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Abstract

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Fighting to Include LGBTQ+ Curriculum in K-12 Classrooms

Introduction

There is a growing number of articles that have documented that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning¹ (LGBTQ+) youth have experienced worse outcomes in mental and physical health and academic performance as compared to their heterosexual peers (Shannon et al. 2015). In an effort to reduce the educational and health disparities that the LGBTQ+ community experiences laws and policies have been passed to make schools a more inclusive environment (California Department of Education, 2011). Several states have adopted anti-bullying policies and nondiscrimination acts that protect LGBTQ+ students, as well as included requirements that classrooms include LGBTQ+ curriculum. By passing these policies the hope is that heteronormativity is challenged inside and outside the classroom, and that schools can start becoming spaces of inclusion and acceptance for LGBTQ+ students. However, since the passing of these laws has the conversation of LGBTQ+ issues commenced in K-12 classrooms? This thesis will begin by exploring the experience of LGBTQ+ youth in schools and the laws and policies that have been passed in an effort to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ students. Proceeded by the research question and methodology used to review the extensive peer-reviewed literature. Lastly, ending in a discussion and recommendation on how to better include LGBTQ+ curriculum in K-12 classrooms. I argue that educators and school leaders play an essential role in the inclusion of LGBTQ+ curriculum in classrooms and must work to become an ally and not a barrier to the acceptance of LGBTQ+ students.

¹ The term queer and LGBTQ+ are used interchangeable throughout this thesis as both terms are umbrella terms for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual or cisgender.

Experience of LGBTQ+ Youth in Schools

Schools are often thought of as being at the center of education and learning. A safe space where all students can engage with the content and experience the joys of knowledge. However, that is not the experience that many students have access too. Queer students must face additional challenges that are oftentimes exacerbated by school climate and sentiment towards LGBTQ+ issues. More specifically, research has proven that LGBTQ+ students experience higher levels of health and educational disparities when compared to their gender-conforming and straight peer (Snapp et al. 2015).

More than 85% of LGBTQ+ students report being harassed in school because of their sexual or gender identity (Biegel and Kuehl, 2010). According to a report published in 2012 by Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) 63% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation (Kosciw et al. 2012). 86.2% of queer students report being verbally harassed, 44.1% were physically threatened, and 20% report being physically attacked because of their actual or perceived sexual orientations or gender identity (Kosciw et al. 2008). These statistics demonstrate that queer students must constantly be on the lookout for their safety in spaces that should make it their priority to ensure their safety, schools.

Since LGBTQ+ students must constantly be on alert for their safety, they begin to experience difficulties in other aspects of their lives. For instance, attendance rates for queer students reveal that 32.7% miss school a day for fear of their safety at school (Biegel and Kuehl, 2010). Multiple absences would thus lead to academic performance being affected. Additionally, dropout rates reveal that LGBTQ+ students are more likely to drop out of school due to a hostile school environment, discrimination, and the overall discomfort of not being accepted by their peers, teachers, and staff (Palmer et al. 2016). Queer students also experience higher rates of

depression, anxiety, and suicidality as a result of high homophobic victimization in schools (Poteat and Espelage 2007). This demonstrates the need for LGBTQ+ students to have teachers, counselors, and administrators become allies that advocate for their academic and emotional needs.

Therefore, with the rise of information reporting on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in school, educators and administrators can now begin to work towards improving their response to ensuring their LGBTQ+ students feel safe and welcomed in school. However, how are states responding to LGBTQ+ students' needs? Can teachers and school leadership count on the support of laws and policies in order to defend themselves from the pushback they may receive in promoting LGBTQ+ inclusion?

Laws and Policies in Place to Protect LGBTQ+ Students

Since 2010, California has been the leading state to push for the inclusion of LGBT content in classrooms. One of their most innovative acts was passed in 2011 called the "Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act" (SB 48), which requires the representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons in the social sciences who have contributed to the political, economic, and social development of California and the United States (California Department of Education, 2019). This act would consequently prompt other states, such as Colorado and New Jersey, to adopt their version of including LGBT content into their curriculum. However some states responded negatively from the passing of this law, such as Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas, all of who prohibit the discussion of LGBTQ+ content within schools in a law known as "No Promo Homo" law (Leins, 2019). According to research conducted by GLSEN, students attending school with such laws experience less support from educators and other students, as well as less accessibility to LGBTQ+-related resources (Gay, L. 2019).

