every single child is different, and those differences add richness to our

lives. It is important that we recognize the value and dignity that children have as human beings. Regarding curriculum relevance, educators should ask themselves if the literature will promote inclusiveness in the classroom as well as challenge assumptions and allow children to think critically. It is important that there is a real connection that can be made to the text. Finally, educators should consider the literary merit of LGBTQ-themed literature. They should choose literature that “enhances literacy and the development of language arts and reading skills that strengthen comprehension, fluency, phonological and phonemic awareness, and vocabulary development.” (Logan et al., 2016, p. 318). In these moments, literature can be used to not only enrich students’ literacy, but also teach them lifelong lessons about others’ differences.

Ways To Incorporate LGBTQ in ELA

There are plenty of children’s books that would make great anchors for English Language Arts lessons on LGBTQ topics. Several websites have compiled helpful lists of titles, such as the one from Family Equality, which can be narrowed down by age group. Some of the must-read books on this list include: *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert, *Adopting My Two Dads* by Luca Panzini, *Cookies and Cake & The Families We Make* by Jennifer L. Egan, *This Day in June* by Gayle E. Pitman, *George* by Alex Gino, *A Girl Named Adam* by Jordan J. Scavone, *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis, and *In Our Mothers’ House* by Patricia Polacco.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s Welcoming Schools website has lesson plans and other resources available. One suggested lesson for early elementary students is to read the book, *Red: A Crayon’s Story* by Michael Hall. After the reading, students then create a paper crayon about themselves that focuses on their inner identities. Then, they use the writing prompt “There’s More to Me Than You Can See,” which allows them the opportunity to share something about themselves that others may not know by looking at them. This lesson helps build classroom community by showing others that people are different from what you can see on the outside.

Older students in grades third through fifth can read and explore about Harvey Milk, a key activist in LGBTQ history. Students can read or listen to *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag* by Ron Sanders and *Flags of the World* by Sylvie Bednar. Students can learn about flags as cultural symbols. After, they can discuss the concept of identity as a class. They can then create an identity flag that captures aspects of themselves using colors, symbols, and words. Assessments will look to see if students are showing reading comprehension. Discussion and creation of their flags will show if students understand the concepts of symbols, identity, and pride.

Historical Context and Multicultural Practice

Just as teachers look to inform students and celebrate the people and events of our nation’s history during Black History Month or Women’s History Month, they can do the same to educate students on the important figures, positive role models, and events in relation to the LGBTQ civil rights movement and during LGBTQ history

month, which is celebrated in October. It should be noted that teachers look to their district or administration for approval of this, as it is not in the Ohio standards and would be considered outside of the curriculum. Welcoming Schools' bias-based bullying prevention program is just one resource that teachers can utilize to create lesson plans, as well as partake in LGBTQ and gender inclusive professional development training.

One rationale for including LGBTQ-themed content in English Language Arts lessons is that it is a part of multicultural practice. Teachers use literature often to explore racial, gender, and ability differences. Another study suggested that it is important for elementary students to understand themselves and others when incorporating “culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum” in their lessons (Parker 2010, p.65). In order to support diversity, the teachers had students research their cultural identities, create family trees, and then write reflective journal entries. While this study was centered mostly on cultural heritage, it would be possible to incorporate LGBTQ into this type of project as it pertains to students developing their sense of self and others in their community. These types of projects are cross-curricular in that they can be part of social studies lessons.

Pronouns

After checking with their districts or building principals for approval, teachers can make their students feel welcomed in their classroom through the simple use of preferred pronouns. Erin Cross, Director of Penn's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center and Amy Hillier, a professor at Penn's School of Social Policy and Practice wrote that educators in PreK to 12 schools can create a dialogue about pronouns and that they are not too young for this conversation: “By asking students their pronouns starting at a young age, educators can make room for students who may be exploring their gender identity and show everyone that gender identity should not be assumed” (“Respecting Pronouns,” n.d.). Teachers can also share their own pronoun when introducing themselves at the beginning of the school year and be a model for the class. Teachers can also be conscious when grouping students that they use other methods instead of using gender. For example, teachers may ask that anyone wearing green can line up for lunch instead of asking all the girls to line up. If early elementary students do not understand the idea of pronouns, the use of literature can be helpful. Welcoming Schools has a lesson plan on understanding pronouns using a book titled, *They She He Me: Free to Be!* by Maya and Matthew Smith-Gonzalez.

Teacher Confidence

Some teachers may feel uncomfortable or unprepared to touch on these topics in their classrooms. Training and professional development are options for teachers to help build their confidence when approaching this subject, which may be touchy for some administrators and parents. Teachers can reframe resistance by educating themselves and addressing the resistance with information (Meyer et al., 2019). Teachers may also use these lessons in a small group setting or present the material individually, as needed, depending on the classroom situation. Numerous websites

and scholarly papers exist that can help identify quality LGBTQ-themed literature, and even complete lesson plans. Even by making small-scale adjustments, such as including a book that has an LGBTQ character in it, teachers can greatly impact the social-emotional outcomes for their students that identify as LGBTQ. Through training, open involvement, and continuing conversations with families and students, teachers can help their schools become more suitable environments for these marginalized students, as well as other affected groups.

Conclusion

Elementary educators have the opportunity to create a classroom community that includes acceptance of all kinds of students. Incorporating English Language Arts lessons that are inclusive of LGBTQ characters and themes, students can learn more about this topic that may affect them or someone close to them in their lives. The benefits of creating an inclusive classroom and empowering children to be accepting of people that are different from them is so important now more than ever. In addition, incorporating LGBTQ-themed literature in classrooms will help these students feel valued and affirmed, and in turn, help them socially, emotionally, and academically.

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