Facilitating Conversations on Sexuality, Same-sex Marriage, and Same-sex Parenting Through Literature in the Elementary Classroom

By

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Teaching
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Abstract

This research study looks at the use of children’s and young adult literature to facilitate and generate conversations about sexuality, specifically focused on various topics relating to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community (same-sex parenting, same-sex marriage, etc.). The goal of this particular study is to learn how practicing educators are effectively using various strategies involving literature to provide a platform for candid, student-directed conversations, while maintaining a safe, inclusive environment for all students. Three practicing educators with a variety of experience were interviewed, the data analyzed, the findings discussed, and implications and recommendations generated.

*Key Words: literature, LGBT, inclusive*
Acknowledgements

There are a number of individuals that I wish to acknowledge who have supported not only my research journey, but also my path in becoming an educator. First of all, I would like to thank my research supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Campbell, whose insight, encouragement and sense of humour have gone a much longer way then I could ever had imagined. I also wish to thank Dr. Arlo Kempf, who I feel fortunate enough to have connected with, and supported by throughout this whole research process. In addition, I wish to thank my three wonderful participants – without them, this research would not have been possible. I will take their words, stories, and insight well into my education career. I would like to acknowledge all of my course instructors and associate teachers who have shared their love for teaching and experiences with me throughout the past 2 years. I would like to say a heart-felt thank you to each and every one of my colleagues, whom I have grown with and learned from immensely. This program would not have been nearly as colourful or profound had I not done it with you. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my family for a lifetime of sacrifice and support, as well as my close friends who have provided me with ongoing love, laughs, and valuable insight.
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Facilitating Conversations on Sexuality, Same-sex Marriage, and Same-sex Parenting Through Literature in the Elementary Classroom

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

There is no denying it – there are many students, some of whom will some day be in our classrooms, who are involved with or identify as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community. According to Statistics Canada, the number of students who identify themselves as LGBTQ, or are a part of queer families is rising (2011), and I believe it is our job as educators to provide the environment where conversations about these topics can be generated. Through my past experience in the classroom, as well as four practicum placements in the MT program, I have witnessed just how effective children’s and young adult books can be at generating discussions and critical thinking among all students, and it is my hope that I can learn strategies to use these techniques to create an inclusive and accepting environment.

According to a recent census (Statistics Canada, 2011), the number of same-sex married couples in Canada nearly tripled between the years of 2006 and 2011. In a similar census, 59 per cent of LGBTQ high school students reported they were verbally harassed as a direct result of their sexuality, and 73 per cent of Canadian LGBT and queer high school students felt unsafe at school, due to their sexuality.

It is obvious that there is a disconnection between some students who identify as members of the LGBTQ community and their peers. I believe that we as future educators have the opportunity to deconstruct what is “normal,” and provide our students the opportunity to have conversations and discussions in the early years, through candid experiences in the classroom, and a safe community environment. I believe that by
providing the platform for these conversations, specifically through the use of diverse literature in the classroom and school library, we can help not only those students struggling with their sexuality or family diversities, but foster a sense of acceptance and support for all members of the school community.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to learn various strategies on how we as educators can use the incredible diverse literature that is available with themes surrounding the LGBTQ community to help facilitate conversations, and critical thinking for our students of all ages regarding topics including sexuality, same-sex parenting, and gender identity. Through exploring previous literature, as well as conducting interviews with practicing educators, I gained insight on how to use literacy practices in the classroom to deconstruct what is normal and allow students from all sexual orientations and family structures to feel they are a part of a safe, accepting, and inclusive environment. I believe this study will be very significant to the education community in allowing teachers to learn strategies and practices that can work in their classrooms, with the hope of moving towards acceptance and equality for everyone. It is also my hope that this process will allow me to gain insight, on how I can add to this diverse community, and provide meaningful opportunities for all my students as I transition into the field.

**Research Questions**

1. **Research Question**
   
   - How can the use of children’s and young adult literature help in the facilitation of conversations about aspects and issues in the LGBTQ community?
ii. **Sub-questions**

1. What motivates teachers to use literature to promote diversity and equity?
2. What LGBTQ literature already exists and is being used in the classroom to facilitate conversations of this nature?
3. What strategies are practicing teachers and school librarians using when deciding which types of books to provide students access to? (Whether in the library or classroom).
4. What kind of support, guidance or training, if any, have teachers received either in pre-service or in-service teacher education that helped them create a safe, inclusive classroom for all their diverse students needs? Specifically, LGBTQ students and students from queer families.
5. Is there any resistance from the school’s administration or community when teachers introduce these types of books to stimulate classroom conversations?

**Background of the Researcher**

This research topic is becoming increasingly important to me as I prepare to enter the education profession, as well as being a long-time passion of mine outside of my teaching life. As a future educator whom identifies in the LGBTQ community, I hope to discover strategies and tools that will help myself uncover these LGBTQ issues in the classroom, and hope that my future students feel both comfortable and safe in my classroom, in all aspects of their emotional, personal, and physical lives. I myself was fortunate enough to have some incredible role models who identified as members of the LGBTQ community while navigating through the education system. However, it was not until high school that these conversations were starting to be had, and teachers’, specifically role models to myself, sexualities were that of a more transparent nature.

One of them most significant moments for me as a student was when my grade 10 teacher not only came out to our class as a lesbian, but also announced that she and her
partner were having a baby. This disclosure shed light and produced a class-wide discussion, where the teacher welcomed questions, and answered them open and honestly. I remember reflecting on this, and thinking that it was very possible that many of these students would not have otherwise had the opportunity or been exposed to this topic area. This is the type of educator I hope to be in the future.

