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Expanding Awareness: LGBTQ+ Content in Students' Lives

The LGBTQ+ community occupies a different space in the public consciousness than it did when advocates struggled for recognition and an end to harassment in the era after the Stonewall riots. This is, in large part, a result of those activists' work and the initiatives undertaken by organizations formed to fight for LGBTQ+ rights. Political activism, though, is not the sole reason for this change. In the half century since the Stonewall riots, societal norms and culture have changed, as well. Interactions that might have been uncommon or censored as recently as twenty years ago are now more commonplace; advertisers boycotted shows like *Thirtysomething* and *L.A. Law* that featured gay and lesbian characters in the 1990s,¹ yet shows like *Pose* and *Schitt's Creek* that regularly depicted LGBTQ+ characters interacting were among the most critically acclaimed in 2020. As the LGBTQ+ community became more prominent, some myths and stereotypes receded. To an extent, therefore, the gay rights movement accomplished one of its most intangible goals: removing the societal barriers that prevented LGBTQ+ people from safely and openly living public lives. This representation is educationally meaningful, as well. As young people are increasingly exposed to complex portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals and themes in the media they consume, school-based discussions provide opportunities to talk about and contextualize the information and messages students receive elsewhere.

The LGBTQ+ Community in Popular Culture

GLAAD introduced its now annual *Where We Are on TV* report on LGBTQ+ representation on television in 2005. For the 2019–20 season, GLAAD found that “of the 879 regular characters expected to appear on broadcast scripted primetime programming this season, 90 (10.2%) were identified as gay, lesbian,

bisexual, transgender, and/or queer”; according to the report this was the “highest percentage of LGBTQ series regulars GLAAD has found since beginning to gather data for all series regulars in the 2005–06 season.”² In addition, cable shows featured 121 regular LGBTQ+ characters and streaming services featured 109. Moreover, nonbinary and transgender characters, as well as LGBTQ+ characters of color, populate television shows in greater numbers than in the past.³ Though GLAAD also cites the ways in which television programming needs to continue improving—LGBTQ+ characters need to be better developed and LGBTQ+ representation on television does not truly reflect the full diversity of the LGBTQ+ community, to name two⁴—this increased representation, amid a trajectory of increasing representation, meets the goals GLAAD expressed in previous reports. President and CEO Sarah Kate Ellis concluded,

GLAAD is calling on the industry to ensure that 20 percent of series regular characters on primetime scripted broadcast series are LGBTQ by 2025. Further, we would challenge all platforms to make sure that within the next two years, half of LGBTQ characters on every platform are people of color. While broadcast has actually hit this mark two years in a row, cable and streaming have yet to reach this goal. These two steps are key moves towards ensuring that entertainment reflects the world in which it is created and the audience who consumes it.⁵

Greater representation in the entertainment Americans consume contributed to increased social acceptance of the LGBTQ+ population in the twenty-first century.⁶ Beyond television, films and music increasingly represent LGBTQ+ Americans. *Moonlight*, a film depicting the same-sex relationship between two Black men and its effect on their lives, won the 2017 Academy Award for Best Picture. An increasing number of chart-topping musicians—including Lil Nas X, whose “Old Town Road” spent seventeen weeks at number one in 2019—are openly LGBTQ+. Like social acceptance, though, accurate and fully diverse media representations are an uphill climb. While the media is more reflective of American society than it was in the past, resistance, economics, power dynamics, and public opinion slow the pace of change.

In addition to on screen entertainment products, children’s and young adult (YA) books explore LGBTQ+ themes. Beginning in 1981 with *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* by Susanne Bosch, same-sex couples and diverse family structures emerged as a motif in books written for school-age children. The themes and availability of these books have proliferated over the years; an internet search for LGBTQ+-themed children’s literature now yields hundreds of results. Among

