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Pride and Prejudice: Teacher Autonomy and Parent
Rights in the Incorporation of LGBTQ+ Studies in
K–12 Education
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Abstract

Censorship of books and other reading materials in K–12 schools is not a new phenomenon in the United States. A recent wave of interest around literary restrictions has extended to LGBTQ+ themed books, with parents and even politicians leading the charge. Concerns that parents are not respected as the moral authority for their children on sexual orientation and gender identity seem to drive decisions made by some school districts and even state legislatures. Teachers, librarians, and other school personnel argue that they are not trusted to offer classroom and cocurricular instruction about LGBTQ+ culture that is academic and age-appropriate. Furthermore, educators express concerns that curtailing the study of LGBTQ+ culture in schools can exacerbate the already harmful discriminatory attitudes toward students who identify as LGBTQ+. This article will explore arguments for and against the rights of K–12 teachers and librarians to use LGBTQ+ themed literature in their respective spheres and the implications for university-level teacher-education programs.

Recent resistance to the adaptation of critical race theory (CRT) in K–12 settings for the purpose of teaching students about the history of power and privilege dynamics in the United States has been accompanied by a parallel resistance to LGBTQ+ studies and resources in K–12 classrooms, libraries, and extracurricular spaces. Neither the fight to promulgate accurate narrations of American history as it concerns people of color nor

the struggle to render visible LGBTQ+ culture and communities in American life is a new movement. In the current iteration of these controversies, parents have gone before school boards to contest library holdings and social studies and reading or language arts curricula, arguing that CRT is divisive and generates guilt in white children about whiteness while insisting that LGBTQ+ studies are largely sexually explicit and corrupt children into questioning their sexual identity unnecessarily (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan 2019). In both cases, parents argue that K–12 students should be shielded from delving into race and sexual identity in the United States in order to stem an already growing division in society. At the same time, teachers-in-training have coursework and other experiential activities designed to prepare them to work in multicultural settings and to teach from multicultural perspectives in K–12, empowering them to incorporate themes of race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious and spiritual identity, and ability status in an evidence-based manner using best practices highlighted by their profession. Now that controversy surrounding LGBTQ+ themed curricula has led to legal restrictions in at least one state, especially for elementary school spaces, university teacher-education programs must respond to this new reality.

Attitudes Toward LGBTQ+ Studies

Explicit censorship in the United States of publications deemed to promote queer culture dates back to the mid-twentieth century. In 1954, *ONE Magazine*, the first widely distributed magazine in the United States designed to appeal to LGBTQ+ subscribers, was banned from being sent through the US mail. Four years later, in *One, Inc. v. Olesen*, the US Supreme Court overturned this prohibition (Shepard 2020). The 1969 Stonewall Uprising in New York City signaled a movement in the LGBTQ+ community to legitimize LGBTQ+ culture and bring an end to the societal pressure for LGBTQ+ communities to stay underground. This movement eventually influenced workplace rights, antidiscrimination in health care, marriage equality, and sensitivity toward LGBTQ+ culture in higher education. The ongoing push for legitimization of LGBTQ+ academic studies has persisted into the second half of the twentieth

century and early twenty-first with the publication of LGBTQ+ studies-related journals, such as the *Journal of Homosexuality* (first published in 1976), *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (first published in 1993), and the *Journal of LGBTQ Youth* (first published in 2003). Various universities across the United States, such as the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and the University of Maryland, now offer academic programming, majors, and minors, in LGBTQ+ or queer studies, and LGBTQ+ affinity groups are active on a large number of campuses (Department of Gender Studies n.d.). However, there is a very sharp divide between the LGBTQ+ affirming activity seen in higher education and the tremendous controversy around incorporating LGBTQ+ culture into K–12 settings.

Some states have taken progressive actions toward incorporating LGBTQ+ themed content into K–12 education. Most notably, California enacted its FAIR Education Act, S.B. 48, in 2012, explicitly mandating respectful inclusion of the contributions of people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ people in social studies curricula (Moorhead 2018). The law stipulated that students would be instructed in age-appropriate facts about historical events involving LGBTQ+ individuals but not about the intimate details of the lives of these historical figures. Lessons about sex and morality were excluded, with the understanding that parents would decide the timing and content of such discussions. Subsequently, California implemented the use of LGBTQ+ inclusive textbooks in K–12 public schools at the start of the 2018–19 academic year, and a high school in San Francisco launched an LGBTQ studies course in 2015. Other states, such as Massachusetts, Illinois, New Jersey, and Colorado, have had similar movements to incorporate LGBTQ+ themed studies into K–12 public education (Topping 2020).