I hope that by discovering ways to use another voice (literature) to provide opportunities for dialogue, I will help my students who are facing such challenges to feel part of an inclusive classroom environment as valued, equal members. However, it is my hope that not just students in the LGBTQ community benefit from these practices, but all my students as allies and citizens. I am passionate in moving forward and continuing to be a part of this ever evolving society we live in, and I strongly believe that by focusing on how we can bring conversations regarding this aspect of our LGBTQ students’ lives into the classroom, the education community will be a better one for it.

To say that the reason I am passionate about this topic is because I myself am a part of the LGBTQ community is only part of the truth. What drives me more than my own sexual orientation are all the conversations I have had with my colleagues, peers, current students, and campers who share heart breaking stories about their life as queer students in the education system. We hear too often in the news of another young person taking his or her life due to constant harassment and bullying both in the classroom and online. Many of these cases have been determined were due to their sexuality. This has only inspired me to try harder as a person and future educator, and thus, the reason I am passionately diving into this topic area.
Overview

This paper contains five main sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, and the Discussion. The first chapter introduces the focus and the purpose of the study, the research question and sub-questions, as well as my personal experiences and how I came to be involved in this particular topic of study. The second chapter constitutes my literature review, in which conceptual and theoretical literature and empirical data from previous studies in similar topic areas are examined. The third chapter explains the methodology and procedure that were used in this study including information about my sample participants, data collection instruments, the data analysis process, ethical considerations, as well as expected limitations in the study. Chapter four, the findings section, lists the main themes from the interview with summaries of each of the three participant’s contributions. Finally, the discussion provides my own reflections on what I have learned, suggested practices, and possible next steps in the research area. The references and the list of appendices will follow at the end.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing Issues in the Education System

Bullying

Many young people struggling with their sexuality are more likely to be bullied, both verbally and physically, in and out of the classroom. (Beauchamp, 2004). The Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), states that 69% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth reported verbal or physical harassment at school (1999). In a more recent study, it was found that compared to heterosexuals, the odds of being victimized are nearly 2 times greater for gays and lesbians and 4.5 times greater for bisexuals (Beauchamp, 2004). It is our job as educators to make sure all of our students feel safe, as equal members of the school community, from a very young age. It is because of these alarming statistics I believe we need to provide a platform for our students to start having conversations regarding LGBTQ topics and issues in the elementary years. I feel that by using literature that addresses various topics and issues aimed for a wide range of age groups, the candid facilitation of these conversations can take place, while avoiding the tokenization of these topics.

Canadian schools are certainly making positive steps in creating school environments that feel safe for all students, regardless of their sexuality or gender. In 2012, Ontario passed an Accepting Schools Act, also known as Bill 13, where it states that “sexual assault, gender-based violence and incidents based on homophobia will not be tolerated in the province’s elementary and secondary schools,” (Ontario Ministry of Education). In another recent study, the benefits of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) were determined to have significant importance and an overall positive impact on students of sexual minority, as it provided a space and activities that these groups of students felt
ownership to (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013). This study also found that cases of student identified bullying was less for queer students in that of schools who had a GSA to belong to.

It is with these findings that highlight the importance of the school environment, resources, and safe spaces, which drive the force behind the need to be bringing these topics and issues into the classrooms, especially in the elementary years.

**Mental Health & Suicide**

Students who identify as members of the LGBTQ community, especially males, are at a higher risk of suffering from various mental illnesses and suicide (Dempsey, 1994). It seems like there is a new story of a young person taking their life every week, and it has most recently been brought to light in the media. For example, Ellen Degeneres featured a story about a young boy, Tyler Clementi, who committed suicide after been tormented for having sexual relations with another male. In another study, entitled *What Schools Can Do to Help Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Youth*, van Wormer and McKinney determined that failure to take a proactive stance to help youth with gender identity issues is a major cause of psychological problems, leading in some cases to suicide, alcohol and other drug abuse, and homelessness (2003). This is believed to be due to the fact that many young people suppress their sexual orientation confusion, and by doing so, struggle with their own identity and confidence.

**Heterosexual Themed Education**

Often, when formal instruction about sexuality occurs in the classroom, homosexuality is omitted or mentioned in a negative context, according to van Wormer
and McKinney (2003). Although sexuality is a part of the Ontario Physical and Health Education Curriculum (2010), it is up to the discretion of the teacher to navigate and decide what aspects of sexuality to cover, and in what tone it will be delivered. In another study conducted by Dwyer (1997), it was determined that sexual education is very heterosexual based; he feels that schools have the opportunity to do so much, but are doing so little. In a similar study, Uribe and Harbeck argue that high levels of personal prejudice, ignorance, and fear results in negligible intervention by teachers, counselors, administrators and school board members (1991). In the study conducted by Beauchamp, she discovered that teachers do in fact have a great responsibility and impact on the LGBTQ students in their classes. She states that by challenging the heterosexual themed education curriculum that many of us see in schools, we can normalize all types of love and represent all learners (2004).

