



## **Equity by Design:** Teaching LGBTQ-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms

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# Teaching LGBTQ-Themed Literature in English Language Art Classrooms

## KEY TERMS

**LGBTQ** - The acronym used to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning identities and themes. We recognize that this acronym excludes some people, like those who are asexual or intersex, but we aim to be honest about who gets featured in literature representing sexual and gender minorities.

**Gender** - While “sex” is the biological differentiation of being male or female, gender is the social and cultural presentation of how an individual self-identifies as masculine, feminine, or within a rich spectrum of identities between the two. Gender roles are socially constructed, and typically reinforced in a gender binary that places masculine and feminine roles in opposition to each other.

**Cisgender** - An individual who identifies as the gender corresponding with the sex they were assigned at birth (Aultman, 2014; Stryker, 2009). By using cisgender to distinguish someone as not transgender, the term “helps distinguish diverse sex/gender identities without reproducing unstated norms” (Aultman, 2014, p. 62).

**Heteronormativity** - A set of practices and cultural institutions that position heterosexuality as “normal”, privileging heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships while also positioning LGBTQ identities and relationships as abnormal (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Sanders & Mathis, 2013). Heteronormativity reinforces rigid gender roles and is overwhelmingly present in US schools, as students are expected to act in certain ways according to gender and sexual expectations (Blackburn & Smith, 2010).

**Intersectionality** - The recognition of multiple identities and categories of oppression, acknowledging the relationship and interconnection between categories of difference such as race, gender, class, and sexual identity (Collins, 2000, 2009; Kumashiro, 2002).

Equity Assistance Centers (EACs) are charged with providing technical assistance, including training, in the area of sex desegregation, among other areas of desegregation, of public elementary and secondary schools. Sex desegregation, here, means the “assignment of students to public schools and within those schools without regard to their sex including providing students with a full opportunity for participation in all educational programs regardless of their sex” (<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/03/24/2016-06439/equity-assistance-centers-formerly-desegregation-assistance-centers>). This is pertinent to LGBTQ students. Most directly, students who identify as trans or gender queer are prevented from attending school because of the transphobia they experience there. Further, barriers exist for students attending schools who do not adhere to gender norms (i.e., they experience romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of their same gender) due to the homophobia and biphobia they experience there. Even those who manage to endure these forms of hatred and oppression and come to school are typically deprived of a curriculum that acknowledges other LGBTQ people. This is problematic because there is a documented correlation between inclusive curriculum and LGBTQ students staying and succeeding in schools (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016). In other words, in order to provide LGBTQ students with a full opportunity for participation in all educational programs, we must strive to



eliminate transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia in schools. Although curriculum is just one piece of the larger puzzle, it is an important one, and the one of focus for this briefing. More specifically, this briefing focuses on curriculum in English Language Arts classrooms, with particular attention to literature.

First, we argue that curriculum is a tool for fostering civil rights in inclusive education for LGBTQ youth. Next, we describe key components related to the selection and incorporation of high-quality LGBTQ-themed texts and then provide an overview of three pedagogical approaches for integrating LGBTQ-themed literature into ELA curriculum. The podcast associated with this brief features teachers discussing their use of specific LGBTQ-themed texts in their own classrooms, providing concrete examples of pedagogical practices and texts.

## Curriculum as a Tool for Fostering Civil Rights in Inclusive Education for LGBTQ Youth

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students face many challenges in schools related to homophobia, which often appears as violence, verbal abuse, and anti-gay graffiti in schools, and heteronormativity, in which gendered and sexual stereotypes are both explicitly and implicitly promoted in schools, minimizing and erasing LGBTQ voices and experiences. While teachers and the administration may work toward fostering more inclusive and safer school environments, many students, particularly LGBTQ students, report feeling unsafe in their schools (Kosciw, et al.,

2016).



