

Public Middle School English Teachers Using LGBT Discriminatory District Curriculum “Multicultural” Guides

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Abstract: This paper is part of a dissertation in progress exploring why despite increased LGBT visibility and the legalization of gay marriage, in many U.S. classrooms, LGBT students are not provided the same level of representation in the English language arts curriculum that other oppressed groups enjoy.

Despite teachers’ recognition that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students face bullying and harassment, many teachers have been unsuccessful at addressing these problems. In fact, survey studies from the California State Safe Schools Coalition, the National Mental Health Association, and the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) organization show a prevalence of students reporting a lack of educators’ effective use of interventions to stop bullying and other forms of harassment of LGBT students (Meyer, 2010). Part of the reason for this may be that sufficient information is not filtering into most schools. For instance, according to Meyer, (2010), even though there are 3,000 Gay Straight Alliances (GSA) registered in the United States with GLSEN, in a nation-wide U.S. survey, less than a quarter of students said they had a GSA in their school.

Moreover, according to Fredman, Schultz, and Hoffman (2015), despite it being one of the goals of these policies to include LGBT content in school curricula, the reality is when LGBT issues surface, many teachers report feeling unprepared and fearful of incorporating it due to the possible backlash from parents, administrators, and other students. Furthermore, relying solely on anti-discrimination policies in school districts is insufficient to combat the problems LGBT students face—especially in middle school. According to Kosciw and Diaz (2006), based on a national survey of 5, 420 students (58% female and 66% males with a mean age of 16), middle school students are at a greater risk for harassment and bullying than high school students.

Statement of the Problem

Equal representation in the district mandated English Language Arts (ELA) middle school pacing guides may help improve the lives of LGBT students; however, according to a Meyer (2010) study, curriculum representation of LGBT issues is lacking. This may be part of the reason when teachers and students think of the term “straight,” which they may never do unless it is in opposition to “gay,” they make what they consider pleasant associations, such as their parents and grandparents, families with kids, get-togethers, tradition, a host of romantic comedies, the first house, the first kiss, weddings, etc.; but when they hear “gay,” they think SEX, and not much else. At that point, all conversation stops because sex itself may be a taboo subject in their minds.

To combat this kind of attitude, it is important to understand how heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia work in combination within schools to maintain the barrier of silence and invisibility that are the source of discrimination and violence against LGBT students. Heteronormativity is “a pervasive and often invisible aspect of modern societies” (Gunn, 2011, p. 280) which uses social institutions to maintain the belief heterosexuality is normal and homosexuality is deviant. For instance, as it is commonly known, the Catholic Church’s stance

not to marry people of the same gender may also be sending the message, whether they intended it or not, that heterosexuality is good and therefore sanctified, and homosexuality is evil.

Heterosexism is the default assumption that everyone one meets is heterosexual. For instance, when a teacher hypothetically refers to a male student's future wife or a female student's future husband without realizing that, (if the student even chooses to marry), it may be to someone of the same gender, that teacher is behaving in a heterosexist manner.

Homophobia is hatred or intolerance of LGBT people or any deviation from the accepted gender roles (Marshall & Hernandez, 2012), and it is a direct result of heteronormative and heterosexist attitudes. Indeed, much homophobia in middle schools is perpetrated by students who fear being labeled "gay" and thus become victims of harassment themselves. This may be one of the reasons particularly middle school boys do not join clubs or do activities typically associated with girls such as the glee club, the cheerleading squad, or the dance team.