**Identity Struggle**

According to the van Wormer and McKinney study, there are many issues that LGBTQ youth struggle with in their own journey of discovering their sexual identity. One of the major reoccurring issues they found in young students was the dissonance between their spirituality and sexuality, when coming from an upbringing of a religious nature. They learned that the guilt and feelings many of these students are having can sometimes be too overwhelming (2003). This is an important aspect to consider when looking at the importance of allowing these students to feel safe, confident, and comfortable in their classroom, because often they are not finding that solace in their homes.
Homophobia From Peers and Classmates

In the van Wormer and McKinney study, much of the literature reviewed described what both teachers and students can do to help LGBTQ youth. It is clear that there is a clear correlation between the comfort and happiness levels of LGBTQ youth and the perceived acceptance of their peers and school educators (2003). One of the strategies listed was to include sexuality content material into the classroom, throughout the school year. This content may include films, music videos, poetry, books, and current news stories. By bringing this in, educators are adding another dynamic to the classroom, where all sexual orientations, families, and identities are represented.

This reinforced my topic of research greatly in that it is in line with my personal thoughts, and cements my beliefs on the importance of having these conversations, with full transparency and honesty. In another study that looks at the psychological outcomes of homophobic bullying, states that bullying from peers, especially in the adolescent years, has a lasting effect on the LGBTQ individual. Not only does it result in mental health issues, but can also cause the individual to attempt to change their sexuality, and to act out in doing so (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett & Koenig, 2008).

Existing Children and Young Adult Literature With LGBTQ Themes

LGBTQ Literature

According to Hunt, censorship is not a new phenomenon in the field of children’s literature (2001). Each year there are a number of new books, aimed at all age groups, which force the reader to reconsider and assess what is considered “normal,” specifically regarding LGBTQ issues. Some of these books include:
Same-sex Parenting/Homosexuality

- *And Tango Makes Three*, By: P. Parnell & J. Richardson
- *The Story of our Family*, By: P. Thorn & L. Green
- *Picnic in the Park*, By: J. Griffiths
- *The New Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, By: B. McMurray

Homosexuality

- *King and King*, By: L. De Haan & S. Nijland
- *Boy Meets Boy*, By: D. Levithan (Young Adult Fiction)

Gender Identity

- *My Princess Boy*, By: C. Kilodavis
- *The Sissy Duckling*, By: H. Fierstein

Transgender

- *Bills New Frock*, By: Anne Fine
- *The Sweet In-between*, By: Sheri Reynolds
- *Be Who you Are*, By: Jennifer Carr

I read an extremely informative paper written by Clyde (2004) entitled *Homosexuality in Literature for Young People: The Story and Access to the Story*. In this article, Clyde speaks about the literature that exists including themes of sexuality, and how it is being used and received in today’s world. Clyde states that many schools and public libraries are denying children access to controversial literature, especially those with themes of homosexuality. Clyde challenges the process in which public institutions decide which books will be on the shelves, and states that there should be an ethical
process in which this happens, to make sure all members of each diverse community are represented. This was a brilliant paper to read and has provided me with yet another facet to explore in this study.

**Controversy and Resistance**

There has been a lot of controversy over some of the books with themes of sexuality. In a literature review of *And Tango Makes Three*, Young explains that this story, that recounts the true story of 2 male penguins that raise a chick as part of their family, has been scrutinized for being unsuitable for young children (2011). One of the authors of the book, Parnell, indicates that many parents and teachers feel anxious discussing sexuality with their children or students. He feels that his book provides a good resource for parents and teachers so that they don’t have to feel like they are choosing the wrong words; they have the book to facilitate conversations for them (Young, 2011). This is very in line with what I am looking to explore, and I have seen first hand how this particular book has been used to facilitate such conversations in the elementary classroom.

It is one thing to know that an increasing number of books exist in which there are gay, lesbian, and transgendered characters or themes, but whether or not young people actually have access to these books is another matter. Another study, conducted by Rothbauer and McKechnic (1999), discovered that school libraries are for the most part getting on board and providing a large number of books for student and teacher access. Among these books, are those with sexuality themes (1999).

In a more recent study, Hermann-Wilmarth reveals that more teacher education programs should be addressing these topics and showing future educators how to use
these tools in the classroom (2007). She states that although educators will likely face resistance from their students parents, colleagues, or administration, the more understanding and experience they have surrounding these topics, the more confident they will feel responding to the situation (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007).

A news release from Canadian Press Newswire, states that the Surrey School Board in British Columbia rejected such books with queer themes in 2003. They deemed the books to be inappropriate for use as resources in the classroom. Similar boards in the United States have taken a similar stance, attempting to put restrictions in place to keep these types of books out of the classroom.

**How to Implement Children’s Literature into the Classroom**

A literature review done by Cart (2002) for a children’s book entitled *The Sissy Duckling*, a book focusing on gender stereotyping through a humorous duck named Elmer, states that the book allows it to be easier for younger students to relate to the character – since the main character is not that of an adult. Many children have a much easier time exploring different themes and lessons when they can relate to the characters involved, however by using fictional, unrealistic characters to explore these types of topics has been proven most beneficial (Cart, 2002).

In another article, a high school teacher named Vicky Greenbaum (1994), recounts her first hand experiences using books with themes of sexuality in her high school English classes. She explains that over each semester, she noticed her students’ increased comfort levels in addressing LGBTQ topics. She states that it was not until students started disclosing that they were having issues with their sexuality, or being harassed because of it, that she realized just how important it was to be using these types
of books in the classroom. Students explained that her classroom was one that they felt safe in, because of the conversations being had that normalized different sexualities (Greenbaum, 1994).

In the same article, Greenbaum explains that she believes her students developed tolerance and acceptance because they could identify characters who were LGBTQ, and could ask critical questions and have discussions about the usually silenced topic. She states that teachers need to know that because exclusion and fear create pain and distance, it is important that all gay and lesbian voices are heard in the classroom (Greenbaum, 1994). This was a very powerful piece of literature to read, because it provided me with a teacher’s first hand account of just how effective and beneficial these proposed practices are.