Parents and politicians in two particular states have launched recent, highly politicized efforts to block exposure to LGBTQ+ culture through K–12 library book holdings and classroom reading curricula. Texas and Virginia have been the sites of heated arguments over the benefits and the dangers of students reading books with significant LGBTQ+ themes. Demands have been made of school boards in both states to forbid school libraries from circulating LGBTQ+ themed books. In 2021, a Texas state

legislator, Matt Krause of Fort Worth, compiled a list of 850 books that he deemed in need of investigation because of sexuality- or racism-themed content that he found concerning for K–12 consumption (Chappell 2021). Framing the reading of LGBTQ+ themed books in K–12 as an issue of morality, Governor Greg Abbott (2021) insisted that the state’s education agency “investigate any criminal activity in our public schools involving the availability of pornography,” which has librarians worried that their book choices could be criminalized. In Virginia, Governor Glenn Youngkin framed book bans as an issue of parental prerogative and control (Harris and Alter 2022). The Henrico County Public Schools are one of the Virginia districts that has established a review committee to investigate parent concerns about the content of books. A parent filed a complaint with the school district about the appropriateness of a book titled *I Am a Gay Wizard*, found only in a district high school library, citing concerns that a scene of oral sex between two boy characters could result in “premature sexualization” and subsequent “pornography addiction” (O’Brien 2022). Other states, such as South Carolina (Prieb 2021) and Mississippi (Davis 2022), have been the sites of similar conflicts.

In other states, legislatures have taken even more aggressive action to curtail the inclusion of LGBTQ+ culture in school curricula. Bills in states such as Tennessee, Missouri, Louisiana, and Florida have called for restrictions on the mention of any nonheterosexual orientation in classroom or extracurricular activities (Barbeauld 2014). The first such “Don’t Say Gay” bill was introduced during Tennessee’s 2005 legislative session. To date, such legislation has only been passed and signed into law in Florida. The Florida law restricts any Florida school district from encouraging “classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels [particularly K–3] or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students” (Fla. H.R. CS/HB 1557 2022). Critics of “Don’t Say Gay” bills argue that they violate the First Amendment rights of both educators and students and promote stigmatization of LGBTQ+ identity, which negatively affects the mental health of students who identify as LGBTQ+.

The Impact of LGBTQ+ Studies on Student Development

One of the arguments made against the rampant banning of LGBTQ+ themed books is that these books are instruments of self-discovery and identity development for some students who do not find this support elsewhere (Moorhead 2018). In books with primary characters who identify as LGBTQ+, students are able to encounter images of themselves and narratives that mirror their own or their families'. They find models for families with same-sex parents, for coping with homophobia and transphobia, for coming out, and models for forming support systems beyond their biological family. Integration of LGBTQ+ themed literature into school curricula also provides a space for challenging the homophobic and transphobic messaging that is still common in the United States. LGBTQ+ affirming course content can be a vital resource for healthy cultural identity development.

Several models exist to describe cultural identity development, with particular models articulated to outline various aspects of LGBTQ+ identity development. Eli Coleman (1982) posits a five-stage model for gay and lesbian adolescent identity development. It consists of the pre-coming out stage, the coming out stage, the exploration stage, the first relations stage, and the integration stage. In the pre-coming out stage, individuals may question their sexual identity due to nonnormative sexual thoughts and attractions and try to resolve the internal conflict by seeking out information to increase their self-understanding. Books that normalize sexual identity confusion can help young people realize that they are not alone in their struggle for identity clarity and confirmation. Parents who oppose the inclusion of LGBTQ+ themed books in school libraries and school curriculum argue that LGBTQ+ themed books are most dangerous when youth are in this pre-coming out stage and may not be certain about sexual orientation identity (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan 2019). They argue that exposing students to information about LGBTQ+ identity without guidance may lead to premature acceptance of gay or lesbian identity. Books may also be a source of support during the other stages of identity development, during which time individuals begin to disclose their identity to others and to build their first relationships, friendships, and possibly romantic relationships, as people