The 2015 National School Climate Survey, conducted by GLSEN, reported that 57.6% of students who identified as LGBTQ “felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 43.3% because of their gender expression” (Kosciw, et al., 2016, p. 4). LGBTQ Students who feel unsafe avoid certain spaces in school buildings, or even miss school entirely as a result of feeling unsafe (Kosciw, et al., 2016; Russell & McGuire, 2008). The 2015 National School Climate Survey results revealed that 85.2% of LGBTQ student respondents had experienced verbal harassment at school, 27% had been physically harassed (“e.g. pushed or shoved”), 13% were physically assaulted (“e.g. punched, kicked, injured with a weapon”), and 59.6% were sexually harassed (“e.g. unwanted touching or sexual remarks”) (Kosciw, et al., 2016, p. 4). Of the students who reported incidents to school staff, 63.5% “said that the school staff did nothing in response or told the student to ignore it” (Kosciw, et al., 2016, p. 4). Over half (56.2%) of the students “reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other staff” and 63.5% of students “reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff” (Kosciw, et al., 2016, p. 5). Less than a

quarter of LGBTQ students reported positive inclusion of LGBT people, history, or events in their school curriculum, and less than half said they could even find such content in their school libraries or via the internet as accessed at school. When these students were, however, taught positive representations of LGBT people, they were less likely to hear homophobic and transphobic comments, less likely to feel unsafe, less likely to miss school and more likely to feel accepted by and connected to their classmates (Kosciw, et al., 2016). This is why we must include LGBT people and themes in curriculum.

This particular briefing focuses on the ways that literature and Language Arts curricula can serve as a revolutionary force for social change, specifically with regard to countering the civil rights injustices experiences by LGBTQ students in our schools. The intentional inclusion of diverse literature into Language Arts curricula has shown to foster empathy toward marginalized groups (Louie, 2005; Malo-Juvera, 2016), and the inclusion of specifically LGBTQ literature not only fosters empathy in straight and cisgender students, it also allows LGBTQ students to see themselves reflected in curricula with the goal of improving school climates for LGBTQ students. This is significant since LGBTQ students are often unable to see reflections of their identities in the books taught and offered for leisure reading in their classrooms (Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Smolkin & Young, 2011). By incorporating LGBTQ-themed texts and curricula that intentionally prevent and counter transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia in schools, teachers do necessary work towards the integration of LGBTQ

students, challenging the persistent harassment and discrimination experienced by so many of them.



Language Arts teachers, indeed all teachers, need to develop curricula that include LGBTQ-themed texts for the purposes of centering LGBTQ identities and advocating for the civil rights of LGBTQ students (Kosciw, et al., 2016). “Curriculum is tied to power” and Language Arts teachers have the power to not only include diverse perspectives by centering LGBTQ identities, but also to promote broader transformative goals of equity and social justice through combating transphobia, homophobia, biphobia, and heteronormativity (Page, 2016, p. 118). By centering and celebrating LGBTQ identities, teachers address critical civil rights issues including the invisibility of LGBTQ identities in the curriculum, and homophobic actions of discrimination, bullying and harassment, and inequitable school discipline that exist in our schools. Seeing examples of other teachers is a critical component of incorporating LGBTQ-themed literature into the Language Arts classroom (Page, 2016; Thein, 2013), and this brief explores methodologies

proposed by contemporary researchers.


Teachers are often resistant to the teaching of literature with LGBTQ themes (Schieble, 2012; Thein 2013) and may completely ignore LGBTQ topics in the Language Arts classroom (Puchner & Klein, 2011). Thein (2013) found that even teachers who identified as allies or who were “sympathetic” to LGBTQ issues were still resistant to including LGBTQ-themed literature in their classrooms (p. 170). While teachers express hesitance to introduce LGBTQ themes into the classroom, sexuality and heteronormativity are already present in schools, including in Language Arts classrooms (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Clark & Blackburn, 2009, Kedley, 2015; Puchner & Klein, 2011). The inclusion of LGBTQ-themed texts and identities is an issue of civil rights, and to include and discuss identities outside of the already present heteronormative discourse in schools contributes to a more equitable society. Teaching LGBTQ-themed texts not only benefits LGBTQ students by allowing them to see themselves in literature and classroom discussions but additionally benefits all students by opening Languages Arts curricula “to a far broader set of stories about human identity” (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005, p. 206). In spite of teacher reluctance or unfamiliarity with the instruction of LGBTQ-themed literature, teaching these texts is important and necessary work to be done in Language Arts classrooms (Flores, 2014). Incorporating LGBTQ-themed literature in the classroom has shown “significant and sizable reductions in homophobia” for some students (Malo-Juvera, 2016, p. 19). Other scholars (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003; Epstein, 2000) have documented their experiences

teaching LGBTQ-themed literature in their own classrooms, describing rich discussions of community, identity, and family, as students practice combating homophobia in their classrooms.