Although it was difficult to find a large amount of recent literature directly related to this topic area, the literature I did find proved to be very supportive of my research as well as consistent with my own thoughts towards bringing these conversations and themes into the classroom. It is clear that there is a need to address many issues surrounding members in the LGBTQ communities, and make sure that every classroom allows each student to feel represented, safe, and included. Whether our students are struggling with their own sexual identity, are from queer families, or have people in their lives who identify as members of the LGBTQ community, we must make sure that the curriculum reflects this. I believe that children’s and young adult literature is an ideal and effective way to do so.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Procedure

I first conducted a comprehensive literature review looking at existing research and relevant findings. The purpose of the literature review was to gain insight on the topic area, as well as compare and contrast the existing literature with my data analysis. The sources used for the literature review are academic articles, government reports, and professional development resources. I used articles that are peer reviewed as well as both recent and relevant.

My research is a qualitative study, in which semi-structured interviews were conducted and data analyzed. I performed face-to-face interviews with three current, practicing educators. I found educators who met my specific requirements, which included being currently employed and teaching in the elementary grade levels, as well as demonstrating these practices in the classroom, by having conversations with colleagues, friends, and family in the field. I looked at the various aspects of how children’s and youth adult literature can be used to facilitate candid conversations regarding sexuality, and related topics (homosexuality, same-sex marriage, same-sex parents, adoption, etc.). Through speaking with fellow colleagues and teachers in the field, I now know that there is a wealth of books that are being used in the classroom to spark these kinds of conversations, and I was looking to understand the strategies and approaches being used by practicing educators. I wanted to know what variety of books teachers have in their classrooms, how they use these books, if these books are used throughout the year or only during focused lessons, and any other strategies, beliefs, or approaches that participants describe during the data collection.
Upon completion of each interview, I transcribed the interview for the purpose of data analysis. I then organized my findings using a colour coding technique, making sure to look for themes, categories, patterns, supporting, or contrasting responses in support of my topic area. After the data analysis was complete, I began my final write up for the Master of Teaching Research Paper. In April, I presented my topic area, findings, and results to my colleagues and faculty on the Research Day held at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education.

**Instruments of Data Collection:**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with three participants, all of whom are current educators in the public school system. Each participant was asked the same 16 questions, (APPENDIX A), as well as probing questions that build on their individual responses. These probing questions differed among the participants. The questions built on such questions as the following:

1. **What are some of the diversities that you see in your school community? In your own classroom? (Race, socioeconomic status, etc.)**

2. **Have you ever had a student(s) in your classroom that has identified as LGBT, or from a queer family?**

3. **If so, how did you make adjustments to your program, to navigate any particular conversations involving the diversity of those students?**

4. **How do you use children’s literature in your day-to-day classroom lessons?**

5. **How do you go about choosing the children’s books in your class library?**
Participants

I looked for three participants who are currently teaching in a public school with primary, junior, and intermediate aged students. I wanted to find teachers who are currently teaching with this age group because I am focusing on the use of children’s and young adult literature, and these are most often found and utilized in the primary, junior, and intermediate classrooms.

I wanted to find teachers who have a range of experiences, years taught, additional qualifications, and approaches to this specific topic. These qualities are important to me as I recognize that teachers of different ages and experience levels may have very different approaches and beliefs on this topic. I hope to be able to find teachers from various school boards, not just in the Toronto area. I recognize that Toronto is a place of vast diversity, and thus, perhaps more liberal in the approach to homosexual topics and issues. It would be beneficial to my research if I could find participants from other parts of Ontario, where perhaps the administrative support or community reactions are different than that found in larger cities.

Data Collection and Analysis

I audio recorded each interview using my iPad recording device. That way, I had no problem transcribing each interview, making sure to gather all the content shared, for the purpose of analysis. Each interview ranged in length between 30-60 minutes, depending on the participant’s responses and probing questions. Upon transcribing the interview, I read and reread the data, focusing on main points, significant quotes, and similarities and differences shared by each interviewee. I used a chart as well as colour coding techniques to organize the data in an efficient, systematic way.
I also took field notes by hand as the interviews were taking place, underlining/highlighting parts that I would like to pay close attention to upon transcribing and organizing the data.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

All of the participants took part on a voluntary basis and were asked to participate in a recorded interview. The participants were treated with respect, honesty, and in complete confidence. I assured each teacher that if she wished to stop the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time she may do so. The data collected from each interview were kept on my computer, and access to the raw data was limited to my research supervisor and myself.

Prior to the interview, each participant was sent the informed consent form (APPENDIX B) and asked to read the form, sign, and return it to me. The informed consent form let the participants know that they had the right to withdraw at any time. The form also informed the participants that their names and schools would be replaced with pseudonyms, and their participation in the study would be kept completely confidential. Each participant kept a signed copy for her individual records.

**Limitations**

The main limitation to my study is the small sample size. I have only interviewed three teachers, and therefore these views, beliefs, and practices are not generalizable to the larger teaching population. The participants may not represent the diverse nature of our teaching community. Despite the small sample size, I believe the research will still be of great benefit to myself and the teaching community since it provides insight for me as
I start my teaching career, as well as rich descriptive accounts of practice that may open the eyes of educators who are resistant or lack confidence in this topic area.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

The findings of this research were collected from interviews conducted with three different educational professionals. All of the interviewees had both similar and different experiences using LGBTQ themed literature across different curriculum areas, with the intent of creating an inclusive, safe classroom for all their learners. All three professionals provided a great deal of valuable insight, where personal experiences, both in and out of the classroom, were shared. The data from the interviews were reviewed and common themes in the topic area were extracted. All participants will be kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms.

