

## Alleviating Teachers' Fears, Concerns, and Obstacles When Implementing LGBT Themes in Elementary Classrooms: Personal Anecdotes

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### Abstract

Multicultural programs in schools have done well implementing various themes and cultures that represent a pluralistic society. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about LGBT themes in schools. Some teachers fear the ramifications of having a more inclusive curriculum with LGBT themes, especially in the elementary classroom. The present article provides information, strategies, and techniques that may help mitigate teachers' fears when they decide to implement LGBT themes and literature in the elementary classroom.

**Keywords:** Sexual orientation, multicultural education, gay-themed literature, homosexuality, gay and lesbian, LGBT, gender identity

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## Introduction

I am an advocate for a more inclusive multicultural education; a multicultural education that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) themes (i.e., two-mommy/two-daddy families and transgender and LGBT heroes, etc.) in lessons and children's literature starting as early as elementary school. I will say that there are many teachers who are nervous to even hear the word "gay," let alone add it to school curricula. However, I believe that change is needed, and because I am in education, I can slowly and positively change society one step at a time, and our nation's teachers can, too.

What is meant by LGBT themes? Over the years I have implemented books that deal with gay familial awareness, such as families composed of two mommies and two daddies. I have also read books that deal with bullying, gender nonconformity, transgender children, and prominent LGBT leaders, such as Harvey Milk. Some examples of such LGBT-themed literature that were implemented in my second- and third-grade classrooms are listed below.

On September 12, 2012, I was with friends at a local restaurant and the topic of implementing LGBT themes/literature in elementary education came up. One of my friends strongly retorted that she would object to any implementation and said that such themes are unnecessary. Because I am a gay Chicano, this topic, however, is my passion, and a small skirmish ensued.

A few days passed. I was still bothered by what had occurred and especially by her insensitive comments. I went ahead and collected some LGBT articles and research with a short note explaining the articles' purpose and my concern about her hurtful

comments. I sent the package via school mail. I had hoped that she would go through some form of cognitive dissonance and reflection after the arrival of the articles. Sogunro (2001) suggests that one of the initial stages in dealing with personal prejudices and biases is reflection and eventual admission to those biases and prejudices. I presumptuously assumed that perhaps through self-reflection this colleague's attitudes would change after some reading of my materials. Although having prejudices is not acceptable, the reality is that people have prejudices either because of underexposure or overexposure to a group (Sogunro, 2001). However, through reflection, learning, and action, one can change the prejudicial feelings.

A few weeks later, I viewed my school mailbox and noticed that she had sent me something in return. I opened the package, and there were my articles with a short note. She wrote the following:

*Gabriel,  
Please forward this information to someone interested in reading about this topic. Unfortunately, I do not have the time for this now as my life is preoccupied with much more precious things. I may consider educating myself in 2015 when I am mandated to do so. In the meantime, I would appreciate if you would not send me such materials, as I am not interested. Best of luck in your efforts, as I will continue with mine.  
Respectfully, P*

Why do I add the note? I want readers to sense her apathy or perhaps fear. (I may be presumptuously assuming fear; however, to bring about positive social change, one must think of all possibilities and outcomes). I understand P's note was about apathy and

ignorance about the topic. Perhaps, she has too many things on her plate, as many teachers do. Nonetheless, now my purpose as an educational scholar is to help teachers overcome this fear and apathy. I want to help alleviate teachers' fears and concerns about implementing LGBT themes so that notes like this are not necessary. After reading the aforementioned note, I immediately decided to write the present article. Let me begin with my personal story.

### **Personal Experience with Policy**

I have been implementing LGBT themes in the elementary classroom since 2001 because of one school district memorandum. One day, I walked into my school's main office and noticed a superintendent's message in my mailbox. The memo was a simple reminder to school leaders and teachers that June was designated as Gay and Lesbian Awareness Month, and teachers should use the month to teach a more inclusive curriculum that included gay and lesbian themes. I felt that message was intended for me, so I started the quest of looking for grade-level appropriate materials. I also knew that if I had the support of my administrators and school district, I could proceed in implementing the curriculum. Other straight ally teachers joined my quest in doing the same for their students. As the years went by, more and more teachers joined the call to include LGBT-themed literature in their classrooms.

The Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) policy is simple. The LAUSD and the Los Angeles School Board of Education have adopted June as Gay and Lesbian Pride Month and direct the superintendent and all district staff to support lessons and activities that engage students in meaningful learning, research,

and writing about our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and families (Wilson, 2011; J. Chiasson, personal communication, November 6, 2008).

A problem still exists around the country, however. Many teachers, administrators, and policy makers do not implement LGBT themes in the curriculum, most often because of fear of termination, criticism from parents, lack of professional training, or their own negative attitudes (Flores, 2009; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). However, what teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers should understand to help implement LGBT themes is that learning about LGBT people and families is similar to learning about heterosexual people and families headed by heterosexual couples (Roffman, 2001).

Teachers may also find comfort in knowing about the National Association for Multicultural Education's (NAME) policy. NAME has welcomed LGBT themes and cultures as part of its multicultural education agenda since 1992. If teachers were made aware that gay cultures are part of the multicultural education agenda and that preventing homophobia, homonegativism, and heterosexism is a commitment of the NAME (Flores, 2014; Holland, 2005), implementing LGBT themes in schools may be more feasible. While there have been gains in the inclusion of other multicultural and ethnic literature, the same is not true for LGBT cultures and literature.

### **Rationale for LGBT Literature and Themes Implementation**

Teachers may wonder what the rationales for implementing LGBT themes in classrooms are. Seventeen percent of all hate crimes are committed against gay and lesbian people. Gay students demonstrate

higher suicide rates; gay or lesbian people attempt 33% of all national suicides (Daniel, 2007; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). The aforementioned statistics made me want to take immediate action. In addition, teachers' focus on how to serve gay students in increasingly diverse classrooms is critical because of low academic performance, dropping out, and truancy; these issues among gay students are quite prevalent. LGBT students are compromising their student development and doing poorly academically because of low self-esteem, low self-acceptance, few positive role models on television or in the community, and no representation in the curriculum, contributing to a situation in which students feel invisible (Birden, 2002), which eventually leads to feelings of shame (Sanders & Mathis, 2013). The invisibility of LGBT cultures, stories, and experiences highlights the importance of implementing a more inclusive multicultural education curriculum.

Administrators, too, may wonder why a more inclusive curriculum and a welcoming school climate is needed. All children need to learn tolerance/acceptance, and all children, including gay youth, need a supportive and safe environment that is conducive to learning (Barber & Krane, 2007; Cosier & Sanders, 2007). Administrators must maintain a harassment-free environment for gay youth because current laws and courts have addressed the issue of harassment of sexual minority students. Schools, administrators, and teachers are often liable and guilty of inaction and complacency (Flores, 2014; National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2004).

### **Litigation**

Certain court cases have set the precedent for LGBT students with respect to bullying

and abuse. In *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*, 526 U.S. 629 (1999), the Supreme Court held that a Title IX funding recipient may be held liable for "student-on-student harassment where (1) the harassment was severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive; (2) the school district had actual knowledge of the harassment; and (3) it acted with deliberate indifference to the harassment" (Scariano, Clark, Fletman, Reeder, & Llorente, 2012, p. 3).

In *Ray v. Antioch Unified School District*, 107 F. Supp. 2d 1165 (2000), the federal district court for the Northern District of California became one of the first to recognize antigay bullying as actionable under Title IX. In *Martin v. Swartz Creek Community Schools*, 419 F. Supp. 2d 967 (2006), an openly gay student alleged that the sex-based harassment occurring persistently during his freshman and sophomore years was largely ignored by teachers and school administrators. This, he said, brought him to the "brink of suicide. . . . In each of these cases, the court found that the plaintiffs had presented plausible claims under Title IX, and denied defendants' motions for summary judgment" (Scariano et al., 2012, p. 6).

