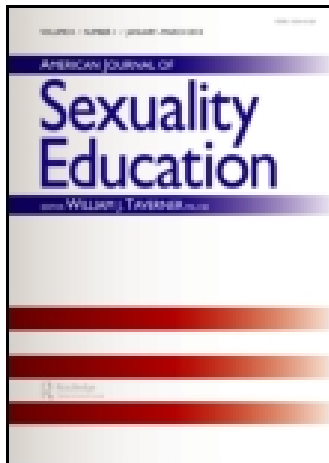


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Teachers Working Cooperatively with Parents and Caregivers when Implementing LGBT Themes in the Elementary Classroom

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Many teachers are interested in having a more inclusive multicultural education that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) themes and gay-themed children's literature; unfortunately, research has found that many teachers do not implement gay themes in their multicultural education curriculum because of fear of criticism from parents and administrators, lack of professional training, and their own negative attitudes. Moreover, the most common topic that surfaces during teacher discussions are concerns over parental objections. This article will detail techniques and strategies when implementing LGBT themes and gay-themed children's literature in the classroom and how to deal positively, cooperatively, and proactively with parents and caregivers.

KEYWORDS *Sexual orientation, gay/LGBT themes, multicultural education, gay and lesbian, literature, attitudes, pedagogy, professional development, parental involvement*

As an educator who has been implementing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) themes and gay-themed children's literature in the elementary classroom for more than 10 years, I understand the fear other educators may face when they consider implementing a more inclusive multicultural education and the possible encounters with parents. The "parental concerns" issue is the most common topic that surfaces when I talk to educators about the possible implementation of LGBT themes in the elementary classroom. This article will provide educators with techniques and strategies about how to have a smoother implementation process dealing with parental concerns and objections.

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The terms LGBT and gay-themed children's literature refer to books that deal with gay familial awareness, such as families composed of two mommies and two daddies. I also read books that deal with bullying, gender nonconformity, and prominent LGBT leaders, such as Harvey Milk. When the term LGBT theme appears in the present article, the aforementioned book examples were LGBT-themed types implemented within my third or second grade classroom. Many of the books presented are listed on the Welcoming Schools' webpage, and the webpage includes a more thorough bibliographical list of LGBT-themed literature: <http://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/>.

Over the years, I had few problems with parents when I implemented LGBT themes and gay-themed children's literature in the elementary classroom. Some parents did complain, but it was uncommon and problems were dealt with swiftly and professionally. However, some colleagues and straight allies who implemented LGBT themes in their classroom had more problems with parents; some had been verbally abused and/or harassed. However, no matter the abuse, these teachers were committed to the implementation process because they knew it was right and fair. Having a more inclusive multicultural curriculum reduces the invisibility of LGBT families and gay culture from mainstream curriculum. When colleagues asked the teachers what made them continue with the process, they simply responded that they had the support of their principal and district policy and it was the fair thing to do. They continue with their inclusive program today.

The aforementioned teachers and I are all employees of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and fortunately the LAUSD has had an inclusive multicultural education policy for many years. If parents were concerned or complained, the following policies were relayed to parents. LAUSD official policy states:

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is perhaps the most diverse school district in the world. We recognize the importance of children seeing themselves and their stories represented in their schooling. As such, we strive to adopt curriculum and books that represents this diversity. That being said, we also encourage our teachers to supplement the curriculum with books that are particularly applicable to their specific classes. The California Department of Education underscores this directive. (personal communication, Judy Chiasson, PhD, LAUSD)

Moreover, LAUSD strives to have a more inclusive multicultural education by including LGBT themes and gay-themed literature in the curriculum. The policy continues:

The LAUSD and the Los Angeles School Board of Education have adopted June as Gay and Lesbian Pride Month. The Board of Education of the Los Angeles Unified School District hereby declares June as Pride Month

and directs 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. (personal communication, Judy Chiasson)

In addition, the State of California has implemented new legislation that should help California teachers more feasibly implement LGBT themes in the classroom. SB48 – The FAIR Education Act (Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful Education Act) was enacted in January 2012 by California governor Jerry Brown. The legislation makes it mandatory for school districts to implement a more inclusive and nondiscriminatory curriculum that incorporates the achievements of LGBT persons in social science courses. The law is intended to curb suicides and alleviate bullying by acknowledging the achievements of LGBT citizens (Kushner, 2011).

Other states have followed suit with their own legislation. In New York, the Dignity for All Students Act was passed in June 2010 and went into effect on July 1, 2012. It mandates all New York public schools create board policies that include language regarding sexual orientation and gender expression. Washington followed and adopted a policy requiring schools to do the same as New York. More states are slowly following this lead (DeWitt, 2012). Teachers who live in the aforementioned states may find some comfort when implementing LGBT themes and help ease any parental concerns.

Nonetheless, teachers and parents may also find comfort in knowing the National Association for Multicultural Education's (NAME, 2005) policy. NAME has welcomed gay themes and culture as part of its multicultural education agenda since 1992. If teachers and parents were made aware that gay culture is part of the multicultural education agenda and that preventing homophobia and heterosexism is an essential element of the NAME (Holland, 2005), then implementing gay themes in schools may be more feasible.

However, my reasons for implementing LGBT themes also took on a more personal level. As a gay Chicano, the following statistics made the implementation process imperative. Seventeen percent of all hate crimes are committed against gay and lesbians. In addition, gay students demonstrate high suicide rates: gay or lesbian people attempt 33% of all suicides in the United States (Daniel, 2007; Satterly & Dyson, 2005). The alarming statistics make the implementation of LGBT curriculum even more important, and my hope is to see the statistics disappear completely from society someday. In addition, when I present parents with the horrifying statistics, their attitudes change and concerns turn to empathy.