The first participant, Alice, currently teaches at a middle school in a rural area west of a major urban center in Ontario. She completed her Bachelor of Education at the University of Toronto, and later went on to complete Additional Qualifications (AQs) in French as a Second Language (FSL) parts 1 and 2, and Special Education part 1. She has experiences teaching literacy, ESL, French, Science, Drama, and Math across all Primary and Junior grade levels. She began teaching in her 40s, and has been teaching full time for over 20 years.

Bette is a teacher at an Elementary School in Toronto. Bette obtained her teaching degree in Ireland, with an undergraduate degree in English. She later moved to Ontario with her family, and has been teaching in Toronto for over 20 years. She started her career as a primary teacher, and later taught in a grade 5 classroom, where she taught the core subjects English, Social Studies, Math, and the Arts. She later obtained her AQ in librarianship, and has been working as the school’s full time Librarian for five years.
Finally, Helena is a Middle School teacher in a mid-size urban area in Ontario. She did her undergraduate degree at McGill University (Montreal, QC) in the sciences, and later completed her Bachelor of Education at the University of Western Ontario (London, ON). She holds AQs in Special Education, part 1, as well as English as a Second Language, part 1. She has been teaching for six years, and has experience in grades 4-8. She is currently teaching a grade 6 class, where she is in charge of their English, Math, Social Sciences, and Art curriculum.

**Themes**

The most prevalent themes that emerged from the three different interviews are as follows:

- Motivation for creating an inclusive classroom community
- Professional development/training (or lack of) aimed at creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ identified students or students who come from LGBTQ families
- The prevalence of LGBTQ identified students/LGBTQ families in the school community
- How educators choose the literature they will have present in their classroom library
- The techniques/use of LGBTQ themed literature in the classroom
- The motivation for educators to use LGBTQ literature across their curriculum
- Resistance from the school community that educators face when introducing these sensitive topics
Motivation for creating an inclusive classroom community

In order to create an inclusive classroom and school community, there must be a motivation that drives the educators to do so. Although there is an emphasis on inclusive education practices within many teacher education programs across Canada, it is up to the educator instructing the class to implement them. It was during the interviews with all three participants, that I truly understood and felt the passion and motivation each of these teachers possessed to create classroom and school communities that allowed for each student, regardless of his or her diversities, to feel a part of the community.

Alice’s motivation for working tirelessly to create an inclusive community comes strongly from her past, and her own adversities she has felt. As mentioned earlier, Alice started her teaching career in her 40s, and worked in the corporate world prior to this. As an individual who has faced discrimination and ridicule for her own diversities, she holds a personal interest in making sure that is not something that the students in her classroom will experience. She later stated that “no matter who my students are – white, black, purple, straight, gay, disabled – they all have a place in my classroom and it is my job to make sure they feel that way.” As stated in Chapter 2, 69% of LGBTQ students reported that they have faced verbal or physical harassment in the classroom (GLSEN). Alice spoke a lot about bullying in the classroom, and what she has observed over the course of her career. She believes that “every student has faced bullying of some sort, creating safe spaces helps with this.”

Bette’s motivation to provide a safe space, (currently the library), for all her students comes from her years of “watching the faces and baggage of students change.” Bette has been teaching in Toronto for over 20 years, and spoke a lot about the evolution of her own school community over this time period. Part of her motivation also comes
from the administration and professional development she has been exposed to in recent years. She explains,

There is a real push to find ways to speak to all students. I am lucky that I have many resources to do so in the Library, but I know there are other teachers in the school that are doing so too.

Finally, Helena’s motivation and willingness to create an inclusive classroom for all her students comes from a very genuine place. As a fairly new teacher in the profession, she shared a lot of insight on what she does to create an inclusive space from the very first day of school. For example, for the first week of school she does not go into any curriculum, but rather facilitates a number of team building type activities. She further explained that,

Creating a class where all of my students feel safe isn’t really something that I have had to given much thought to… it just, makes sense. During my B. Ed at Western there was always a lot of talk about making sure our class felt safe and our teaching practices were inclusive. I guess it has just become something that I do without paying much attention to it?

**Professional development/training (or lack of) aimed at creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ identified students or students who come from LGBTQ families**

Creating inclusive environments for all students, specifically those who identify as LGBTQ, comes naturally for some educators, and is more challenging for others. As previously stated in my literature review, the number of children that come from same-sex parenting families has nearly tripled from 2006-2011 (Statistics Canada, 2011). For this reason, it is obvious that this is an area that should be covered in teacher pre-service programs, as well as professional development opportunities once in the field. In my own experience in teacher education, inclusive practices are definitely something that has a large emphasis in the program. However, I do not feel that there has been adequate time
spent on navigating the possible issues with various strategies when there are students in the LGBTQ community in one’s classroom.


Both Bette and Alice did not experience any education or exposure to LGBTQ issues in their teacher pre-service program. Alice explained that there was “none specifically that I can remember. Everything I did in my classroom came from my own belief system and what felt right.” Both teachers indicated that they had been a part of various professional development opportunities in the past few years that have covered some issues and topics with this particular theme. Bette explains that,

> Even though there are some workshops and resources posted, it is really up to you to take it upon yourself to get informed and develop your own beliefs and practices. This is something that I can imagine is particularly hard for teachers who have young families or lots on their plate – professional development in teaching is like a full time job!