In depth studies to understand how heteronormativity develops among middle school students are helpful to change the perceptions of the next generation. For instance, in a 2.5 year long ethnographic study, Mora (2013) examined how and why USA-born Puerto Rican and Dominican middle-school aged boys constructed their masculine identities in part by distancing and repudiating homosexuality, which "they perceived as a threat to their sexuality, personal safety, and physical dominance" (p. 340). The findings showed that the boys in the middle school where he conducted the study "affirmed their hegemonic masculinity by promoting compulsory heterosexuality within their group" (Mora, 2013, p. 347). In a similar study, Duncan and Owens (2011) compared girls in two demographically different high schools and the association between popularity, social power, and bullying behaviors and concluded that despite the differences, they all had one single factor: attractiveness to boys. What both of these studies have in common is the ways in which heteronormativity is enforced among middle school students of different genders. With this information, teachers could potentially design lessons that address these types of patterns among their students.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to describe the multicultural educational practices of public middle school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers who use district mandated pacing guides that discriminate against LGBT students by excluding them from any form of pedagogical or content representation. According to Banks (1995), multicultural education in general can be defined as an idea, a practice, a movement, a process, a framework, a way of thinking, or criteria for making decisions that serve the needs of diverse student populations. In this sense, multicultural education recognizes the value of cultural diversity in shaping "lifestyles, social experiences, personal identities, and educational opportunities of individuals, groups, and nations" (p. 28).

Research Question

Teachers in the classroom are expected by school districts to bring multiculturalism into the classroom and to represent fairly all kinds of diverse perspectives. Yet, in many of the textbooks, websites, and most notably, district created curriculum guides (standards, focus, exemplar lessons) in public schools around the country, LGBT people are left out. As a result, well-intentioned teachers who care about all their students may often be confused about what, if anything, they are supposed to do when confronted with LGBT issues in the classroom. This problem may be particularly pressing for ELA teachers who are tasked with exploring the more personal and psychological aspects of human nature through literacy. And so, the question must

be asked:

How do ELA public middle school teachers engage in all-inclusive multicultural curricular practices within a context of district mandated LGBT exclusionary pacing guides?

Theoretical Framework

This case study will use a critical theory framework that, according to Creswell (2013), will “critique the knowledge base, and [this way], reveal ideological effects on teachers, schools, and the culture’s view of education” (p. 31). In addition, to create relevant questions, deepen understanding of what a multicultural, LGBT-inclusive curriculum may look like, and analyze the pacing guides, Banks’ (2001) *Four Levels of Integration of Multicultural Content Model: The Contribution Approach, The Additive Approach, The Transformational Approach, and The Social Action Approach*, will be used.

Significance of the Study

This study may help teachers, parents, and administrators understand how anti-bullying policies are insufficient to create a positive environment for LGBT students to prosper; it may increase our understanding of the factors that prevent ELA teachers from addressing LGBT student issues in the classroom (e.g., lack of support from administrators, unpreparedness, and fear of parents; Meyer, 2010); and, in doing so, point to ways of supporting teachers, administrators, and districts to develop fairer, more inclusive pacing guides that address the diverse experiences of all students.

Literature Review

The Limits of Protective Policies: Teachers, Parents, and Administrators

Teachers, parents, and administrators play an important role in improving the lives of LGBT students by helping to create safer, more tolerant, and accepting educational climates for students (Fredman, Schultz & Hoffman, 2015). However, according to data from a study conducted in the UK, there is widespread disconnection between the policies that policy and practice in the field of education (Nixon, 2013). In other words, even though policy regarding LGBT issues seems to be more positive in the society at large, within the teaching profession itself, this does not seem to be the case; in this sense, according to Nixon, teachers are not unlike priests: impervious to legislative and cultural changes.

Further evidence for this disconnection can be found in a study of 18 urban schools that examined school avoidance and substance abuse among sexual-orientation victimized students in grades 8-12. In this study, the results confirmed that “adult support is an important contributor to school adjustment” (Hymel & Waterhouse, 2012, p. 381); yet, adult intervention is often not available in schools. For instance, in a 2007 School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN, 82% of students reported their teachers “rarely or never intervene when hearing homophobic remarks” (Meyers, 2010, p. 103).

