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Alysha Mercendetti

St. John Fisher College, Amercendetti_no@sjfc.edu

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Abstract

Overview: Acceptance, whether it be by friends, family, teachers, or peers, is crucial for any teen. Finding acceptance can be significantly more difficult for a teen going through the coming out process or maybe one that has already done so but is still not feeling completely okay in his or her own skin. Along with the fact that the world is highly a heteronormative one, society holds extremely shortsighted views and lacks knowledge on the subject of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning sexualities, and this ultimately plays a huge role in why LGBTQ teens are either too afraid to come out or do not feel the acceptance they should. Feeling alone, and like they cannot relate to anyone around them, causes some teens to turn to suicide. Suicide rates among adolescents who identify as LGBTQ are rising. In her article, "Suicide in Young Adult Literature," Paula Berger acknowledges that, "Teenage suicide has reached epidemic proportions in the United States and is therefore an important issue in contemporary society" (14). She goes on to say that, "... for those teenagers that have suicidal thoughts, these novels can show them that they are neither unique nor alone in their feelings of despair and hopelessness, but others have shared these same feelings and have found constructive ways to handle them" (14-15). Berger expands on how young adult novels on suicide are helpful to readers who have suicidal thoughts. The same concept applies to LGBTQ teens. If they are able to relate to characters in the novels that they read in the classroom, LGBTQ teens will realize that they are not the only ones going through these kinds of experiences, and this is a potential aid in ultimately terminating the issue of suicide among young adults. In his article, "Suicide Risk and Sexual Orientation: A Critical Review," Martin Plöderl proved through individual studies, reviews, and meta-analyses that "sexual minority individuals are at greater risk for suicides and suicide attempts, compared to their heterosexual counterparts" (724). Thus integrating and mainstreaming LGBTQ Young Adult Literature into the classroom setting is beneficial and should be part of the curriculum. It not only helps LGBTQ identifying teens to feel acceptance in their daily lives, but also fosters learning and understanding for heterosexual teens, parents, and teachers.

Keywords

MLA, Writing

Alysha Mercendetti

The Inclusion of LGBTQ YAL in the Curriculum: Can it Foster Acceptance?

Acceptance, whether it be by friends, family, teachers, or peers, is crucial for any teen. Finding acceptance can be significantly more difficult for a teen going through the coming out process or maybe one that has already done so but is still not feeling completely okay in his or her own skin. Along with the fact that the world is highly a heteronormative one, society holds extremely shortsighted views and lacks knowledge on the subject of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning sexualities, and this ultimately plays a huge role in why LGBTQ teens are either too afraid to come out or do not feel the acceptance they should. Feeling alone, and like they cannot relate to anyone around them, causes some teens to turn to suicide.

Suicide rates among adolescents who identify as LGBTQ are rising. In her article, "Suicide in Young Adult Literature," Paula Berger acknowledges that, "Teenage suicide has reached epidemic proportions in the United States and is therefore an important issue in contemporary society" (14). She goes on to say that, "...for those teenagers that have suicidal thoughts, these novels can show them that they are neither unique nor alone in their feelings of despair and hopelessness, but others have shared these same feelings and have found constructive ways to handle them" (14-15). Berger expands on how young adult novels on suicide are helpful to readers who have suicidal thoughts. The same concept applies to LGBTQ teens. If they are able to relate to characters in the novels that they read in the classroom, LGBTQ teens will realize that they are not the only ones going through these kinds of experiences, and this is a potential aid in ultimately terminating the issue of suicide among young adults. In his article, "Suicide Risk and

Sexual Orientation: A Critical Review,” Martin Plöderl proved through individual studies, reviews, and meta-analyses that “sexual minority individuals are at greater risk for suicides and suicide attempts, compared to their heterosexual counterparts”(724). Thus integrating and mainstreaming LGBTQ Young Adult Literature into the classroom setting is beneficial and should be part of the curriculum. It not only helps LGBTQ identifying teens to feel acceptance in their daily lives, but also fosters learning and understanding for heterosexual teens, parents, and teachers.