who identify as gay or lesbian. Because these types of relationships are not commonly seen in mainstream culture, individuals may seek answers to questions about how to form and maintain such relationships from literature. The lack of candid conversations in families, churches, schools, and other civic settings about nonheterosexual identity development leaves a vacuum of the information, role modeling, and support that is critical for healthy self-esteem. Less research has been conducted to deepen understanding of transgender identity development than has been done for gay and lesbian identity development (Katz-Wise et al. 2017). Transgender identity development models often over-rely on models more relevant to sexual orientation identity development. A characteristic shared by all these differing models is that individuals typically experience anxiety about their identity not matching the heteronormative, cisgender mainstream and about how their interpersonal relationships may be affected.

Exposure to LGBTQ+ themed literature by students who do not identify as LGBTQ+ serves to challenge stereotypes and myths that may be held about nonheterosexual identities. Students who have been presented with negative, one-sided messages about LGBTQ+ people from home, places of worship, or various media outlets can explore other aspects of the needs, interests, and concerns of people who identify as LGBTQ+, providing these readers a space to reflect on biases and assumptions they have formed. Prejudices can typically be overcome when the person holding them has meaningful contact with the group that is the target of prejudice (Crisp and Turner 2009). This could happen through in-person interactions but may also be facilitated through literary contacts with persons from a group about whom prejudiced views are held.

The Role of Teachers in LGBTQ+ Studies Curriculum Construction

There is a very practical benefit to trusting teachers to craft lessons that integrate LGBTQ+ culture into their classrooms. Classrooms can be relatively safe spaces to challenge cultural biases and assumptions if discussions are managed appropriately (Schieble 2012). The availability of literature that depicts diverse cultures is important in helping young

people develop cultural sensitivity and respect for those from different backgrounds. In the case of LGBTQ+ culture, gaining information about LGBTQ+ history and relationship dynamics is important in reducing misinformation that can fuel bullying, microaggressions, and other forms of discrimination in schools. Numerous studies document increased depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, nonsuicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and suicidal activity linked to discriminatory treatment experienced by LGBTQ+ students in schools (CDC 2017). To make effective this practical benefit of supporting teachers' integration of LGBTQ+ culture into their classrooms, teachers must be allowed instructional autonomy to craft lessons around cultural competence. Instead, significant restrictions have been placed on educators in some areas.

Simply leaving to teachers decisions about integrating LGBTQ+ themes could have a harmful results. Teachers who have unconscious bias toward LGBTQ+ people could unknowingly manifest these biases in the classroom. Oversight and accountability must exist in terms of cultural infusion in K–12 curricula. Advisory groups comprised of parents, teachers, school counselors, administrators, and community representatives, including people from culturally diverse backgrounds (race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, etc.), are needed to support educators as they design lessons that address cultural communities with a history of marginalization, and school administrators have the ultimate responsibility to monitor the pedagogy of their teachers for content and teaching style.

Recent movements to limit LGBTQ+ themed literature is a matter of academic freedom for teachers, but it is also a matter of recognition of the LGBTQ+ community as a valuable cultural component of society rather than as an immoral faction of the population that should be avoided and silenced, especially by children and adolescents. Teachers who commit to designing lessons that include LGBTQ+ cultural content generally recognize the contributions of LGBTQ+ culture and the consequences for their students of living in a world that does not recognize these contributions. However, teacher-education programs should include intentional activities to equip future teachers to effectively integrate

LGBTQ+ themed content into their classes. Joseph Jones (2015) presents a model for faculty in teacher-education programs to help preservice teachers learn to address homophobia in K–12 schools. Laurie Hansen (2015) proposes strategies for fostering safe discussions and critical thinking about LGBTQ+ topics. With the availability of evidence-based strategies for teaching LGBTQ+ themed content in K–12 schools, school and district administrators can create guidelines and accountability measures that are consistent, based in research, and known to parents, while empowering teachers to present course content that is culturally inclusive.

In 1981 the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), now the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, began to require that colleges and universities applying for accreditation for their teacher-education programs show evidence of multicultural education integration into their programs without exceptions. Donna Gollnick (1992) holds that individual states cannot restrict education programs in such a way that impedes programs from complying with the NCATE requirement to prioritize multiculturalism, and NCATE identifies elementary education as a specialty area required to show incorporation of multicultural competencies. Paul Gorski, Shannon Davis, and Abigail Reiter (2013) find that the LGBTQ+ aspects of multiculturalism are underaddressed in many teacher-education programs, leaving many teachers uncomfortable addressing issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and heterosexism in their classrooms.