them are several different books entitled *Families*, or some variation thereof, all of which look at the vast number of family structures and cultures that exist in the United States and across the world.⁷ There are also a wide variety that focus specifically on same-sex pairings; these books have become more mainstream and less controversial over the years. In 1989 Leslea Newman published *Heather Has Two Mommies*, a story with an inclusive message that was nevertheless derided by critics as inappropriate for its target audience.⁸ Newman, a prolific author of LGBTQ+-themed literature and resources aimed at children and adolescents, later wrote *Daddy, Papa, and Me* (2009) and *Mommy, Mama, and Me* (2009), both aimed at toddlers, and for school age children, *Donovan's Big Day* (2011), about a boy's excitement as his two moms' wedding approaches; all caused less uproar in a changing world. Newman, who is gay, asserted, "I wrote these books because I think it is important for kids from all types of families to see themselves portrayed in books. It validates their experience, and teaches all of us that there are many different types of families and the most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other."⁹

LGBTQ+-themed picture books are, at their foundation, stories for children; in addition to the focus on family authors therefore write stories that resonate with their audience. Linda De Haan's *King and King*, for example, published in 2003, offers children a variation on the traditional fairytale—in this story, the prince chooses another prince as his betrothed. Moreover, in keeping with a classic children's literary device, some authors use animals to tell stories of same-sex relationships. In *And Tango Makes Three*, which proved as controversial when it was published in 2005 as *Heather Has Two Mommies* was in the 1990s, two male penguins "adopt" an egg, nurture it, and raise the baby penguin together. According to the New York Public Library, "*Tango* challenged some Americans' ideas and assumptions about homosexuality, age-appropriateness of the material, and raised the thorny question about what makes a family. ... *And Tango Makes Three* has topped the ALA's 10 Most Challenged Books List between 2006 and 2010."¹⁰ *Worm Loves Worm*, published after the Supreme Court affirmed the right to same-sex marriage, explains that concept to young children as woodland creatures figure out how to conduct a wedding that does not reflect "how it's always been done."¹¹ LGBTQ+-themed children's books, like nearly all children's books, aim to convey a message. Often, as these stories reflect, the message is about love, more than traditions and cultural norms, binding families together. As the number of books available increased, children were and continue to be more exposed to these ideas—in regions where reading these books is socially accepted—than in the past.

Books about gender, and the bullying that often accompanies gender nonconformity, are more prominent on bookshelves, as well. *The Paper Bag Princess*, published in 1980, upended the traditional princess narrative when the titular princess saves the prince from a dragon, much to his dismay. *Jacob's New Dress* (2014) and *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (2015) tell stories about children whose feelings, desires, and fashion choices don't fit into societally established norms and binaries. In *Introducing Teddy*, meanwhile, nothing substantively changes when Thomas, a teddy bear, realizes that he actually identifies as Tilly. All of these books, like those about same-sex families and relationships, share a message of acceptance and inclusivity. Children's literature, then, hues closely to ideas conveyed in schools where LGBTQ+ topics are included in the curriculum; they teach tolerance, open mindedness, and friendship. These books, perhaps, lay the groundwork for children and adolescents to internalize that particular message.

Middle grade and YA novels, written for upper elementary through high school students, also incorporate LGBTQ+ themes more frequently than in the past. *The Best Man*, published by Richard Peck in 2016, focuses on one child's experience finding out that two of his male role models, his revered uncle and his student teacher—who end up dating—are both gay. *George*, published by Alex Gino in 2015, tells the story of a transgender fourth grader who navigates the travails of sharing her secret, including bullying and family resistance. Gino followed with *Rick*, a 2020 book about a middle school student who explores his identity and surroundings in his school's "Rainbow Spectrum" club. *The Best Man*, *George*, and *Rick* were written for, and at the reading level of, fourth through sixth graders. *The Other Boy*, about the difficulties a transgender middle school student faces when his friends and teammates discover his identity, offers middle school students the opportunity to read about similar issues.¹²

Meanwhile, the number of YA novels with LGBTQ+ characters increased between 2003 and 2018. Author Malinda Lo, who compiles and evaluates statistics on LGBTQ+ representation in this genre, found that fewer than twenty YA books featured LGBTQ+ characters in 2003.¹³ That number has increased significantly over time. In Lo's most recent report, evaluating books published through 2018, she found that LGBTQ protagonists and issues were prominent in 108 young adult books in multiple genres; that number represents a "300% increase over 2009," her baseline for the report, "when only 27 were published."¹⁴