Because LGBTQ Young Adult Literature is unavailable to teens in many high schools, they have not many outlets for where to turn and tend to lean toward suicide or have suicidal thoughts. Studies suggest that suicide is the second leading causes of death for adolescents in the United States (Fisher 364). The reason high school administrators and authorities backlash at the idea of including LGBTQ literature in their curriculum is in part due to their lack of understanding and knowledge of this topic and the explicit content which they believe it contains, but more importantly is because of the heteronormative society we were raised in. Think about it, from the time we were old enough to understand, men being with women and vice versa was the norm. To have it any other way is considered deviant or abnormal. We subconsciously develop homophobic attitudes, which are offensive and dehumanizing to the LGBTQ community. Once these views are instilled in us, it is difficult to think otherwise; especially when we are not given the tools we need to broaden our minds and become more tolerant of others. In their article, “Moving Beyond the Inclusion of LGBT-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms: Interrogating Heteronormativity and Exploring Intersectionality,” Molly Blackburn and Jill Smith explain, “By heteronormativity, we

mean a way of being in the world that relies on the belief that heterosexuality is normal, which implicitly positions homosexuality and bisexuality as abnormal and thus inferior” (625). Jen Scott Curwood, Megan Schliesman and Kathleen T. Horning make a valid point in their article, “Fight for Your Right: Censorship, Selection and LGBTQ Literature,” when they say, “One of the key ways schools condone homophobia is by failing to include LGBTQ literature in the curriculum” (38). By integrating the theme of LGBTQ into an English Language Arts classroom, it will make the idea of sexualities [other than heterosexual] a more widespread and regular thing, so that we can reverse the heteronormative characteristic of our society, become less homophobic, and more accepting.

Unfortunately, in society today the heteronormative way of thinking takes precedents over anything else, especially in school. Blackburn and Smith state, “From the time they enter school, students are systematically calibrated with ‘normal’ of one of the two gender assignments, male or female” (627). We are brainwashed into thinking that anything else is wrong or unusual. They go on to say, “Requiring adolescents to read a text focusing on a heterosexual couple and to identify with those characters as heterosexuals presents only one option, that of an unchangeable binary: You are either Romeo or Juliet, a boy attracted to a girl or a girl attracted to a boy” (627). It is no wonder adolescents who identify as LGBTQ turn to suicide. It seems in many cases suicide is their only outlet. They cannot relate to anyone or find support at school, and sadly sometimes cannot even find it at home. High school is the time when most LGBTQ identifying individuals go through difficulty with either coming out or feeling comfortable about their sexuality, and this is when they need the most support.

This is why literacy educators play a vital role in the lives of LGBTQ identifying students. Although it is acknowledged that, "...students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or not sure of their sexual orientation are 3.41 times more likely to report a suicide attempt", "Suicide is one of the most preventable causes of violent death," says Douglas Fisher in his article, "The Literacy Educator's Role in Suicide Prevention" (364). Believe it or not, teachers can be the difference between an individual committing suicide or not. The material, lesson plans, and required reading teachers provide their students can help students who identify as LGBTQ to realize they are not alone in their struggles. It may give them the strength and will to keep fighting, although their lives and situations can be difficult at times. Fisher expands this idea by saying, "Teachers can use books [that deal with suicide in sensitive ways or contain LGBTQ characters] like those listed in Table 2 to encourage students to talk about their feelings" (368).

Although he is not the main character in Stephen Chbosky's, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Patrick is a character whom many gay or lesbian readers can relate to. He is not the most popular of people in high school and gets bullied on a daily basis. Yet, Patrick makes such a good role model for readers because of the fact that he is happy with the person that he is, inside and out. He is adventurous, fun and outgoing. Patrick sets an important example for gay and lesbian readers. He teaches them, through his own actions, that is okay to be who they are; and although bully's words and actions can be hurtful, LGBTQ teens should never stop from being and expressing themselves in their own way.