In 2012, California passed “Seth’s Law” (AB 9), which require public schools to “update their anti-bullying policies and programs, and [focus their efforts] on protecting students who are bullied based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity/gender expression, as well as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, disability, and religion” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012). As a result of Seth’s Law, nineteen other states have also adopted anti-bullying policies that protect students from being bullying based on their sexual or gender identity. Furthermore, in 2013 California passed the “School Success and Opportunity Act” (AB 1266), which would allow transgender students to fully participate in all school activities like sports teams and have access to facilities that match their gender identity (Ammiano, 2013). A total of twenty states have adopted similar laws that protect transgender students from the exclusion of activities such as sports and clubs because of their gender identity.

Research Question

While there have been some accomplishments on advocating and fighting for LGBTQ+ students’ right to a safe and inclusive school environment my research question arises. Since the passing of the California Healthy Youth Act, the FAIR Education Act, and others like it, has the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics commenced in K-12 classrooms? If policies and laws have been passed in an effort to ensure that LGBTQ+ students find the support and acceptance needed for them to excel inside and outside the classroom on an institutional level, then are teachers, administrators, and district or county directors taking the initiative to include LGBTQ+ curriculum in K-12 classrooms?

Methodology

An analysis of peer-reviewed articles on LGBTQ+ curriculum implementation, critique, and recommendations on incorporation was conducted in order to determine the current

conditions (acceptance/ pushback) on content inclusion found in K-12 classrooms. The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) was used to gather the peer-reviewed articles. Keywords utilized to isolate articles relevant to this research were phrases such as “LGBT curriculum K-12,” “gay and lesbian curriculum,” and “queer curriculum.” A total of forty-six articles were collected, but only thirty-eight were reviewed as they connected directly to responding to the current conditions of implementations. Reasons for excluding some articles were their country of publication was outside of the United States or their study was conducted on higher education implementation. Out of thirty-eight articles selected only one discussed the experience of queer folx of Color and did so in high education content, not K-12. Secondary data on the experience of LGBTQ+ students in schools and the allocated statistics came from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). Secondary data on laws and policies passed were found through the California Department of Education (CDE).

Conditions of LGBTQ+ curriculum in schools

While there has been a fight to include LGBTQ+ curriculum in K-12 classrooms through the passing of laws and policies, there has been an effort to investigate and gather data indicative as to whether or not there has been an implementation of LGBTQ+ curriculum in classrooms. In the text “Navigating the relationship between policy and practice: competing discourses of fear and care in teachers’ sense-making about the FAIR Education Act,” author Bethy Leonardi (2017) argues that the creation of policies such as the FAIR Education Act are the start of discussing gender and sexual diversity (GSD), but they are not enough. More specifically, teachers who are responsible for teaching GSD experience a level of fear that holds them back

from achieving the goal of the FAIR Education Act, which is to disrupt heteronormativity as the ‘social order’ of schools (Leonardi, 2017).

Similarly, Jaqueline Ullman (2018), author of “Breaking out of the (Anti) Bullying ‘Box’: NYC Educators Discuss Trans/Gender Diversity Inclusive Policies and Curriculum,” agrees that teachers and administration are not getting to the root of the problem when attempting to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ students via policy implementation. For instance, rather than questioning why schools must regulate student body (through the creation of policy regulating toilet access) and regulate identity (through the use of a gendered name) teachers and administration is failing to see these regulations “as potential site[s] for the reinscription of heter/cisnormative power relations” (Ullman, 2018). Co-authors, Meyer and Harper (2018), agree that when laws and policies are implemented to advocate and included LGBTQ+ students, in particular transgender students whom they are interested in monitoring the inclusion of in classrooms, policymakers only serve to create a greater divide between the institutional problem and the individual problem. Legislative changes only work to “respond to individual students” through the creation of anti-bullying policies set to protect gender and sexual diversity and punishing students who use homo/transphobic slurs rather than attending to “the systemic and ongoing issues” that has normalized the harassment of students who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ (Meyer and Harper 2018). They also agree that while school administrators and district officials may want to be supportive, they are oftentimes ill-equipped, lack the awareness, or experience to provide intentional support that works to change the conditions that marginalize LGBTQ+ students.

According to a study conducted in 2019, educators play a significant factor in determining how LGBTQ+ curriculum is included in K-12 classrooms (Block, 2019). Teachers

are oftentimes found the ones that determine whether or not the reaffirmation of heteronormative practices occur in school, and in most cases are the ones to perpetuate it (p. 7); thus, making it harder for their queer students to feel accepted or welcomed inside and outside the classroom. The study also illustrated that educators experience hesitation and fear on two levels: 1) fear of administration and parent reaction and 2) fear about how to correctly incorporate LGBTQ+ contenting into their curriculum (Block, 2019). Finnessy (2016) conducted a similar study that supports the notion that teachers oftentimes feel as if they do not wish to perpetuate “stereotyping, provide misinformation, opening up [the] opportunity for negative discussion, or [do not integrate LGBTQ+ content] because they “just didn’t know [how]” (p. 45).