## Text Selection and Incorporation

The selection of high quality texts with LGBTQ themes is critical for Language Arts teachers to combat transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia (Banks, 2009). Reading and mediating this literature with students invites students struggling with biases to interrogate them in a relatively low-stakes context. As Thein (2013) articulates, “Becoming familiar with high-quality children’s literature featuring LGBT characters, families, and issues is a key step in becoming an informed ally who can advocate for inclusion of LGBT texts and issues in the language arts classroom” (Thein, 2013, p. 179). Further, reading and discussing inclusive literature allows students experiencing same-sex desire and/or questioning their gender identity ways of seeing possibilities of understanding their experiences and answering their questions. LGBTQ-themed literature “should be high quality, meeting literary standards for character development, plausibility of plot, and authenticity of setting, and importance of theme” (Vare & Norton, 2004, p. 190). As LGBTQ-themed literature can foster empathy and bring about social change (Meixner, 2006), teachers should select texts that combat stereotypes (Murray, 2010), do not reinforce heteronormativity (Martino, 2009; Sanders & Mathis, 2013), and do not position LGBTQ identities as pitiable (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). The podcast associated with





this briefing includes teachers identifying what they believe are high quality LGBTQ-themed texts, providing examples for educators working to include these novels in their classrooms. High quality LGBTQ-themed literature serves as a vehicle for critical and activist discussions that promote social justice aims and center LGBTQ identities and voices.

LGBTQ-themed literature is often presented as a window (Bishop, 1990) for straight and cisgender students to see representations of LGBTQ identities (Blackburn & Schey, 2017; Clark & Blackburn, 2009), however, recent scholars (Kenney, 2010; Sanders & Mathis, 2013; Schey & Uppstrom, 2010; Vetter, 2010) highlight pedagogical practices that include LGBTQ-themed literature as mirror texts, in which LGBTQ students can see themselves reflected in literature. When LGBTQ-themed texts and LGBTQ identities are centered in the classroom, LGBTQ students are able to have multiple mirror texts with which to engage. Additionally, by presenting LGBTQ-themed texts as potential mirrors for *all* students, Language Arts teachers remove their own heteronormative and cisgender assumptions of their students, allowing for students to find themselves within a variety of identities related to gender and sexuality. As Bishop (1990) writes, “when lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror” and moving these LGBTQ-themed texts from windows to mirrors for straight and cisgender students disrupts heteronormative assumptions and reasserts the fluidity of gender and sexual identities (p. ix). Language Arts teachers can aim to position texts in ways that allow students to insert themselves into LGBTQ-themed literature or discuss ways in

which they relate to LGBTQ identities.

Literature with LGBTQ themes must be continually offered, not only during conversations on sexuality or as part of diversity initiatives, which can position queer identities as abnormal or LGBTQ themes as separate from the traditional curriculum (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). LGBTQ themes should instead be fully incorporated into the curriculum and everyday conversations that work to foster equity. Frequently incorporating LGBTQ-themed literature allows for more opportunities for students to “engage, participate, and identify themselves as readers and writers” in the Language Arts classroom (Vetter, 2010, p. 106). Centering LGBTQ experiences and allowing for repeated engagements with LGBTQ-themed literature pushes for the continual disruption of heteronormativity.