Competency in fostering culturally inclusive classrooms is a critical focus for preservice K–12 teachers. Teacher education programs have developed special courses about multiculturalism and also work to infuse multicultural perspectives in all courses, ensuring that teachers are prepared to consider the educational needs of children from all backgrounds, especially marginalized ones, as they develop their curricula. At its most inclusive, this multicultural focus is comprehensive and not limited to racial or ethnic diversity but also encompasses sexual orientation and gender identity difference, ability difference, religious or spiritual identity difference, and so on. The challenge for teacher-education programs is to prepare preservice teachers to constructively

confront resistance they may face in integrating LGBTQ+ themes into their classrooms. Jill Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlin Law Ryan (2019) suggest that it is prudent to expect that some parents will object to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ themes in elementary school classrooms but that teachers should avoid overgeneralizing that all parents will resist. Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan suggest helping preservice teachers gain comfort with some simple strategies for navigating the inclusion of LGBTQ+ themes in elementary school curricula, such as clearly situating LGBTQ+ themes within the larger realm of inclusion and diversity. The authors suggest incorporating LGBTQ+ themed literature as part of a series of books about understanding different types of families or traditions, alongside topics such as multiracial families or families with differently abled people. Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan also recommend creating a space to educate parents about the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the elementary classroom and to apprise parents of the scope and limits of the inclusion so that parents understand the age-appropriateness of the lessons. Lastly, rather than simply abandoning the lesson plan, teachers who encounter resistance should be prepared to offer individual accommodations for students whose parents adamantly object to their children participating in LGBTQ+ themed lessons. For preservice teachers, these can be moments of great apprehension and anxiety. Teacher education program faculty must commit themselves to equipping preservice teachers to confront the variety of reactions they may face to incorporating LGBTQ+ themes into elementary classrooms. Faculty should also empower preservice and novice teachers by helping them understand that teachers' freedom to design and execute curricula does not preclude the need to engage with parents to secure buy-in.

Current political efforts to prohibit any incorporation of LGBTQ+ themes in elementary school pedagogy directly contradict the multicultural competencies required by the National Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation and prioritized in most teacher-education academic programs. Do program leaders simply yield to legal pressures and stop teaching preservice teachers to skillfully acknowledge alternatives to heteronormativity in elementary school classrooms, or do they equip preservice teachers to be advocates for inclusion even in

defiance of legal restrictions? Teacher-education programs do not teach preservice teachers to promote any particular sexual orientation or gender identity but instead prepare them to appropriately recognize that differences in identity and family structure do exist, without endorsing one as preferred and others as inferior. The current legislation seeks to silence discussions in teacher-education classrooms about how to recognize differences around sexual orientation and gender identity in an age-appropriate and inclusive manner, putting decisions about diversity education in the hands of politicians rather than in the hands of professionals trained in child development and learning. The legal restrictions also place limits on educational research, making it difficult for Institutional Review Boards to approve research about the experiences of elementary school teachers with LGBTQ+ themed lessons in jurisdictions with legal prohibitions. This type of research is critical to refuting claims that any mention of experience beyond cisgender heteronormativity is dangerous to children's development.

Conclusion

Rather than restricting K-12 teachers from introducing LGBTQ+ themed information into their classes, an alternative approach is to develop curricula that are transparent and provide basic learning objectives related to LGBTQ+ culture. These can help professionals, including teachers, study constructs like cultural competency (Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis 1992), cultural humility (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1998), and cultural efficacy (Nunez 2000) to use as frameworks for their own self-reflection and professional practice. Teachers trained in cultural competency, cultural humility, and cultural efficacy are prepared to reflect on their own biases and assumptions, identify power and privilege dynamics, and craft lessons that are culturally affirming. Such educators teach in a way that welcomes multiple perspectives. Also having some background in developmental psychology, educators have insights about psychosexual development and about what is age-appropriate for students. Teacher-education programs need the latitude to freely craft their curricula of multicultural infusion based on what is known about

children's ability to appropriately grasp differing cultural identities from the social sciences rather than based on political pressures.

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