While it may appear that integration of LGBTQ+ curriculum may not be possible due to the perception of teachers and school administration there have been successful cases of inclusivity. For instance, Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar (2013) suggests that, if done correctly, the incorporation of LGBTQ+ curriculum, particularly the discussion of gender and identity, can be done successfully with students as young as third and fourth grade. Such success can be achieved if the teacher responsible for incorporating the curriculum consistently has their students engage in “question[ing] the restrictive social systems around them and think more inclusively about gender and identity” (Ryan et la. 2013). This demonstrates an example of a responsive practice that engages with the institutional level of discrimination that queer students experience rather than look only at the individualistic level of harassment the LGBTQ+ community endures. By stepping back and asking students to interrogate the systems that constructed heterosexuality as the only ‘acceptable’ sexual orientation and gender-binaries that do not allow for gender queerness, does the real work being to be done in ensuring that LGBTQ+ students feel a deeper level of safety and comfort.

Steck & Perry (2017) suggests that another way of ensuring that LGBTQ+ curriculum is included in K-12 classrooms is for school districts to create “mandatory requires for teachers to complete professional development training that [deals] specifically with integrating queer content into the course curriculum, sexual orientation diversity, HIV/AIDS, queer-based discrimination, and counseling students with sexual orientation issues” (p. 344). This professional development would help reduce the fear and insecurity of teaching queer content incorrectly and encourage more teachers to engage in classroom dialogue about gender and sexual diversity.

Veceillo (2012) evaluates the implementation of LGBTQ+ content into social science classes utilizing James Banks’ model of the Four Levels of Integration of Multicultural Content, which include: the Contribution Approach (Level 1), the Additive Approach (Level 2), the Transformative Approach (Level 3), and the Social Action Approach (Level 4). Veceillo (2012) explains that while educators may want to begin implementation of LGBTQ+ content at level one and gradually working up to level four, “one of the advantages of [the] current situation of being at the beginning of implementation is that [as educators] we may, in fact, begin at any level we see fit” (p. 174). Moorhead (2018) also describes how educators can work towards include incorporating LGBTQ+ content in their classroom by also using Banks’ model. “LGBTQ+ people and issues are embedded in the American experience,” Moorhead (2018) states. That is why these four levels of integration, in particular levels three and four, can work towards beginning the discussion of LGBTQ+ issues (p. 24) but also working towards addressing the root of the problem in schools, which is the re-enforcement of heteronormativity.

Discussion

To synthesize the findings from the current literature, two main themes emerged as barrier to implementing LGBTQ+ curriculum: 1) Educators fear of parents, 2) Educators underpreparedness of content.

Educators fear of parents

While policies and laws have now been passed to encourage and require educators to incorporate LGBTQ+ content into their classrooms, the data indicates that educators are often the ones standing in the way of a successful inclusion of queer curriculum. For instance, one of the reasons educators decide to not discuss LGBTQ+ heroes, historical events or discuss an individual's sexual or gender identity is because they are fearful of the push back they might receive from parents, students, or unsupportive school administrators (Block, 2019). The fear that educators experience from the possibility of receiving pushback is indicative of their unconscious (or conscious) belief that queer content may be "inappropriate" or even something to be avoided (Leonardi, 2017). Since public schools have historically silenced LGBTQ+ people and history the sentiments of these teachers can be understood, but not be accepted. For teachers who experience this discomfort, they must begin to work towards understanding the role that heteronormativity plays in schools and actively work towards dismantling it in order to successfully included LGTBQ+ curriculum in classrooms (Ullman, 2018).

Additionally, teachers experience a fear of providing misinformation about LGBTQ+ issues to their students. It is this lack of confidence and doubts in their ability to comfortably and accurately discuss LGBTQ+ issues in the classrooms that stop teachers from beginning their discussion of queer curriculum in their classrooms. They do not wish to engage in queer curriculum because they fear they might misinform students. Therefore, Steck & Perry (2017)

argued for the need for professional development for educators to be trained properly on how to implement the requirements brought by laws and policies such as the FAIR Education Act. If teachers were to receive the support from their educational institutions, whether it be through the district, the county, or the school itself, with workshops that teach them what it means to advocate for LGTBQ+ students, then there can be an improvement of the implementation of an inclusive curriculum.