Furthermore, a 2018 *Vulture* article asserted, "Just in the last few years, we seem to be entering a golden age of queer YA. We are seeing far more titles getting published than ever before, and a much broader array of stories

being told. We still have a long way to go, however.”¹⁵ Some of these books, like Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and Becky Albertalli’s *Simon v. the Homo Sapiens*—which became the motion picture *Love, Simon*—are widely read and part of teenagers’ common consciousness. All of Albertalli’s novels, in fact, feature LGBTQ+ characters and themes. Similarly, authors like Adam Silvera and Elizabeth Acevedo consistently write about LGBTQ+ young people from different cultures and backgrounds. Numerous options exist, then, for children at every age to immerse themselves in the LGBTQ+ experience through literature.

Children and young adults raised on these books came of age in an era of greater openness and, in some regions, tolerance about families and sexuality than prior generations. The continued, if decreasing, resistance to these books, though, as well as the minimal number of LGBTQ+-themed books published compared with other groups, indicates the need for further evolution. Moreover, because children are receiving this content in the books they read and entertainment products they consume, more widespread classroom learning could contextualize information that might otherwise exist in a vacuum.

LGBTQ+ Content in Schools

Though LGBTQ+ themes and content are not as pervasive in schools as they are in the media and other institutions, there are entry points for inclusion among several subjects. A recent GLSEN survey found that students are more likely to interact with LGBTQ+ content in their history, English, or health classes than other classes in which they are enrolled.¹⁶ The information conveyed and resources considered in these subjects create space through which students can learn more about LGBTQ+ individuals and their lives, and, potentially, open their minds and become more aware and accepting. Thus, regardless of the discipline for which they were created, these materials echo LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations’ calls and serve similar goals to social studies lessons.

High school English classes offer students opportunities to see worlds beyond their own through the literature they read and analyze, similar to the experience students may have reading LGBTQ+-themed YA novels. In an academic setting, as opposed to independently, teachers guide students through the process of learning more about the characters, their backgrounds and motivations, and the way in which events in a story influence and affect them. Topics relevant to gender and sexuality appear throughout literature, even in books that are not

specifically noted as LGBTQ+- themed; teachers can introduce a queer lens through which to evaluate those themes more deeply than students might on their own.¹⁷ Through this lens and these experiences, then, students learn more about LGBTQ+ lives over time.

In 2014, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) issued a position statement entitled “Diverse Gender Expression and Gender Non-Conformity Curriculum in English Grades 7–12.” In it, the organization asserted,

it is imperative that English language arts educators develop a lens through which they can see and think critically about gender, gender expression, sexuality, and gender non-conformity. Through this lens, students would consider how gender and sexuality are represented in a range of texts; would gain awareness regarding gendered and heteronormative expectations; would work with texts featuring a diverse range of people (including those who are LGBTQ and/or gender non-conforming); and would express their own perspectives regarding these representations and expectations.¹⁸

The statement goes on to specifically recommend introducing books with LGBTQ+ characters, employing a “gendered or gender non-conforming lens” in text analysis, and providing students opportunities to incorporate personal and academic ideas about gender in writing assignments.¹⁹ NCTE, an organization that works to support literacy, improve English education, and promote justice and equity in classrooms throughout the United States,²⁰ therefore claimed that making the discipline more inclusive was the way to do so.

Following NCTE’s guidance, lessons and resources exist to promote inclusive English curriculum and push students to consider LGBTQ+ perspectives when they evaluate literature, verbally and in writing. Massachusetts, which amended its state framework in 2018 to promote inclusive education, developed lessons for English classes including “Is Nick Carraway Gay? A Hidden Gay Voice in an American Classic,” which applies an LGBTQ+ lens to students’ analysis of *The Great Gatsby*; “Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes: A Reflection of African American and Queer Identity During the Harlem Renaissance”; and “Leslea Newman: An Influential American Voice and an Authentic Writer of the LGBTQ Experience in Literature.”²¹ Each of these lessons fulfills NCTE’s goal of making the subject more representative and challenging students to think deeply about both the characters and ideas on the page and the authors who create them.