Various plaintiffs have won sizable awards, which has caused many school districts to take notice. It is obvious today that schools must provide protection from peer-on-peer sexual harassment of LGBT students. However, it requires more than rewriting policy and rules. Rules must be enforced fairly and consistently or school districts face litigation and liability. Perhaps this will cause districts to address bullying and teach more respect and acceptance of all students, including LGBT youth (Scariano et al., 2012).

It is important to mention that some states, such as Tennessee, have passed legislation allowing bullying of LGBT students in the name of religious freedom. The Tennessee law (SB 1793/HB 1547 “Religious Viewpoints Antidiscrimination Act”) allows students to use religion in any way they choose and protects the use of religion. In addition, this legislation allows attacks on LGBT people and same-sex couples and offers antigay students a state-sponsored license to ostracize, bully, and attack. The legislation likely violates the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution, but we will have to see how future litigation plays out in the courts (Garcia, 2014).

### **Gaining LGBT Cultural Competency**

Some teachers may have no LGBT family, friends, or acquaintances. How might such teachers acquire LGBT cultural competency in order to more feasibly begin the process of implementation? Acquiring cultural competency helps create positive attitudes and awareness. Research has suggested that increased contact with LGBT people and positive exposure, reinforcement, and representation of LGBT people can help alleviate negative attitudes and concerns (Bassett, vanNikkelen-Kuyper, Johnson, Miller, Carter, & Grimm, 2005). Therefore, to build their LGBT cultural competency teachers can collaborate with and join various LGBT organizations, such as the following (see references page for web link location):

- The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN)
- Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)
- Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center (gay centers often provide courses, libraries, and networking opportunities)

- The Human Rights Campaign

I have seen my school staff acquire gay cultural proficiency firsthand. I have implemented professional development for my colleagues. Most teachers were welcoming and interested, and many were quite curious. My reason for initiation of professional development was to ensure that teachers were comfortable with implementing LGBT themes. Research has suggested that attending professional development and training helps improve negative attitudes, sensitize staff, and dispel misconceptions about the LGBT community (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001). Having more professional development may help ensure implementing LGBT themes in a school community as feasible; it did for my colleagues. See the Welcoming Schools' website for information on professional development (see references page for web link locations).

### **Resistant Colleagues**

Not all colleagues were welcoming and friendly to the LGBT themes in schools topic. The following question often surfaced: What about the issue of religion and personal beliefs? I had colleagues approach me and state that their personal or religious beliefs prohibited or hindered the implementation of LGBT themes in the classroom. The implication is that a teacher would have to find a compromise between his or her personal and religious beliefs and his or her social responsibility and ethical and professional role (Flores, 2014; Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2007). Within a democratic society, a teacher's job is to be an open-minded professional who creates positive social change toward a just society (Chou, 2007). Teachers should want to stop bullying, hatred, suicide, and intolerance and foster students who will one day be

successful in their future lives. Teachers should also want to create a student population who will be productive within the culturally diverse population of the future. Simply put, to help all students succeed and thrive is an ethical imperative.

One day, a colleague came to me and asked, "But you must be promoting gay behavior and recruiting boys, aren't you?" A few colleagues stated that reading LGBT-themed literature somehow will have students "turn" gay or lesbian. Some teachers believe implementing LGBT themes influences and promotes homosexuality (Flores, 2014) and having LGBT-themed discussions, gay or lesbian parents, or gay or lesbian teachers might influence or recruit students to become gay, but that is incorrect (Paccione-Dyszlewski, 2008). LGBT discussions, instead, ensure that children are less likely to insult someone and less likely to ostracize people for being LGBT and, in turn, create tolerance and acceptance of all people (Women's Educational Media, 2006). This is not about recruitment, but about fair and just treatment of all people, including LGBT people. Children do not turn gay or perform homosexual behaviors when such curriculums are implemented (Roffman, 2001); rather, tolerant and accepting human beings who will be better prepared to live and thrive in a diverse population are created.