Meanwhile, Helena spoke about many different discussions and resources surrounding LGBTQ curriculum and topics that were provided during her B. Ed at Western, as well as what continues to emerge in her daily teaching experiences. It was evident that she feels confident to deal properly with these topics in an effective way.
The prevalence of LGBTQ identified students/LGBTQ families in the school community

As mentioned above, there is supporting evidence that indicates the number of students who either identify as LGBTQ, or are from same-sex families is increasing. Three of the educators interviewed spoke to this, and indicated that this was certainly the case in their school communities.

Alice was the educator with that indicated the most diverse school community. As a teacher in the Greater Toronto Area for over 20 years, she had many stories of students who came from various diversities. Specifically she explained,

I really saw it all! Rich, poor, white, Asian, Muslim, straight, gay, questioning, kind, rude... you name it!

And,

I had one young boy whose father had a sex change while he was in my school... he was mostly quiet about it.

Helena also had some experience with students in her classroom who are in the LGBTQ community. Specifically, she talked about her experiences with a female student in her class this year that was adopted by her two fathers. She explained that this student “forced her to reevaluate her curriculum and practices, and pay close attention to all her students that come from different families.” The student’s fathers were “very supportive, and frequently corresponded with me about ways to make the student feel comfortable with her classmates about her experience with same-sex parents.”

How educators choose the literature they will have present in their classroom library

When I reflect on my own experiences, both as a volunteer and student teacher in various classrooms, I recognize that each teacher’s classroom library looks different. It
was important for me to understand how different educators navigate choosing the literature that is available in their classroom. One of the major themes that I took from each educator was the importance they each found in avoiding the tokenizing of these topics. One of my hesitations going into this research was that I would find teachers who felt they were using the literature effectively, but instead conducted a lesson on this area only once a year, using a stereotypical book or movie to facilitate the topic. Fortunately, all three of the educators felt it important to do the opposite of that, and use diverse literature throughout the year in a more natural, authentic way.

All three educators had different ways of choosing their literature for their classroom. First, Alice is an avid book collector, and stated that “(she) never really stops looking for books to use in the classroom.” She does a lot of reading on her own time, and uses literature across all subjects in her classroom. She also uses the resources available within her school to expand her classroom library. She explains,

I work with the librarian to find and use the books in her collection, too. I showed picture books to illustrate everything we were discussing – it was almost a form of validation. I would say things like “See, I am not making this stuff up!!”

As a librarian, Bette’s technique to choose meaningful literature is a large part of her job description. She explained that the library is a place that has become more popular since she took over, and “the students basically run it themselves – it makes my job easy!” She explained that,

Whenever the students come to me with a new book they want to read, I get online and order it. I have a big budget that lets me buy many new books every year. Last week, I took a class to Chapters with me… I had a competition with each Junior class, and whoever could come up with the best proposal as to why they deserved to come with me – won. They had a blast.
Helena relied on the first few weeks of school to get to know her learners, and chose meaningful literature accordingly. She uses various techniques to learn about the diversities among her students, and takes every opportunity to find and purchase children’s books to add to her classroom collection. She explains, “it is very exciting for my students to find a new book on the shelf. They always feel the need to come tell me that there is a book on the shelf that they have not seen before… as if I didn’t know! I figure it is better for them to stumble upon these books themselves, instead of me sitting them down and making a scene about the book with adopted siblings.” Helena shared that she often uses the Internet to find new titles that fit different challenges, lessons, or opportunities in her classroom. “I just Google “same-sex parenting children’s books” and I go from there.”

The techniques/use of LGBTQ themed literature in the classroom

According to Young, there are many books being published every year that cover controversial issues. Although there will always be resistance, these are tools that need to be used during all stages of child development (2011).

All three teachers had experience using LGBTQ literature to introduce various topics such as of love, identity, sexuality, and families. Alice and Helena, both classroom teachers, also spoke about the various titles of LGBTQ picture books that were present in their classroom library throughout the year. Some of these include And Tango Makes Three, My Princess Boy, and the Sissy Duckling.

Alice was especially avid about the use of all texts, especially those that focused on gender identity and sexualities. She spoke about a recent lesson where she had her students challenge gender stereotypes in the media. She explained that she feared
“tokenizing the topics of being gay,” and did want her students to only think about people who identified as homosexual as the stereotypes that are shown in the recent picture books (white, male, etc.) She added,

What about mixed-race or gay couples – are they seen in standard ads? Do we find pictures of families like George Smitherman’s or Kathleen Wynne’s? We don’t, except in news stories or in books specifically highlighting the theme, like: *David’s Two Dads*.

As previously stated, Helena currently has a student in her class who has two fathers. She explained “this year I felt especially responsible for balancing the books I read to represent each of my students. The first book I read during the first few months of school was *And Tango Makes Three*, this was perfect for the group because they were able to have conversations that made sense to them, about characters that were animals.” Helena made a point of emphasizing that she didn’t want to use these types of books purely just for lessons, but throughout the school year as casual conversations. When I asked her to explain what she meant, she said,

I don’t want to sit everyone down and be like “class, today we are going to talk about families with two dads.” Instead I want it just to be something that is spoken about in the classroom. This is why I have books on my shelf that represent all diversities. I have fairytales that cover different races, books about divorce, depression, cancer, sexuality, and other things.

*Resistance from the school community that educators face when introducing these sensitive topics*

Although LGBTQ issues are becoming more commonly spoken about and represented both in the media, and daily life, it is still a topic that can be very controversial for many individuals. In fact, even though many Ontario school boards
identify as “safe spaces” for all students, it is still very much a topic that many educators with whom I have spoken or worked fear bringing into their classroom.