In the case of parents, their involvement is often negative or insufficient to make a positive difference for LGBT students. And when it is there, it is insufficient. In one study, after the stress of 15,923 adolescents in grades 7 to 12 were tested for the effects of homophobic victimization on educational outcomes by using *Meyer’s Minority Stress Model*, Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, and Koenig (2011) reported that “parental support alone did not moderate the effects of homophobic victimization for LGBT youth” (p. 597). This means that teachers and administrators are often completely alone in their quest to help LGBT youth.

In many cases, families either blame the LGBT youth for what they consider indecent or incorrect behavior, or they may be completely unaware or in denial that there are problems. For

instance, in a recent study using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescence Health, Pearson and Wilkinson (2013) explored the links between same-sex attraction, family relationships, and adolescence well-being in a sample of over 13,000 7th to 12th grade adolescents. Their research found also that “families were less protective of risk behaviors for same-sex attracted boys; and that same-sex attracted girls reported higher levels of depressive symptoms, binge drinking, and drug use” (p. 376).

Even though administrators are essential in creating a supportive climate for teachers and students to combat the more extreme forms of LGBT prejudice, according to Kearns (2014), a Canadian survey designed to understand school climate found 75% of LGBT students felt unsafe in their school compared to one-fifth of straight students--a reminder, according to the researcher, of the importance of affirming the lives of LGBT people in order to minimize regular instances of harassment.

Kearns also points out LGBT harassment and discrimination is one of the least understood and investigated phenomena. This may be one of the reasons there is such a large discrepancy between the amount and intensity of the harassment teachers and administrators report compared to LGBT youth. For instance, even though most principals have reported students been harassed for gender expression, only 12% believed it occurred “often” compared to 90% of LGBT students who say it happens “very often,” along with 62% of non-LGBT students agreeing with the LGBT reports (Marshall & Hernandez, 2015, p. 455).

The Limits of Multicultural Training: Pre-service and Professional Development

One of the ways teachers receive help to address LGBT issues in the classroom is through professional development. For instance, an Australian study found that professional development and access to teaching and learning resources such as professional development programs could “impact positively on teacher’s willingness and ability to include diverse sexualities in their...education programs” (Ollis, 2010, p. 217). However, in a study by the Illinois Safe School Alliance examining 57 Illinois university teacher preparation programs and their issues with LGBT invisibility, Horn et al., 2010 found that despite going through their preparation programs, teachers were often unaware there were problems concerning LGBT students, and therefore, do not seek support.

These findings may suggest some deficits in the type of pre-service preparation those teachers received in the first place. Still, in a study of teacher education programs, Kitchen and Bellini (2012) found teacher education programs play an important part in helping teachers understand LGBT issues and their obligation to prevent homophobic bullying. For instance, in a Canadian study conducted by Kearns, Mitton-Kukner, & Tompkins (2014), the researchers describe the impact of an integrated training program they called (Positive Space I and Positive Space II) on pre-service teachers’ understanding and abilities to create safe spaces for LGBTQ youth and allies. Their findings suggest that for the pre-service teachers they teach “the Positive Space program is needed if they are to be allies and to interrupt heteronormativity” (p. 1). The researchers noted how given the age of the participating students was in their early twenties, the researchers found it surprising a majority of pre-service teachers had not engaged with LGBT people.

Other studies find limitations with the type of multicultural education pre-service teachers receive. For instance, in a study based on interviews and observations focused on how conceptions of diversity affected the instructional decisions of two practicing secondary school teachers, Angus and de Olivera (2012) found many of these programs are often too general, tend

to exclude the LGBT component, or fail to help pre-service teachers put their learning into practice.