Readers can also learn from the mistakes that Patrick makes in the book. For example, we learn Patrick is seeing the quarterback of the football team, Brad. However,

he agrees to Brad's wishes to keep their relationship a secret from everyone else. Have you ever been in a relationship where your boyfriend or girlfriend did not want others to know? How would that make you feel? This is what happened to Patrick and is also an indication to me that with being LGBTQ sometimes comes the inability to recognize one's own pride or self-worth. In the end, with some serious soul searching, and the help of Charlie, the protagonist of the novel, Patrick is able to come to an understanding that he is not alone and that he has the support of others to get him through his troubles.

I agree with the notion that, "These books provide students with a sense that they are not alone. They give students an opportunity to interact with ideas and consider the consequences of suicide on the people around them" (Fisher 368). Many individuals may not have thought about the impact their lives actually have on others, and this could be a reason that they think about, and even go through with, committing suicide. LGBTQ students need to be reminded their lives are just as sacred as heterosexual individuals, and what better way to show them than through literature. Fisher states, "Literacy educators can become one of the early responders in the adolescent suicide epidemic" (372).

But what happens when literacy educators are not cultured enough themselves to recognize that LGBTQ young adult literature should be integrated into their curriculum? It becomes clear to us what happens through analyzing Sandra Hughes-Hassel's findings in her article, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, And Questioning (LGBTQ)-Themed Literature For Teens: Are School Libraries Providing Adequate Collections?" According to studies from the 2011 National School Climate survey, "Less than half (44.1 percent) of the 8,584 students surveyed...reported that they could find information about LGBTQ-related issues in their school library" (3). The study also reveals that

“across the sample, LGBTQ-themed titles made up an average of 0.4% of each library’s total collection” (6). This is a problem, not only for LGBTQ identifying students, but also for their peers and teachers. If LGBTQ teens cannot find ways to help themselves feel comfortable identifying as such, then how are their heterosexual counterparts supposed to understand them either? Hughes-Hassel, Overberg, and Harris point out, “A lack of LGBTQ-themed literature in school libraries can send a message to LGBTQ teens that the school library is not the place for them, and that their lives and their concerns are not valued there” (10). The message that LGBTQ teens receive is not the complete truth. While high school can be a harsh environment, there are also people who are very much accepting; and there would be more if students were provided the necessary education, which, in my opinion, includes LGBTQ Young Adult Literature.

With the integration of LGBTQ literature comes the overwhelming need for literacy educators to be able to realistically discuss the subject matter. It is their responsibility to be educated and comfortable enough to talk with their students about sexuality. Unfortunately, Catherine Ashcraft’s article, “But How Do We Talk About It: Critical Literacy Practices for Addressing Sexuality With Youth,” exposes that “to date, literacy educators receive little instruction and, indeed, little research exists on facilitating critical discussions about sexuality in classrooms” (598). Still, the call for addressing sexuality in the classroom prevails. Ashcraft emphasizes, “...addressing sexuality is important not only because the current trend to ignore it is impeding current critical literacy efforts, but also because sexuality is itself an important site for students’ critical literacy development” (601). She explains how we need to attend to sexuality, as it is a

growing problem in the classroom setting. Hughes-Hassel, Overberg, and Harris go on to state more of the benefits of integrating LGBTQ material into the curriculum by saying:

LGBTQ-themed literature provides LGBTQ teens with the opportunity to understand what it means to be queer, to learn gay social norms, to vicariously experience the coming out process, to know they are not alone, to connect with others like them, to find positive role models, and, perhaps most importantly, to affirm the fact that they are normal. (4)

In addition to these benefits, LGBTQ literature broadens the minds of students who read it. Whether they are gay, lesbian, transgender, intersex, questioning, or even heterosexual, students who read young adult literature containing LGBTQ themes or characters are expanding their minds and opening up to new perspectives, which ultimately shapes them into more well-rounded students.