Not only should high quality LGBTQ-themed literature be frequently taught and discussed in the Language Arts classroom, but teachers should aim to also provide LGBTQ-themed literature available for leisure reading and entertainment. By “providing opportunities for students to self-select their reading” of LGBTQ-themed literature, teachers can provide multiple opportunities for LGBTQ students to see themselves in literature and engage in literacy events that encourage equity and the centering of LGBTQ identities (Wood, Kissel, & Miller, 2016, p. 47). By providing LGBTQ-themed texts within a classroom library or encouraging the selection of LGBTQ-themed texts for student workshops, teachers can signal inclusion and demonstrate “commitment to equitable representation” (Page, 2016, p. 121). Literature with LGBTQ themes should be centered in critical discussions and

simultaneously offered for entertainment and aesthetic enjoyment, disrupting the normative positioning of heterosexuality and heteronormativity that currently exists in Language Arts classrooms.

## Pedagogy with LGBTQ-Themed Literature


Simply introducing LGBTQ-themed literature does not address the civil rights issues of transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia in our schools, instead teachers must endeavor to incorporate and discuss these texts throughout their curriculum (Epstein, 2000; Page, 2016; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Sanders & Mathis, 2013; Schall & Kauffman, 2003). Heterosexuality is privileged in many ways throughout schools and classrooms. Curricular examples include naming heterosexual relationships, like F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, but not homosexual ones, and exploring the Civil Rights Movement without naming Bayard Rustin's role or never referencing the Stonewall Rebellion. Extracurricular examples include traditions such as kings and queens for homecomings and proms, which reinforce heterosexual assumptions of opposite gender pairings. Other examples include referencing parents as mothers and fathers. Teachers must explicitly discuss these topics and shortcomings in order to challenge them, as more general discussions on bullying or tolerance risk reinforcing LGBTQ stereotypes, positioning LGBTQ students as outsiders, or maintaining these heteronormative constructions present in classrooms and schools (Sanders & Mathis, 2013). While nearly all US schools are inherently heteronormative, students should not be

positioned as homophobic or even straight (Clark & Blackburn, 2009) and discussions should not focus on the "morality" of sexualities or identities (Burke & Greenfield, 2016). Curricula should be constructed in a way that centers LGBTQ identities, encourages students toward social action, and represents "the LGBTQ presence in all of our lives" (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005). Successful incorporation of LGBTQ-themes are examined here, including pedagogical practices that promote equity, center LGBTQ identities, and involve intentional pedagogical activism that works to combat heteronormativity and homophobia.

## Reading Queerly



Effort should be made to ensure the availability of high quality literature that centers LGBTQ identities, however, LGBTQ themes can still be incorporated into the Language Arts classroom if such texts are not immediately available. Reading queerly is a critical reading practice that approaches texts from a queer perspective: exploring the portrayals of genders and sexualities, identifying absences of identities or



stereotypes portrayed in a text, and challenging and deconstructing heteronormativity (Helmer, 2015; Morris, 1998). Reading queerly (Helmer, 2015; Kumashiro, 2002) by exploring dimensions of power, oppression, identity, and justice, can be a way of disrupting heteronormativity when Language Arts teachers make the effort to question and discuss the presence and absence of sexualities and genders in a text. Teachers can prompt their students to examine heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia, through these conversations on privilege and visibility. Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2013) propose queer readings of books “already on the shelf” in elementary Language Arts classrooms to introduce LGBTQ -themes in the absence of texts with LGBTQ characters. By assuming a political stance and reading texts through a queer lens that addresses identity, discrimination, and equality, LGBTQ themes are brought into the elementary Language Arts classroom, providing foundational literacy events that work to promote equity and disrupt heteronormativity. Banks (2009) argues for the need to read critically even if books with LGBTQ characters are unavailable, and teachers should feel encouraged to center LGBTQ identities through examinations of intersectionality and heteronormativity (Blackburn & Smith, 2010). Teachers can immediately improve the lives of their LGBTQ students by incorporating queer readings of books that are already in their classrooms and curriculum, even if explicitly named LGBTQ identities are not currently represented. Reading queerly can be considered one part of an inclusive curriculum, or used in the absence of immediately available

LGBTQ-themed literature, though we want to assert the necessity of acquiring and including texts that explicitly name and center LGBTQ identities, as “LGBTQ texts must be present if they are to be a part of a critical pedagogy which engages marginalized students” (Page, 2016, p. 135). Language Arts teachers must find ways to center LGBTQ identities, both in their classroom literature and through their pedagogical practices, and reading queerly can be one way to begin or complement this process.