GLSEN, which creates resources for educators in addition to advocating for LGBTQ+ students and teachers, has two lessons available on its website: the interdisciplinary “He Continues to Make a Difference” and an English-language

arts lesson focused on *Simon v. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and the movie adaptation *Love, Simon*. “He Continues to Make a Difference,” in which students learn about Matthew Shepard’s life and murder, focuses on Leslea Newman’s poem “The Fence” and asks students to engage in “text-text and text-self strategies” to analyze the poem, draw connections between Matthew Shepard and other LGBTQ+ individuals’ experiences, and “create a work of fiction based on a real moment in LGBT history.”²² The *Love, Simon* lesson asks students to “compare identities and traits of main characters with a focus on ‘invisible’ identities” and “reflect on their own identities around race, sexuality, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, and ability, in order to strengthen their capacity to empathize, connect, and collaborate with a diverse group of people.” Students then write letters to discuss the characters’ identities and share aspects of their own; one of the lesson’s goals is for students to be able to better support peers struggling with revealing their gender or sexuality.²³ Both of these lessons build literacy skills by engaging students in reading and writing and asking them to apply information in new, thoughtful ways. They also promote tolerance for and understanding of LGBTQ+ lives, experiences, and struggles in ways that are indicative of the power of English education.

English teachers, through class discussions and writing assignments, gain insight into their students’ thoughts and identities in ways other subject teachers don’t often access. Furthermore, character analysis is, in itself, an identity study. Through curriculum and conversation, then, LGBTQ+ topics and content enter English classrooms. Christine Gentry, a former high school English teacher and current teacher educator, cited identity as a significant reason for instructing her students to critically evaluate literature through a queer lens that, she posited, is “very much attached to gender roles.”²⁴ She personally identifies as queer and asserted that the absence of LGBTQ+ themes and information in her school experience hindered her from “embracing and accepting that side of [her]self”;²⁵ she wanted her students to have opportunities that she did not. Gentry’s classes read *The Color Purple*—the only Pulitzer Prize-winning novel with a lesbian protagonist written by a woman—because she “explicitly wanted to discuss” Shug Avery’s relationships with men and women with her students. According to Gentry, “people who are queer who ... have partners of both sexes or genders are often erased from both straight narratives and gay narratives.” Highlighting these characters and individuals, she believes, contributed to meaningful conversations about “having trouble feeling included or truly part of a community when you’re caught in between” that emphasized the queer lens and also resonated with her biracial students.²⁶

Lauren Jensen, a Washington, DC, area teacher, focused on ensuring her students had access to this content despite its absence from state standards. She recalled, “While building my classroom library I devoted a section to LGBTQ+ literature, including daily book chats that highlighted said literature. It’s not a mandated part of our curriculum, so I felt it necessary to build this in authentically in order to foster a community of acceptance in my classroom and provide texts through which students could see themselves.”²⁷ Brooklyn teacher Rebecca McBride, meanwhile, uses photo stories from the *New York Times* and films like *Pariah* and *Moonlight* to convey LGBTQ+ content. She focuses on the impact of gender worldwide, using documentaries like *Period: End of Sentence* to provoke conversations about identity and its role in cultures beyond the United States.²⁸ According to Jensen,

literature with LGBTQ+ content can act as a mirror for those LGBTQ+ students seeking narratives similar to their own. For non-LGBTQ+ students, literature can provide a window into the stories of others. Consequently, LGBTQ+ content and themes are not a luxury or privilege, they are VITAL to fostering students’ authentic selves and understanding of others during a stage of their lives that is often burdened with questions about identity and fear of not being accepted.²⁹

The analysis in which students engage in English classes offers meaningful opportunities to think critically about themselves, others, and the world in which they live. As Gentry recalled, “it’s important to me that my humanity is a part of my teaching, and that my students see me and who I really am, and I see them, and all of them, and that that vulnerability is a two-way street.”³⁰ McBride, Jensen, and Gentry’s choices and inclusivity promoted that relationship building and authenticity in their English classes.