Another point to mention is that educating children about sexual orientation can never start too early (Lai, 2006), because a child's stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes are formed early (Willis, 2004). Social psychological theory maintains that stereotypes promote prejudice, and to reduce prejudice, one must work toward changing stereotypes early (Sherman, Stroessner, Conrey, & Azam, 2005). Finally, in the early years children are learning about

cultural identities and friendships and in turn are developing a sense of fairness and justice. For this reason, children are cognitively and psychologically able to comprehend injustice and cultural and familial diversity early on (Flores, 2009; Flores, 2014; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003).

A colleague asked, "What is the purpose for implementing LGBT-themed literature and lessons in education ... what even for?" I replied, "Preventing the prevalent suicides, bullying, and hate crimes associated with intolerance and the invisibility in curriculum is my purpose." I continued stating that my implementation of gay-themed children's literature focuses on discussions about issues associated with being gay and gay communities and cultures, including themes of love, families, respect, civil rights, and relationships (Wolfe, 2006). The purpose for introducing gay-themed children's literature and lessons is two-fold: to teach diversity, tolerance, and acceptance of LGBT people, and to provide a safer learning environment for all students, including future gay students (Moita-Lopez, 2006). The implementation of LGBT/gay-themed children's literature does not involve discussions of sex (Flores, 2014; Roffman, 2001), which is often the biggest concern of educators and parents.

The following points are valid reasons for the implementation of LGBT-themed children's literature as suggested by Naidoo (2012):

- (a) Children will develop strong social identities and exhibit pride in themselves and their cultures, abilities, and families.
- (b) Children will expand their cultural awareness and learn to express respectfully and accurately

when describing similarities and differences among themselves and other children/cultures.

(c) Children will think critically to identify stereotypes and misconceptions and learn about unfairness demonstrated toward other marginalized groups and cultures. Children will learn that unfairness and prejudice hurts others.

(d) Children will develop and learn the necessary skills to counteract prejudice and unfair treatment of marginalized individuals with appropriate words and actions.

### **Working Cooperatively with Parents**

A teacher said that she refused to implement LGBT themes because she would not risk being tormented by parents. That educational leaders need to provide adequate professional training and support is apparent. Teachers also have to learn about district policies and state legislation about the implementation of LGBT themes. If all policies and legislation are relayed to staff and administrative support exists, implementation is definitely possible.

A few of my colleagues who were ready to implement LGBT themes asked if I had ever sent anything home to "concerned parents." When I read LGBT-themed literature to my third/second graders, I had very few complaints, but when I did (two or three times over the years), I would provide the district policy and a respectful and professional letter. The following is the actual letter I provided to parents:

Dear Parents,  
Some parents worry about schools that implement gay and lesbian

books and cultural lessons. Here are the reasons for implementation in the elementary classroom:

(1) Seventeen percent of all hate crimes are committed toward gays and lesbians. For this reason, it is important to teach acceptance and tolerance of all cultures, including gay and lesbian/LGBT people, early in childhood.

(2) Thirty-three percent (33%) of all suicides in the United States are committed by gay and lesbian people. For this reason, it is important to teach tolerance and acceptance of LGBT people. Self-acceptance can be a problem for some LGBT people within society.

(3) Teaching LGBT-themed lessons and books do not have children practicing sexual behavior. Instead, these lessons teach children to become tolerant and accepting of other cultures different from their own. Research has found (Paccione-Dyszlewski, 2008; Roffman, 2001; Women's Educational Media, 2005) that children do not become/turn gay or practice sexual behaviors by learning tolerance and acceptance of gay and lesbian people.

(4) LAUSD's multicultural education policy states that students should learn about tolerance of other cultures, including gay and lesbian cultures, particularly in June during Gay and Lesbian Awareness Month (LAUSD Memo DP-14, 1999).