I asked the three teachers whom I interviewed if they had experienced any resistance from their students, colleagues, administrators, or parents in response to the LGBTQ topics covered in their class. Alice said that she has not had any resistance from parents or colleagues, but has had some students in her class visibly uncomfortable with the topics. She provided the following example,

There was a student who constantly brought up the question of “gay” in disgust and much of that year’s equity education was in rebuttal to him. Once I mentioned casually that he probably knew more gay people than he realized, since his stereotypes were so over the top. I added that, based on stats, two people in his class were gay. In a total panic, he looked around the room frantically from face to face, and then gulped, “can it be a girl?”

Bette on the other hand had experience where the school community challenged some of her choices of literature that she had on the library shelves. She said, “although we are progressive and the student body has changed over my years here, there is still some backlash that we see from the parents.” She spoke about a new Archie book collection that had a character that is gay. One of the students took it home and when asked by his mother what he was reading, he spoke about this particular character. The mother was “in the school Monday morning wanting to hear why I had such a book on my shelf.” Bette explained that,

Since the school and school board openly support equity – for instance, having us put rainbow signs on our doors if we offer a safe zone for kids, they could hardly object to the kind of books I have in the library that address these issues.

Helena had not experienced any resistance from the students and school community that she could remember. She attributed this mostly to the fact that her
students had grown up in an environment where all types of love were normalized. She also said that her “Principal is very progressive, and often making sure we are doing our best to create those inclusive environments.”

There are many parts of each of the three interviews that link back to the literature review conducted in Chapter 2. The educators were consistent with the data that indicates the various issues faced by students in the LGBTQ community, and are certainly doing their part to address the gaps, and bring tools into their classroom to represent each of their students.

Each of these participants were extremely open, progressive, and confident in their teaching practices. Although I focused on the use of literature in their classrooms, I learned that their resources and techniques go far behind just the diverse library they have in their classrooms. Each of the educators interviewed are committed to creating a community of diverse learners where each student feels safe, represented, and respected. Using literature to create this was but just a small part of their teaching practices.

Each of the above listed themes were significant across all three participants, and it was profound for me to understand the apparent similarities, and some differences, across the three. Looking at the motivation, as well as effective techniques behind these teaching practices was beneficial, and learning why some educators are using these resources, while others are not, was empowering for me as I transition into the field. By analyzing this data and pulling out these particular themes, I was able to identify suggested practices, future research areas, and the full effect this will have on my own teaching career.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Implications

This study has had a great impact on me, both as an educator and researcher. I learned an incredible amount about the researching process, the education community, and practical strategies and suggestions that will be sure to impact my future teaching practices.

My main research question when entering into this study was how the use of children’s and young adult literature help in the facilitation of conversations about aspects and issues in the LGBTQ community. I learned a great deal surrounding these practices, but also where the motivation comes from for the educators, as well as some issues they face when using such resources.

I learned that this is but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to bringing LGBTQ themes into the classroom. It was while discussing these topics with my participants, and other members of the teaching community, that it became clear that there has certainly been progress and growth in this area. However, it was equally as obvious to me that there is an enormous amount that still needs to be done to drive these ideas forward, and create environments and integration into the curriculum that is properly in line with each learner in the classroom, not just the traditional heterosexism themed lessons and materials that we know of.

Another way this research experience has provided me insight was having the opportunity to go into the teachers’ classrooms and see first hand just how passionate and involved they were in their students’ development and well-being. The teachers not only provided me with strategies and ideas to create a safe and welcoming environment for LGBTQ students, but also further showed me just what positive impact effective teachers
can have on their school community. The three teachers I interviewed are the brave ones, the individuals who are breaking down barriers and bringing tough and controversial topics into their classrooms.

I learned that there are more tools and resources available to us as educators than I had anticipated, but although they are available, it is very much up to the individual professional to seek them out. I learned that the support is there to have these conversations in the classroom, but one must be ready for resistance and have a reason as to what he or she is doing. I learned that the LGBTQ community is very much present across all school boards and grades, and that this number is growing. I learned that for the most part, students are accepting of their peers who are different; it has become much more normalized than when I was a student.

I believe that no matter who one is as an educator, what his or her background is, sexuality, or beliefs, we must leave our own thoughts and biases at the door and provide a space that is judgment free and safe for all learners. I believe we need to continue fighting for the Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in all schools, and encourage students to stand up for one another’s rights and safety.

It is my hope that pre-service education programs will continue to recognize that these students do not always have a voice, and that we must challenge our own biases when deciding what we do and do not bring into the classroom. I believe that there needs to be more of a focus on the different materials and resources available, as well as up-to-date practices with these themes in the curriculum.


**List of Recommended Practices**

There are many different recommendations and suggestions that I gained from this research. Reflecting on the literature review was a beneficial step for me in this process, as I was able to identify the consistency with the research and my own findings. Worrmer and McKinney have done a great deal of research surrounding the prevention methods that schools can do to help LGBTQ youth. Creative safe spaces, and using materials that identify all types of love, not just heterosexual love and relationships, is the most beneficial way to do so (2003). Each of the three educators interviewed are doing just that, and truly making a difference for their students.

Although reading the research that already exists was important, it was interviewing and hearing these educators’ stories face-to-face that I gained the most from. Some of the most significant recommended practices identified in the data from the interviews are listed below.

- Get to know your students from the very beginning. Learn what they like and dislike; learn their culture and religion. Learn their adversities and diversities. Once you know this information, you can choose curriculum, literature, and tailor your teaching to your unique learners.