Health education, according to the New York City Department of Education, seeks to “teach students how to take care of their minds, their bodies, and their relationships with others.”³¹ Classes, depending on the grade level, encompass topics like puberty, mental health, nutrition, hygiene, and social emotional growth. Health classes are also the home to sex education in the schools and regions where this subject exists; students then learn about pregnancy, sexual health, and sexually transmitted diseases, among other topics. According to the Guttmacher Institute, in 2020 thirty-nine states and Washington, DC, required sex education and/or HIV education; of those thirty-nine, eleven states and the District of Columbia “require inclusive content with regard to sexual orientation.”³² There, and in classes in other parts of the country, students gain a

better understanding of LGBTQ+ identity and matters and concerns important to their LGBTQ+ peers.

Washington state, which passed its Healthy Youth Act in 2007, mandates that sex education is “appropriate for students regardless of gender, race, disability status, or sexual orientation.”³³ Its Family Life and Sexual Health (FLASH) curriculum aims to fulfill that edict, providing K–12 teachers statewide with targeted lessons that seek to “prevent teen pregnancy, STDs and sexual violence”³⁴ including two high school level lessons that address LGBTQ+ identities and stereotypes. In “Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity,” students “differentiate between biological sex, sexual orientation, sexual behavior and gender identity” and discuss the ways in which heteronormativity and societal expectations can cause harm. “Undoing Gender Stereotypes,” meanwhile, demonstrates the weight that accompanies preconceived notions about gender. Both lessons are inquiry and activity based: in the former students create advice columns, and in the latter, they participate in scenarios in which they consider how stereotypes impact upon behavior.³⁵ The ideas conveyed in these lessons provide students with science- and fact-based information that underscores and contextualizes what they glean from the media and other institutions of which they are a part. FLASH—which was used by 38.3 percent of the state’s schools in 2019³⁶—and Washington’s laws provide a foundation from which students’ ideas and acceptance can grow.

Outside of Washington, several organizations develop lessons and resources to increase students’ awareness of LGBTQ+ students’ plights and change school climate for the better. The Resource Center for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention’s (ReCAPP) “Toward Understanding ... Some of Us Are Lesbian or Gay” aims to “sensitize participants to the difficulties society imposes on gay and lesbian youth and provides participants who have questions about sexual orientation with suggestions for finding support for themselves.”³⁷ Students engage in an activity in which they learn what life is like for people who identify as LGBTQ+ and ponder how they might support this population. Advocates for Youth, an organization that supports young people’s rights to sexual health information and proper care,³⁸ similarly provides students with the resources to learn about LGBTQ+ individuals, breakdown stereotypes, and promote acceptance and respect through discussion, introspection, and writing activities in “I Am Who I Am,” a lesson that investigates identity in general and dispels myths related to sexual orientation and gender identity.³⁹ Other organizations, like the Safe Schools Coalition and Sex, Etc., focus more specifically on individuals’ experiences in society and in schools, asking students to contemplate how they

would feel if placed in situations that members of the LGBTQ+ population frequently confront.⁴⁰ Inspiring students to move past fears and preconceived notions and begin to consider and act upon new ideas accomplishes the goals of both the lessons and the organizations that develop them.

* * *

LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum, regardless of the subject in which it is present, seeks to accomplish certain goals: overcome stereotypes, increase acceptance among students and faculty, and provide context and information beyond what students receive outside of school. It is also a necessity in an era when everyone from toddlers to adults has a window into LGBTQ+ lives, themes, and issues. There are myriad sources from which students can learn about LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences, many of which convey this information in ways that are relevant and relatable. Lessons in English and health classes provide a basis to understand what students read, watch, and consume across platforms, contextualize the information students receive elsewhere, and offer students the opportunity to evaluate this material in ways that they might not on their own. In this way, lessons in other subjects build the skills necessary to participate and involve oneself in society—the same skills that social studies classes, in general and through the LGBTQ+ information incorporated therein, seek to instill.