(5) The National Association of Multicultural Education states that eradicating homophobia is an essential goal in achieving social justice in the United States (Holland, 2005; NAME, 2005).

(6) Books that are read to students

are always age-appropriate and grade-level-appropriate. The books that are read are written for children and are about children and their families.

(7) Sex is never a topic of discussion during LGBT-themed lessons. This is usually a concern for parents, and sex talk is neither appropriate nor acceptable and not the purpose for the lessons. Instead, these lessons teach love for all people, no matter their cultures or identities.

(8) Finally, children learn that it is fine to disagree with the identities of others, but importantly, they learn to respect and accept all members of our community and world.

You are more than welcome to come and observe these cultural diversity lessons during the month of June in room\_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your continued support,

Mr. G. Flores, Teacher

Educators who want to implement LGBT themes in the classroom but are concerned about parent complaints may offer the following points: (a) Explicate NAME's goals; (b) explicate the purpose for implementing LGBT themes (teaching diversity, tolerance, and acceptance of homosexuals); (c) explicate the district's inclusive multicultural education policy, and if no policy exists, request a committee to create one; and (d) explain state or federal legislation that may exist.

Teachers need to be reminded that there may come a time when students with LGBT parents enroll in their classes. Here are some tips for dealing with this event (Flores,

2014): (a) Maintain the student's and family's confidentiality; (b) be honest (this builds the teacher's credibility, trust, and mutual support); (c) do not "out" LGBT parents or students without explicit permission; (d) maintain professionalism; and (e) be respectful and polite at all times.

### Legislation

Teachers in California have legislation that protects their rights with respect to implementing LGBT themes in classrooms. The Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful Education Act (FAIR Education Act, SB48) was enacted in January 2012 and signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown. The legislation makes it mandatory for school districts to implement a more inclusive and nondiscriminatory curriculum that incorporates the achievements of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBT) in social science classes. The law is intended to curb suicides and alleviate bullying by acknowledging the achievements of LGBT citizens (Flores, 2014; Kushner, 2011).

In New York State, the Dignity for All Students Act (Article 2: DASA Dignity Act) was passed in June 2010 and went into effect on July 1, 2012 (DeWitt, 2012). It mandates all New York public schools to create board policies that include language regarding sexual orientation and gender expression. Washington State has followed suit and adopted a policy requiring schools to do the same (DeWitt, 2012). In time, more states will continue the process.

What about states that are not LGBT-friendly? That question has appeared plenty of times when I have presented at national conferences. Some teachers have expressed that living in conservative states is a hindrance to implementing gay-themed



literature. Sympathetic teachers may face challenges because of a lack of policy or legislation, but my suggestions include (a) increasing empathy for bullied students by implementing themes of respect/kindness; (b) teaching the six pillars of character development (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, citizenship); (c) posting inclusive pictures and graphics; and (d) reading gender-nonconformative-themed literature, such as Zolotow's (1972) *William's Doll*, DePaola's (1979) *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*, and Newman's (2004) *A Fire Engine for Ruthie*. In addition, I suggest writing to the local board of education, superintendents, state and federal representatives, governors, and the president and demanding positive social change in your state (Flores, 2014). The positive change process ultimately begins with the nation's teachers.

Teacher's unions, too, have supported the inclusion of LGBT curriculums in schools and have had an impact in the implementation process. The National Education Association (NEA) has encouraged the adoption of LGBT lessons in schools. The NEA encourages "all educators [to] integrate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) history, people and issues into their instructional programs" (Korach, 2013, para. 2). There is great power when teachers unite, organize, and collaborate to bring about a more inclusive curriculum.

### Implementation

A teacher who feels ready to implement a more inclusive curriculum may wonder, "So, what can I do to begin the process of implementing LGBT themes in the classroom?" First, introduce differences through children's literature. Books are really the teacher's best friend; books create

a more meaningful lesson. Children's literature can help build positive discussions, and children seem to respond very well to books (Aronson, 2004). Over the years, I have had to create my own curriculum and buy my own children's books. My collection of LGBT books avoids stereotyping and gender roles and is included during story time; the books are displayed alongside all other books in the library. I have evolved from reading LGBT-themed books primarily in June to all year long.