Similarly, in “Queer Reading for the English Classroom,” David Blair Rhodes touches on the importance of integrating LGBTQ themes into young adult literature. He calls attention to the idea that the characters in such novels can also be used to “combat” the problem of homophobia and heterosexism that I highlighted previously. Rhodes demonstrates that the inclusion of such themes in the English Language Arts curriculum, “...provides the opportunity for English teachers and teacher-librarians to discuss sexual diversity with their students,” (1) as it is a seemingly difficult subject to address with adolescents. Literacy educators can use the characters from LGBTQ young adult novels to make it easier to teach their students subject matter dealing with sexuality, while LGBTQ students can use them to, “...have access to LGBTQ role models, to read about

their own stories, and to find acceptance and an alternate possibility to an often heterosexist and homophobic reality” (1).

Like Patrick from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, characters such as Holland from the LGBTQ young adult novel, *Keeping You a Secret* by Julie Anne Peters, are perfect examples of characters who can be utilized to teach lessons in the classroom and also to become role models for readers. She can be a figure of admiration for LGBTQ teens because of her strong and unrelenting personality. When she comes out to her friends and family, she is disowned by her mother and kicked out of her house. A lot of her friends do not look at her the same anymore, and she is cut off from everyone and everything that she used to consider her life. However, Holland remains optimistic that everything will turn out okay. She never gives up on life or herself and continues to be the person that she is. This is important for LGBTQ teens to understand, because they need to realize that although their lives may be difficult at times, they have so much to live for, just like any other person.

In addition to LGBTQ teens benefiting, heterosexual teens alike can extract new information and understanding from reading LGBTQ Young Adult Literature. In Sandra Hughes-Hassel, Elizabeth Overberg, and Shannon Harris’ article, they cited research done by Angie Manfredi, which stated, “LGBTQ-themed literature can help all teens understand what it means to have gay friends, family members, classmates, peers, colleagues, and acquaintances” (4). When heterosexual students read stories that have gay or lesbian characters, it aids in their awareness of other sexualities apart from their own. If LGBTQ Young Adult Literature is integrated into the curriculum, then students and even teachers will begin to normalize the idea of having gay and lesbian peers.

I am currently taking a course in Queer Studies and am greatly benefiting from the literature and teachings that my professor provides. Consequently, I decided to take advantage of the resources that I have, and I did a short interview with my professor, Dr. Cunningham, a professor of both English and Women and Gender Studies. The interview was concerning the topic of LGBTQ Literature and her selection of novels for our class to read. When asked why she chose the young adult novel, *Keeping You a Secret* in particular for our class, she replied:

This book deals with many issues faced by LGBTIQ people: coming out, peer bullying and harassment, the need for familial and community support, stereotypes associated with queer identities, feelings of alienation and feelings of joy about being queer-identified. All of these are necessary issues to address in a Queer Studies course. I also chose this text because the characters are very close in age to that of the students in my Queer Studies class, and I felt that students would be able to identify with their struggles. The novel also makes for a good supplement to the theory that the students in my course have to read.

She highlights the fact that readers are able to relate to the material in LGBTQ young adult novels, whether it be on account of their age or the actual experiences that the characters are going through. When students are able to find commonality and shared struggles with the characters in their books, it not only helps them to cope but also enhances their engagement, encourages them to keep reading, and ultimately helps to develop them as more well-rounded students.

After being educated about the benefits of LGBTQ Young Adult Literature, one might ask, if used in college courses, why not high school? I asked Dr. Cunningham if

she thought *Keeping You a Secret* would be appropriate for a high school classroom and she came back with the solid statement:

Yes, I absolutely do. This novel is set in a high school and the central character is in her senior year, so the age range is ideal. More importantly, I think it is imperative that LGBTIQ literature is taught in schools so that students can understand that queer-identified people face many of the same issues that everyone else does, but also that they face discrimination and prejudice. This book also addresses the importance of having Gay Straight Alliances in schools as a means of support and allyship. There are far too many schools in the US that lack this fundamental support.