### “Safe Enough”

Wood, Kissel, and Miller (2016) advocate for the use of “safe zones” in the literature classroom, in which teachers intentionally position their classroom community as a safe place, or we would argue a safe enough place, in which students are able to discuss LGBTQ-themed literature, addressing stereotypes and promoting conversations that further social justice aims. As many LGBTQ students express feeling unsafe in schools (Kosciw, et al., 2016), fostering safer places in the classroom can have a critical impact on their school experience. Wood, et al. (2016) examine a middle school classroom in which a teacher, Ms. Smith, uses a social justice unit to incorporate LGBTQ-themed literature and literacy strategies that help to center LGBTQ identities. As conversations on compassion and equity are foregrounded, students are encouraged to connect novels to their own lives and their own encounters with discrimination, resulting in conversations on how to foster “safe zones” in their classrooms and ways in which students can work towards transforming



schools into safe (enough) and inclusive spaces. One of June Jordan’s “ground rules” for her *Poetry for the People* program includes a message on creating trust and safety within a community, in which “The People shall consciously undertake to respect and to encourage each other to feel safe enough to attempt the building of a community of trust” (in Muller & The Blueprint Collective, 1995, p. 16). Though the classroom may not be a completely safe place, creating a “safe enough” place can allow students opportunities to approach, discuss, and enjoy LGBTQ-themed literature and have an impact on the many LGBTQ students who experience unsafe and discriminatory school environments.

## Intersectionality

Teaching LGBTQ-themed literature while recognizing the multiple identities of students allows for further disruptions of heteronormativity as these approaches acknowledge and showcase multiple and fluid representations of gender and sexual identities. As described by Blackburn and Schey (2017): “Curricular representations of LGBTIAQQ people must attend to a variety of dimensions of difference, such as race, class, religion, disability, linguistic diversity, nationality, and indigeneity” (p. 54). When teachers offer LGBTQ-themed literature attending to intersectionality, LGBTQ students are able to see multiple reflections of themselves in literature, including representations of many other identities they may perform. Straight and/or cisgendered students may also find reflections of their own multiple identities or see increased representations of LGBTQ identities through this approach. When discussing the intersectionality

of our students, and acknowledging their multiple identities and experiences, teachers must take care to do so in ways that do not use intersectionality as another way to position students as homophobic (Blackburn & Schey, 2017).



As an example of incorporating intersectionality into the wider Language Arts curriculum, high school Language Arts teacher Ms. Lanza has particular aims of including LGBTQ-themed literature in both her instructional materials and as leisure reading materials (Page, 2016). By incorporating LGBTQ identities into wider discussions of “power, equity, and democracy,” sexual desegregation is related to broader civil rights issues (Page, 2016, p. 119). Ms. Lanza, described by Page (2016), is noted for her commitment to inclusion and intersectionality as she creates a student-centered curriculum that addresses “equity for all and justice for those who were marginalized, not solely on converting homophobic students or boosting self-esteem of LGBTQ students” (p. 123). Intersectional approaches, like those used by Ms. Lanza, allow for discussions and activism that not only advocate for the experiences and equity of LGBTQ identities but also work to

improve the lives of all those that are oppressed and/or marginalized.

## Conclusion

It is imperative that Language Arts teachers incorporate LGBTQ-themed texts into their curricula not only to center LGBTQ identities but also to do the necessary and critical activist work to combat homophobia and disrupt heteronormativity. Teaching is inherently political and it is necessary for teachers to take a stance that explicitly and actively advocates for LGBTQ students. We argue that the centering of LGBTQ-themed literature in the Language Arts classroom can do this important work. LGBTQ-themed literature addresses issues of identity relatable to all students and conversations on equality and action are transferrable to other conversations on civil rights and social justice. The podcast associated with this briefing, “Teaching LGBTQ -Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms,” provides additional pedagogical examples as teachers discuss LGBTQ-themed texts and the ways they center LGBTQ identities in their classrooms.



## **About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center**

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit [www.greatlakesequity.org](http://www.greatlakesequity.org).

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