Locating gay-themed children's books may seem complicated and overwhelming. However, teachers may find a thorough bibliographical list by visiting the Welcoming Schools' web page. Teachers may also visit the GSA Network's web page to learn about LGBT-inclusive lessons and activities (see references page for web link locations).

I completely understand the issue of funding when it comes to buying books and materials; however, there are grants, contests, and free materials available to teachers who are motivated to implement LGBT themes. Go to LGBT organizations' websites and order or download the many free materials available. Teachers can also visit Welcoming Schools, Teaching Tolerance, GLSEN, or the GSA Network for more information about free materials, lessons, and services.

I have expanded my LGBT-themed literature by spending my money; this is my passion. I have found amazing deals on Amazon, Half.com, EBay, and bookstore clearance aisles. On Amazon, for example, some children's books were as low as one cent, plus four dollars for shipping and handling. Simply by adding one or two books to a library collection adds to the

learning and makes an everlasting impression. This is only a suggestion to teachers, as I know how difficult it may be to purchase materials out of teachers' own pockets.

When asked by a colleague if I would create a list of books I had used in the classroom, I promptly answered that it would be my pleasure. Therefore, I created the following list of children's books that deal with oppression and/or marginalized groups (In the end parenthesis, the theme of the book is noted).

- Adler, D. A. (1993). *A Picture Book of Anne Frank*. New York: Holiday House. (Holocaust)
- Adler, D. A. (1990). *A Picture Book of Helen Keller*. New York: Holiday House. (blindness)
- Bunting, E. (1991). *Fly Away Home*. New York: Clarion Books. (homelessness)
- Cowen-Fletcher, J. (1993). *Mama Zooms*. New York: Scholastic Books. (disability)
- Crowther, K. (1996). *Jack and Jim*. New York: Hyperion Books. (racism and LGBT-themed)
- DeHaan, L., & Nijland, S. (2000). *King & King*. New York: Crown. (LGBT-themed)
- DePaola, Tomie (1979). *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. (gender nonconforming)
- Ewert, M. (2008). *10,000 Dresses*. Portland, OR: Triangle Square. (transgender)
- Fabrikant, A. (2013). *When Kayla Was Kyle*. Lakewood, CA: Avid Readers Publishing. (transgender)
- Gonzalez, R. (2005). *Antonio's Card*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. (LGBT-themed)
- Kilodavis, C. (2009). *My Princess Boy*. New York: Aladdin Books. (gender nonconforming/transgender)
- Krakow, K. (2001). *The Harvey Milk Story*. Ridley Park, PA: Two Lives Publishing. (LGBT hero/leader)
- Richardson, J., & Parnell, P. (2005). *And Tango Makes Three*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (LGBT-themed)
- Tompkins, C. (2013). *Oh the Things Mommies Do! What Could Be Better Than Having Two?* San Bernardino, CA: Crystal Tompkins. (LGBT-themed)
- Zolotow, C. (1972). *William's Doll*. New York: Harper & Row. (gender nonconforming)

Teachers who are ready to purchase, acquire, and implement LGBT-themed children's literature in the classroom may use the following criteria when choosing materials for lessons (Naidoo, 2012):

- (a) Choose children's literature with positive LGBT representation. If there is negative representation, teachers should use that as a teachable moment and counter the response with a positive example.
- (b) Look for examples of gender and LGBT stereotypes and stay away from those types of literature.
- (c) Analyze how the literature explains the sexual orientation of an LGBT character. Children's literature with heterosexual characters does not go into explicit detail about the character's sexuality and behavior and neither should literature with LGBT characters.
- (d) Analyze how the book depicts the lives of the LGBT characters and

families. Some books go to great lengths to demonstrate that LGBT families are normal and thereby lose credibility. Although this may be helpful to some children, others would stop and question why a LGBT family wouldn't be considered normal.