Educators underpreparedness of content

However, when teachers, school leaders, or administration are being trained are these trainings addressing how problematic heteronormativity is inside and outside the classroom, or are they simply providing superficial instructional on how to uphold anti-bullying policies? While it is important to teach educators how to address the use of homophobic and transphobic slurs, verbal and physical harassment based on gender or sexual orientation, and LGTBQ+ discrimination, it is equally important to get to the root of the problem in these trainings. The root being analyzing the way schools serve as an environment that perpetuates a heteronormative narrative and normalizes the exclusion of gender and sexual diversity. Training that fails to challenge this narrative or teach their educators how to consistently work to dismantle this oppressive structure through pedagogical approaches is the thing causing a disconnect between policies and inclusion of LGTBQ+ curriculum in K-12 classrooms. Therefore, in having only a superficial understanding that identifies sexual and gender harassment as the fault of only one individual, educators are failing to evaluate the school climate, values, and beliefs on an institutional level that allowed for the harassment of queer students.

The data indicates that although educators and school leaders may feel comfortable advocating for the needs of LGTBQ+ students when asked to explain their understanding of

sexual and gender identity or the use of personal pronouns school leaders addressed only the superficial understanding sounding the topics and not the systematic oppression that the LGBTQ+ community experience(Ullman, 2018). Workshops, professional development, or laws and policies are examples of “an agenda of protection [that do] little to challenge the power dynamics within a hetero/cisnormative positioning of who is othered/victimized/ pathologized and who is in a position to do the protecting” (Ullman, 2018). That is why when conducting trainings for school leaders it is essential to have open dialogues that address the root of the issue in ensuring a successful inclusion of LGBTQ+ curriculum in K-12 classrooms.

Recommendation

Educators interested in learning how to advocate for their LGTBQ+ students or included LGBTQ+ curriculum in their K-12 classrooms have the power to do so by becoming willing to learn and grow. Teachers and school administrators must be willing to disrupt their biases and develop an understanding of what heteronormativity is and the impact it has on the oppression of gender and sexual diversity. One way educators can begin their journey to improving their teaching practice is by attending personal opportunities for professional development, such as seeking out other teachers who have expertise on how to successfully implement LGBTQ+ curriculum. By observing and learning from teachers who are proud LGBTQ+ advocates, educators looking to do their share of including and promoting LGTBQ+ curriculum can accomplish two things: 1) identifying new ways to incorporate the curriculum into their own classroom and 2) find a community of educators who are committed to fighting for LGBTQ+ representation and inclusion in the classroom. Another form of obtaining professional development is by intentionally seeking resources, like those found in GSLEN’s “Educators

Guide,” to improve self-knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues and history is one way of demonstrating one’s willingness to challenge one’s own biases.

Moreover, educators can continue to incorporate LGBTQ+ curriculum gradually into their classrooms through the inclusion of LGBTQ+ literature. Texts such as “Rick,” by Alex Gino, “Felix Ever After” by Kacen Callender, “Pet” by Akwaeke Emezi, and “Julian Is A Mermaid” by Jessica Love are examples of literature that students can read and see LGBTQ+ representation inside their classroom libraries. However, educators should not forget that it is not enough to simply include these texts. They have to do the work to facilitate conversations that questions the role that heteronormativity might play in the text or analyze how the queer character is received by their community. In asking and investigating the text further in the classroom it begins to transform from a place of silence and oppression to a place of acceptance and liberation. Teachers must continue to fight to incorporate LGBTQ+ curriculum in their classrooms, textbooks, and schools because as educators they have the power to help uplift the voices of the queer community or they have the power to silence them. Teachers must not silence them.

Conclusion

The efforts that have been made through the adoption of policies that protect and advocate for LGBTQ+ students’ rights to visibility in the curriculum are steps in the right direction. However, educators must work towards overcoming their fear of receiving push back and must consistently work towards developing a deeper understanding of how to challenge narratives of heteronormativity inside their classrooms and curriculums if they wish to advocate for their LGBTQ+ students. Additional support must also come to educators and school leaders from their school districts or counties in order to help build their confidence and knowledge of

successful ways of incorporating LGBTQ+ curriculum in their classrooms and schools. A study conducted by GLSEN in 2017 reported that “LGTBQ students in schools with an LGBTQ curriculum are *less likely to feel unsafe at school* because of their sexual orientation (41.8% vs. 63.3%) and gender expression (34.6% vs. 47.0%)” indicating the significance and need for providing students with an inclusive curriculum (Kosciw, 2017). Teaching is a political act. Therefore, by “excluding LGBT+ people and issues from the curriculum [it] denies young people a view into themselves and into their world” (Moodhead, 2018). That is why it is essential to continue the fight to incorporate LGBTQ+ curriculum in K-12 classrooms. Schools must make an effort to ensure that their LGBTQ+ students know that their presences if wanted, their voices are important, and that they are not alone.

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