Another common concern for parents is the assumption that LGBT themes or gay-themed literature in classrooms would involve discussions of sex (Roffman, 2001). In addition, some parents believe that having LGBT discussions would promote homosexuality. Some fear that having gay or

lesbian parents, or gay or lesbian teachers, might influence or recruit students to become gay (Paccione-Dyszlewski, 2008), but these are all untrue assumptions. LGBT discussions, instead, ensure that children would be less likely to insult and ostracize LGBT people and in turn create students who are tolerant and accepting of all people (Women's Educational Media, 2006).

Along the same lines, some parents would indicate that young children cannot deal with LGBT-themed discussions and that they have no place in school. However, during early youth, children are forming cultural identities, friendships, developing opinions, and appreciating others. Moreover, children are developing a sense of fairness and justice. Therefore, children are cognitively and psychologically able to comprehend injustice, family, and cultural diversity. Children do well and are open and ready to learn about the differences (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003).

Litigation across the nation has surfaced. Parents should be made aware that many school districts, teachers, and parents have been sued because of bullying and abuses that occur on campus. Teachers and administrators must maintain a harassment-free, safe-learning environment for gay youth because current laws and courts have addressed the issue of harassment of sexual minority students. Schools are liable for inaction and complacency (National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2004). Research, however, has found that increased contact with gays and positive exposure, reinforcement, and representation of gays through literature and media can help alleviate negative attitudes (Overby & Barth, 2002). Therefore, having a more inclusive curriculum with LGBT themes may help alleviate the problems of bullying and harassment and hinder future litigation.

Parents have come to me to discuss problems with their religious beliefs and gay themes being presented to children. However, parents and teachers who may have concerns should consider the following thought. The implication is that a teacher and parent would have to negotiate his or her personal and religious beliefs with his or her social responsibility and ethical and professional role if he or she is to implement and allow gay themes in the classroom (Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2007).

It is a teacher's job to create a safe-learning environment and to be an open-minded person who will create positive social change and in turn create accepting and tolerant students who appreciate LGBT people and all cultures. In addition, for students to successfully contribute in a democratic society, they must be accepting of others; this way students are better prepared for the diversity they will encounter. These points are critical in helping parents and caregivers understand the reasons for LGBT-themed literature inclusion; it is the ethical thing to do.

In summary, if a parent comes to a teacher and asks what is the purpose for LGBT themes in school, here is a list to consider as responses:

- a. High LGBT suicide rate.
- b. Bullying in school toward LGBT students and gender nonconforming students.
- c. High hate crimes toward LGBT people.
- d. Invisibility of LGBT people and culture in mainstream society and curriculum.
- e. To teach about love associated with all families and LGBT families.
- f. To teach about respect, tolerance, and acceptance.
- g. To teach about the gay civil rights movement and leaders.
- h. To teach love for diversity, pluralism, and multiculturalism.
- i. To provide a safe learning environment for all students, including gay youth and future gay youth.
- j. School district policy and or state legislation mandates a more inclusive and welcoming school and curriculum.
- k. The National Association for Multicultural Education's agenda of ridding homophobia as a goal in achieving social justice in the United States.
- l. Children's literature can help build positive discussions and children respond well to books (Aronson, 2004). Books read to students are age and grade-level appropriate and help children learn about people. The books are written for children and are about children and their families.
- m. Encourage parents and caregivers to volunteer in the classroom to help alleviate concerns and misconceptions.

The following reasons may also be suggested to parents when they question the implementation of LGBT literature. Naidoo (2012) lists the following purpose and goals when implementing LGBT themes and anti-bias programs and curriculum:

- Children will develop strong social identities and exhibit pride in themselves and their culture, abilities, and families.
- Children will expand their cultural awareness and learn to express respectfully and accurately when describing similarities and differences among themselves and other children/cultures.
- 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.
- Children will develop and learn the necessary skills to counteract prejudice and unfair treatment of the marginalized with appropriate words and actions.

Families are slowly diversifying and the traditional nuclear family is no longer the norm. There may come a time when a teacher has a student who comes from a two-mommy or two-daddy family. Here are some points to consider when this occurs. Frist, always maintain the student and family's

confidentiality and honesty. This builds not only the teacher's credibility but also trust and mutual respect and support. Do not "out" LGBT parents or students without their explicit permission. If you meet LGBT parents, maintain professionalism and composure and be respectful and polite at all times. Finally, encourage LGBT parents and caregivers to volunteer and participate in school activities.

My final advice to our educational practitioners, adhere to utmost professionalism at all times. As educators, we are to set high standards of cordiality and harmony. In addition, if a parent becomes irate, teachers must maintain calm, take deep breaths, do not become defensive, and never take anything personally. Simply remember that a parent's fears sometimes develop into irrational behavior. Never lower your face in shame; hold your head high with confidence in knowing you are adding to children's cultural knowledge base and building strong character.

Unfortunately, some teachers have expressed that living in conservative non-LGBT-friendly 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) increase empathy for bullied students by implementing themes of respect/kindness; b) teach character development; c) post inclusive pictures and graphics; and d) read 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, write to the local board of education, superintendents, state and federal representatives, governors, and the President and demand positive social change in your state. The change process ultimately begins with our nation's teachers.

In conclusion, the issue of "parental concerns" is the most common topic that surfaces when I talk to educators about the implementation of LGBT themes in the elementary classroom. Nevertheless, undertaking gay-themed literature and LGBT themes in the classroom is a new endeavor for many educators, but it is definitely commendable that teachers are ready and willing to partake in implementation. If teachers take the aforementioned steps to clear up parental misconceptions and fears, then the implementation process will be a smoother and feasible one. Remember, as educators you are teaching tolerance and acceptance and providing the necessary tools and preparing the student population for the diverse world in which they will live and thrive.

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