(e) Analyze the role of the LGBT characters in the book. Do the characters have major or minor roles, and are the roles genuine and naturally integrated into the story line.

(f) Analyze the LGBT characters and their portrayal in the illustrations. LGBT characters and their families should be portrayed as normal and ordinary characters and no different from the other characters in the story.

(g) Analyze how the book will influence the self-esteem of LGBT students and or children of LGBT families.

(h) Does the book contain LGBT characters who live average lives and overcome obstacles of everyday life? Does the character change and grow throughout the story?

(i) Analyze whether or not the book contains any heterosexist or homophobic messages, overt or subtle.

The following are important issues that may arise during LGBT lessons. Some things to keep in mind when a teacher reads LGBT-themed children's literature in the classroom:

(a) Clarify a student's misconceptions immediately and respond promptly to students' concerns and questions. If you have questions, acknowledge not knowing and inform yourself.

(b) Provide simple, accurate, and honest answers; do not ramble on.

(c) If a problem arises, such as name calling and abuse, avoid retreating. Use the problem as a teachable moment, relating it to bullying and teasing with respect to diversity in sexual or gender identity.

Readers may wonder if transgender identity and bisexuality are discussed when literature and lessons are presented. The simple answer is, yes. Transgender themes were presented with the implementation of the children's books. Ewert's (2008) *10,000 Dresses* and a more recent publication, Fabrikant's (2013) *When Kayla Was Kyle* was implemented this school year (2013-2014). These children's books are considered modern tales about positively becoming the person you feel inside.

Although, to my knowledge, there are no children's books that deal directly with bisexuality, the topic did surface during discussions of two-daddy and two-mommy families. I would mention that bisexual people who love and like both males and females exist. The discussion was as simple as that, and children most often feel satisfied with a simple explanation. In general, the children's literature about transgender identity allows for better discussion than does bisexuality, and the bisexual topic was only addressed superficially.

To augment LGBT-themed literature and lessons, offer children experiences with

LGBT people by inviting them to conduct classroom discussions about their family lives and careers. LGBT guest speakers discuss their struggles and successes through life. Guest speakers may be invited from your local gay and lesbian community center, such as the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center and Social Glide (see references page for web link locations). Encourage LGBT parents and caregivers to volunteer and participate in school activities as well.

If opportunities such as the aforementioned are not available, look to movies, videos, and Internet links that demonstrate positive depictions of LGBT people and that are grade/age-appropriate and standards based. Visit the website of Welcoming Schools (see references page for web link locations) to acquire free resources, links, videos, and ideas for implementation.

### **Students' Reactions**

"What about students' reactions?" "Students can't handle this!" These were some of the most common responses by teachers, besides the "sex" concern. Over the years, I can say with confidence that the experience has been rewarding not only for me, but also my students. I have never had any concerns expressed by students. Kids have some of the biggest and most loving hearts. Initially, there would be giggles when I mention the word "gay." However, by the end of the school year, the stigma toward the word "gay" was completely eliminated and playground bullying and jeering stopped.

Some past students and parents have returned to thank me for my more inclusive curriculum, a curriculum that includes themes such as LGBT families/heroes, people with disabilities, homeless families,

and the blind. One of my biggest rewards was in 2012 when I read the children's biography about Harvey Milk (Krakow, 2002), and after the lesson, students responded that Milk was the gay people's Martin Luther King. I expanded the discussion by drawing parallels between the two leaders' character traits and explaining the importance of compassion, patience, empathy, sincerity, and loyalty in leadership. I was surprised and comforted to know the book had reached students' hearts. Children are very welcoming and curious when implementing LGBT-themed children's literature. The ones with fears and complaints are most often teachers, parents, and administrators.

