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The Lack of LGBT Representation in American Schools

In order to feel equal, everyone needs to see themselves represented in the classroom, be it through reading a book, watching a video, or playing a song written by someone similar to how they identify. This also provides a window (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018) into someone else's life for students who do not fit the depiction. Without this sort of exposure students may not experience varying lifestyles, which may lead to harassment towards others. This is especially true when the victim identifies as LGBT (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011; Goodboy & Martin, 2018). Unfortunately, many American schools lack queer-inclusive instruction, leaving out LGBT-students and others who live in LGBT-headed households (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018) and potentially causing gender-based oppression (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Saraswati, Shaw, & Rellihan, 2018). If we as teachers are more open to discussing sexuality and gender identity we can prevent bullying and protect our students' wellbeing (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2014).

The harassment that queer students face is often simplified to bullying. Take note that, "Bullying relies on a power imbalance between communicators that often makes it difficult for youth who are bullied to defend themselves physically, psychologically, emotionally, and/or relationally," (Goodboy & Martin, 2018, p. 502). Power currently lies in the hands of heterosexual cisgender white males, just as it has for the majority of history. Because of this, our society tends to oppress those who fall outside of the norm (Saraswati, et. al., 2018). When promoting activism for LGBT individuals, we must also take into consideration all other

identities of their intersectionality, such as race and social class. People of color who also identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender face more gender-based violence than their white-counterparts, as do people who fall into the lower-class social standing (Saraswati, et. al., 2018). To ignore this factor of their identity is to erase a major milestone in queer history: the Stonewall Riots. On June 28, 1969, a black transgender woman named Marsha P. Johnson threw the first brick to fight back against a routine police raid at a nightclub, which is now considered the turning point for LGBT rights (Saraswati, et. al. 2018). We need to carry these rights over from the streets into the classroom.

Students who are out as LGBT may be faced with violence, oppression, and verbal harassment due to school systems typically supporting a heteronormative society, which can also lead to lower test scores, lack of attendance, and hostility towards school in general. However, when students feel safe in their school system they have quite the opposite reaction: higher test scores, and attendance rates, as well as enthusiasm for learning (Kosciw, et. al., 2013). Unfortunately, this is not usually what occurs in American schools. Studies show that the more "out" a student is at school, the more gender-based violence they will experience (Kosciw, et. al., 2014; Varjas, Kiperman, & Meyers, 2016; Saraswati, et. al., 2018). In-school victimization can have lasting effects outside of school, too. "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender-related school victimization is strongly linked to young adult mental health," (Russell, et. al., 2011, p. 223). It is argued, though, that teachers can prevent such oppression (Goodboy & Martin, 2018).

It is important to note that students who publicly identify as queer in rural schools tend to experience more harassment than those in suburban and urban schools (Kosciw, et. al. 2014). There tends to be more homophobic dialogue within these communities. However, studies show

that this doesn't stop LGBT youth from coming out to their parents and peers, but it can lead to lower self-esteem and depression (Varjas, et. al., 2016; Kosciw, et. al. 2014). Once students reach a state of depression, regardless of if they identify LGBT or not, their attendance rates tend to drop significantly, which in turn causes a negative impact on the student's grade point average and test scores (Kosciw, et. al., 2013). Due to these factors, analyses find that queer youth that attend rural schools experience a stronger correlation between victimization and poor wellbeing than those from suburban and urban communities (Kosciw, et. al., 2014).

I feel as though we as teachers -- as well as the rest of the United States' society -- need to be held responsible for preventing harassment of the LGBT community by thoroughly representing queer culture in our classrooms. With over two million students identifying outside of the norm (Bailey, 2005) we can act as an outlet for students to confide in. By incorporating works by and including LGBT individuals, we can provide mirrors for students who also identify as such, and windows for those who don't have a personal connection with this identity (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). If society -- with school as an element of such -- only throws heterosexual ideals at its youth, how can we expect them to understand their own feelings, let alone expecting others to acknowledge and accept them, too?

As someone pursuing a career in music education, I can be an advocate for the LGBT community by using our literature to make a statement. By programming instrumental pieces written by homosexual composers, I can show like-students that they too can be successful. By teaching choral songs created by transgender individuals, I can be inclusive of trans-headed households. By looking at works that are inherently straight I can show students how differently certain aspects of the piece may be viewed through a queer lens. Instead of only teaching my

students about dead old white men who were perceived to be straight -- although sexual constructs and definitions were infinitely different in the early thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and therefore cannot be compared to those we have today (Saraswati, et. al., 2018) -- I can provide windows and mirrors (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018) to make everyone feel welcomed in our classroom.

Adolescence is a difficult time for everyone, especially in the years of middle school, but "In addition to normal stresses of early adolescence, gay and lesbian adolescents have to figure out who they are and where they fit in, most without the benefit of adequate support," (Bailey, 2005, p. 32). If teachers are enthusiastically offering their support by showing their acceptance -- either directly or indirectly -- in class, they can help ease this transition into young adulthood (Goodboy & Martin, 2018; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

Teachers cannot do this on their own, however. "Schools are a prime location where the impetus for change is possible… Public Schools have the unique advantage of reaching nearly all children throughout the country," (Varjas, et. al., 2016). Faculty and staff need proper training and resources when it comes to understanding LGBT youth; they need to speak up when they hear homophobic language and explain to students how being different is not inherently bad (Bailey, 2005). We need to begin incorporating LGBT history into our curriculum, as well as inclusive content in other subject areas (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). Libraries need to expand their literature to represent diverse characters, including gender identity, sexuality, race, and social class. School policies need to be inclusive of all students -- yes, this truly means *all* students. Students need to have access to a counselor that they feel comfortable speaking with (Bailey, 2005). This can help to reduce gender-based violence, and in turn, "Will likely result in

significant long-term health gains and will reduce health disparities for LGBT people. Reducing dramatic disparities for LGBT youth should be educational and health priorities," (Russell, et. al., 2011, p. 223). If these standards are provided for our students, it might help ease them into accepting who they and their classmates truly are.

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