Moreover, in another study, Gorski, Davis, and Reiter (2013) explored the invisibility of sexual orientation, heterosexism, homophobia, and other LGBT concerns in U.S. multicultural teacher education coursework by analyzing 41 syllabi from multicultural education courses, as well as data from a survey of 80 teachers who teach multicultural education courses. In doing so, they uncovered how and to what degree these teachers incorporated LGBT issues into their courses. The findings: in a 45 hour course, on average, only 4 hours of class time is dedicated to exploring sexual orientation issues compared to 22 hours dedicated to race. However, the researchers concede that because of the nature of textual analysis, which requires interpretation on the part of the researchers, knowing how teachers actually conceptualize and operationalize the content in the syllabi would require more action-research and ethnographic approaches.

Method

Proposed Research Design

This will be a collective case study, in which a single issue (teaching English in a multiculturalist manner while using LGBT discriminatory pacing guides) will be explored by examining multiple cases of it (middle school English language arts teachers who use pacing guides). It will follow Banks' (2003) four *Levels of Integration of Multicultural Content* as the theoretical framework that will guide the studies' questions of the participants and the analysis of the pacing guides: *The Contributions Approach* (level 1), *The Additive Approach* (level 2), *The Transformation Approach* (level 3), and *The Social Action Approach* (level 4).

Participants and Sampling

The study will use public ELA middle school teachers who use the district mandated ELA pacing guides to conduct their lessons. They will be chosen from among various middle schools in the Pleasantville District (pseudonym) regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious background, age, and years of experience.

Instrumentation and/or Materials

The participants sampled are a homogeneous group in the sense they meet the criteria of being ELA teachers who use pacing guides for their lessons and who teach at middle schools where the researcher has contacts that may facilitate the participant recruitment process. This strategy for selection allows for maximum focus, convenience, and simplification of the questions necessary to attain detail-rich cases. District mandated pacing guides 6th to 8th grade will be acquired by printing them directly from the Pleasantville Public Schools' Portal site.

Data Collection

Using a protocol which include open-ended, general, focused interview questions, the identified participants will sit down for a one-on-one interview at a time and place of their convenience. The interview will be recorded using two recording devices in the event one malfunctions. After arriving at the site, the participant will listen to the purpose of the study, the amount of time needed to complete the interview (an hour), and plans for using the results; at that point, the participant will sign a consent form.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The method of analysis used in this evaluation is based on Patton's (2002) general guidelines of qualitative data analysis, which consist of coding, finding patterns, labeling themes, and developing categories. The general purpose of using this type of analysis is to simplify, make sense, and identify the information within the verbatim interview transcripts, notes, and

acing guides considered relevant to the questions. To that end, the researcher decides to (a) number the lines of each of the transcripts, (b) make margin notes, (c) identify words and phrases looking for information regarding the teacher practices, (d) correlate notes, (e) re-read, (f) identify key quotes, and (g) identify emerging themes.

Educational Implications

The study may have several educational implications: One, the findings may support the premise that teaching by using LGBT discriminatory pacing guides is ultimately problematic and unjust. For instance, conscientious students or teachers may take notice of the obvious contradiction in only learning about topics pertaining to discrimination regarding African Americans, Native Americans, and women—but not those of LGBT people. This means public schools may be vulnerable to legal challenges based on constitutional grounds, which they will be unable to defend.

Two, this study's findings may serve as a platform for advocacy in various district public school systems, which may lead to the fair and full inclusion of LGBT issues into the Pleasantville District ELA pacing guides. This means more comprehensive professional development and school programs that address how LGBT student issues fit into the multicultural content of schools, as well as help schools reduce the number of instances of bullying and harassment.

Three, these findings may help advance the research of multicultural researchers working to advance the cause of other oppressed groups. For instance, it may help answer the question as to why many teachers are reluctant to address issues of racism openly and honestly in the classroom despite having the consent of the school system.

Fourth, these findings may bring about changes in how teachers address matters involving human sexuality in the classroom. A greater understanding about sexuality may help all students--regardless of their sexual orientation--to more healthily and completely embrace who they are, such that a male middle school student can be in the dance team without fear of being called names, and a female student does not have to define herself based solely on her looks in order to be valued.

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