I know what some teachers are wondering, "But what do you tell students who ask about two-mommy or two-daddy families and their babies and children?" Some students will ask how two men or two women have children. When I read a book about two daddies and their baby, this is exactly how I responded, "Sometimes, two men or two women love each other very much and the couple has so much love that they would love to share their love with a baby, too." It was that simple. I did not ramble on, and the children were satisfied.

With respect to books that deal with transgender people, students seem to respond in the same manner they do to books about gender-nonconforming children. At first, students squirm, giggle, and try to understand. Eventually they believe that all students deserve to be happy, safe, and comfortable at school.

### **LGBT Students, Coming Out, and Teacher Responsibilities**

During the implementation of my LGBT themes in my second- and third-grade

classes, I had never had students “come out” or have issues with the literature. Actually, some students had used the moment to mention their cousins, uncles, siblings, parents, hairstylists, etc. These students seemed to have become empowered. However, there are some responsibilities we as educators have to be accountable for.

If a teacher presents LGBT-themed literature to older elementary students, middle, or high school students, issues might arise. Some students may decide to “come out,” others might be bullied, or some may question their sexuality. Whatever the situation may be, how might educators help all the students along the way?

Here are some suggestions to consider when being an educator-ally to LGBT youth (GLSEN, 2013):

- Use LGBT-related terminology respectfully and accurately when speaking and conversing. Language is continually evolving, so stay up to date on current and correct terminology and concepts. Also, use inclusive language, such as “partner” rather than husband/wife, for example.
- Be a visible ally. Make yourself known by displaying supportive materials or wearing a visible marker, and let other educators know.
- Make no assumptions. Do not assume the sexual orientation or gender identity of anyone.
- Respond to anti-LGBT bullying and behavior, immediately. Do not retreat from situations like these; name the behavior and use them as teachable moments. Take appropriate administrative action if physical abuse is present. Check school policy

and give consequences; hold students accountable for the behavior. Taking appropriate action informs all students that anti-LGBT behavior is not acceptable and not tolerated.

- If a student “comes out” as LGBT, be supportive. However, do not assume a “coming out” student needs help with the “coming out” process. Instead be there in a safe, respectful, and helpful manner. Acknowledge and appreciate the student’s courage for “coming out.” Finally, be a good listener and assure and respect a student’s confidentiality.
- Do not “out” a student by discussing a student’s sexual orientation without his/her explicit permission. Keep discretion and professionalism on sexual orientation matters at all times.
- Provide a student referral if the situation presents itself. If there are questions that cannot be answered or if a student needs emotional support, then refer the student to a hotline, Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), LGBT community center, or a sympathetic counselor.
- Support student clubs, such as Gay Straight Alliances, which offer critical support for LGBT youth. All student-led clubs must have advisors, and this is another way teachers may be LGBT-student allies.
- Remember not to make any unrealistic promises that cannot be accomplished. This can damage the teacher-student relationship and the teacher then loses credibility.
- Continue teaching about respect, character, diverse families, and having a more inclusive curriculum with LGBT themes, heroes, and history.

- Engage school staff by being a role model and advocating for or providing professional development on how to be a more welcoming educator to LGBT students and how to introduce a more inclusive curriculum.
- Assess your district's and school's policies. Implement comprehensive antibullying/ harassment policies and promote nondiscriminatory policies and practices.

**Conclusion**

Undertaking LGBT themes in the elementary classroom is a new endeavor for many educators, but it is definitely possible and highly commendable for those who are ready. Reading the present article is the first

step toward implementation. Educators who implement LGBT lessons are providing a valuable service to their students. Teachers are creating a safer learning environment where all students will succeed, achieve, and thrive! In addition, teachers will be molding accepting and loving human beings who will be more productive in the diverse world in which they live.

Finally, although the present article is geared toward teachers in districts and states with a more inclusive and welcoming curriculum and policy, I would hope that some of the strategies and ideas described will facilitate teachers in all areas across the country to make microrevolutionary changes and additions to their curriculum. Any little bit helps during the implementation process and can make a huge difference to children everywhere.

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