- Research new books on LGBTQ topics regularly. The number being published is increasingly rapidly. There are many great ones that can add to your classroom library – but it is up to you to seek these titles out.

- Be confident when bringing controversial topics (LGBTQ themes and issues) into your classroom. Be sure to have reasoning and support as to why you are doing so for (if) and when you face resistance from the school community.
• Avoid tokenizing LGBTQ topics. Do not decide that you are going to talk about same-sex parenting one day for one lesson. Have these topics woven throughout your curriculum during the length of the school year. If you tokenize these topics, it may give the students the wrong message.

• Reach out to parents of students who are in the LGBTQ community, if possible, to best come up with effective ways to create the safest and most enjoyable environment for them.

• Seek out support and resources from colleagues, and LGBTQ organizations locally.

Limitations

Although this study was significant for me in regards to the understanding and learning of how to best meet the needs of our LGBTQ students through literature, there were certainly some limitations. The main limitation to my study is the small sample size. I have only interviewed three teachers, and therefore these views, beliefs, and practices are not generalizable to the larger teaching population. The participants do not necessarily represent the diverse nature of our teaching community, but rather the point of view and experiences of a small number of educators.

Areas for Further Study

As previously mentioned, this is only the beginning as far as what is out there to learn about such teaching practices. Some other research questions or studies that this particular one led me to think about are listed below.
• Student Perspective: What do LGBTQ students feel are the most effective ways to feel represented in the curriculum and safe and included in the classroom and school community?

• Parent Perspective: What do LGBTQ parents feel are the best ways that educators and school administration can best meet the needs of their children?

• How can teachers in the Catholic School Boards navigate the restrictions placed on them regarding LGBTQ themes, while still meeting the needs of and creating inclusive environments for these students?

• How can LGBTQ themed literature be used effectively in the high school grades to challenge heterosexism themed curriculums?

• Case Study – study the tolerance/acceptance levels/incidences of bullying, in classrooms that have diverse literature on their shelves and woven into the curriculum, verses those that do not.

• Pre-service Training: What is being taught to Ontario graduates regarding resources and tools that can be used in the classroom? Where are the gaps? Where does more focus need to be placed?

**Conclusion**

According at Statistics Canada, approximately 2% of the Canadian population identify as LGBTQ (2009). This means that, in a class of 25 students, there is likely to be at least one who identifies their sexuality as not heterosexual. The likelihood of having students in our class who are from LGBTQ families, or know someone in the LGBTQ community is very high. For these reasons, I believe it is so important to bring these themes and topics into our curriculum throughout the school year.
It was through the literature that I read prior to the interviews, as well as the experiences and strategies the three educators shared with me, that my notion regarding the use of literature was confirmed. Children’s literature allows teachers to bring various topics into the classroom through a third person’s voice – characters from stories with whom students are able to identify. There is a large number of children’s books available with LGBTQ themes, and more are being published all the time. These are the books that should be present in each elementary classroom, allowing students who have two moms, or feel like they do not belong in their own body, to feel represented in their own classrooms and school communities.

This research study was a valuable experience for me, and I truly look forward to continuing my growth as an educator with a passion to create an inclusive environment, for the diverse learners I hope to have in my class in the future.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Introduction

Thank you so much for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you and ask you some questions about your classroom and teaching practices. I am looking at the use of children’s literature in facilitating candid conversations about various topics regarding the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community (homosexuality, same-sex marriages, same-sex parenting, adoption, etc.). I will be asking questions regarding your teaching experience, classroom set-up, and your individual approach and beliefs surrounding this topic.

Please do not hesitate to ask me to repeat any questions, or provide further explanation if necessary. The interview should take no longer than 45 minutes.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?
   How many different schools have you worked in?

2. What grade levels do you have experience teaching in?
   What grade level(s) are you currently teaching?

3. A which University did you complete your Bachelor of Education?

4. Do you have hold any Additional Qualifications (AQs)?
   If so, which ones?

5. Did you have any training in your teacher education program on how to best create an inclusive, safe classroom environment for students who identified as
LGBT or come from queer families? If so, please describe this part of your teacher education.

6. What are some of the diversities that you see in your school community? In your own classroom? (race, socioeconomic status, etc.)

7. Have you ever had a student(s) in your classroom that has identified as LGBT, or from a queer family?

8. If so, how did you make adjustments to your program, to navigate any particular conversations involving the diversity of those students?

9. How do you use children’s literature in your day-to-day classroom lessons?

10. How do you go about choosing the children’s books in your class library?

11. What are some of the titles of the books you have used in the past to generate conversations surrounding equity, or traditionally taboo topics? Which books worked well? Which ones did not?

12. What types of conversations do you have with your students when introducing children’s literature with themes of a sensitive nature? (For example: sexuality, pain, bullying, etc.)

13. What are some of the strategies that you use when attempting to generate conversations regarding sexuality?

14. What motivates you to use literature to promote diversity and equity?

15. Have you faced any resistance from your students, administrators, or school community when introducing sensitive literature and discussions? If so, can you explain?

16. Do you have any additional strategies or suggestions for pre-service teachers who want to create an inclusive environment using children and young adult literature?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear _________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the use of certain literature in the classroom for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Arlo Kempf. My research supervisor is Dr. Elizabeth Campbell. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 45 minute interview that will be tape-recorded and transcribed. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my transcripts to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: **Kailee Deacon**

Phone number, email: 647-632-1555  
kailee.deacon@mail.utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Kailee Deacon and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: __________________________________________

Name (printed): ____________________________________

Date: _____________________