Unlike some of the literacy educators mentioned previously, Dr. Cunningham grasps the idea that LGBTQ literature is an essential part of the curriculum. She recognizes the positive effects it has on not only LGBTQ-identifying students but heterosexual ones alike. She emphasizes that themes of LGBTQ are not only good for schools to incorporate into their curriculum, but it is a crucial element of their learning as it aids in their understanding. Teens need to realize that they are just like LGBTQ students in many ways. But more importantly, they have to take into account that it is common for LGBTQ students to be poorly treated and singled out. If integration of LGBTQ literature in the classroom setting does nothing more than raises awareness of this issue, then it is at least benefiting those who formerly lacked the knowledge of this growing concern.

Dr. Cunningham demonstrates her final opinion on the inclusion of LGBTQ in Young Adult literature by saying:

It's more than just good; it is imperative. The literature that we teach (or don't teach) is a reflection of the world that we do (or don't) want to live in. Until queer-identified characters are included routinely in the literature that students are taught, LGBTIQ people will continue to be seen as marginalized, not fully normal, not worthy of inclusion. Excluding a group on the basis of an identity factor, whether race, orientation, disability, age, or any other factor, perpetuates and fosters discrimination.

My standpoint on the subject is analogous with that of Dr. Cunningham's. I agree that leaving out the LGBTQ community within the literature which is taught in schools can bring about and further discrimination. One of the main goals is to have readers develop familiarity with the idea of having LGBTQ counterparts so that it may become customary or regular and not so much an abstract or abnormal idea.

Opposing viewpoints, such as the Alabama State Representative Gerald Allen's, who attempted to ban all literature containing homosexual characters or themes, as well as authors, say, "I look at it as protecting the hearts and souls and minds of our children" (Emert). His ban would additionally not allow the state funds to go toward any literature which made gay way of life seem tolerable. But why? What makes heterosexual life superior to that of homosexual life? And who is he to say that it is? The bill went on to state that "books that attacked or criticized homosexuality would still be allowed in libraries under his proposed legislation" (Emert). Telling adolescents what they can and cannot read is doing nothing positive for them. The number of teens who actually enjoy reading is probably lower than we think. And to tell them that they are not permitted to read the books that they want to is only making matters worse.

In addition to some states attempting to get bills passed which banned LGBTQ themed literature, many books containing LGBTQ themes or characters were also challenged during Banned Books Week. Some titles include, but are not limited to: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, for its “coverage of homosexuality,” *Annie on My Mind*, which was actually burned in some schools in Kansas to “avoid controversy,” and *The Color Purple*, for its homosexual characters (“Banned Books Week”). Critics of the banning of books stress that “the idea of a library collection that represents, one political view or one religious view is not a library” (Emert).

My objection, in reference to the comment made by Alabama State Representative Gerald Allen, who claims he is “protecting” the children, lies in the questions: What exactly is he protecting them from? Human beings? People who have nothing wrong with them and are being victimized under the circumstance of their biology? Or perhaps he is “protecting” them from learning to be accepting of their peers no matter what their sexual orientation may be. Allen believes he is protecting these children, but in reality he is brainwashing them into narrow-minded, intolerant individuals who have no sense of the world around them. Maybe if people like Gerald Allen read some young adult literature containing LGBTQ themes or characters, they might learn a thing or two, and their perspectives on the topic might also be somewhat altered.

Although it remains that some literacy educators, parents, and governmental leaders disapprove of the inclusion of LGBTQ into the curriculum, I still stand firm in the idea that it can be highly beneficial. The world we live in is exceedingly heteronormative, but this does not mean that our individual perceptions have to be. Much can be learned

from the inclusion of LGBTQ material in the curriculum, and it is in part our job to make this known. If not, how are we going to achieve acceptance of all individuals?

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