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WHEN THE QUEERS COME SWEEPING DOWN THE PLAIN:
AN ENGLISH EDUCATORS' GUIDE TO SERVING AS LGBTQ ALLIES IN
AMERICAN SCHOOLS

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STEFANIE RENEE HEINRICH
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WHEN THE QUEERS COME SWEEPING DOWN THE PLAIN: AN ENGLISH
EDUCATORS' GUIDE TO SERVING AS LGBTQ ALLIES IN SECONDARY
SCHOOLS

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BY

Dr. Susan Laird, Chair

Dr. Mirelsie Velazquez

Dr. Lawrence Baines

To my parents, Ronnie and Lisa Heinrich, for their continued support even in the face of seemingly constant bemusement and confusion about the path of their stubbornly unique youngest child.

And to those who refuse to abandon Oklahoma for greener pastures, and instead stay to water our own grass for the betterment of future generations.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this inquiry, located in Oklahoma, is to create a public document that can guide U.S. professional educators as designers and teachers of middle and high school English curricula that welcome queer identities unique to one another based on race, class, ideology, sexuality, and gender expression. This work is focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth both in and out of school, who are constantly navigating their identities in environments often indifferent or hostile to their very existence. This educators' guide describes the devastating and harsh realities of their growing and living in a world that favors heterosexuality and cisgendered identity. It situates these problems in the connections among schools, homes, and their surrounding societies and communities. When discussing LGBTQ issues, especially in red states like Oklahoma, very real considerations have to be given to political and religious beliefs that constrain how curriculum is developed, and how students of vulnerable populations are educated.

Finally, after grappling with concerns of faith and morality, and the overall importance of children's general wellbeing and educational development, this work suggests how middle and high school English educators can rethink their curriculum to begin creating a space that includes LGBTQ identities, and allows straight and cisgendered students also to tackle their own assumptions on gender expression and sexual biases. Teachers, teacher educators, and other educational influences, such as librarians, play important parts as LGBTQ allies and as advocates for their students and their overall development as future members of a shared civic society. This work proposes that such teachers can become leaders within their schools, and begin to create

environments that are welcome to a variety of personal identities both within their individual classrooms and also within the school community as a whole. Such teacher leaders must pursue individual research and personal learning to fulfill their roles as LGBTQ allies and advocates.

I

COMPLICATING THE PLOT

Introducing The Characters

“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.” - Ralph Ellison

The state of Oklahoma has always had a history of volatile weather; long horrific droughts, frigid winters, flash floods, leveling tornados. It also holds a history that is singularly unique from its fellow states in the Union. It was a place that no one wanted, except for those who lived there for generations. It was a land that was difficult to farm, that was a convenient catchall for displaced Native tribes, free blacks and former slaves, migrants from neighboring Mexico, and finally whites in search of the American Dream and free land. In its earliest days as a territory, what would become the state of Oklahoma in 1907, it was either a place where people attempted to make the best of all the injustices that had been forced upon them, or it was a place of hope and opportunity. Still, even with the unique diverse set of peoples who were considered the territory’s earliest settlers, it hardly served as an example of a multicultural utopia. Current tribes living in the region were forced onto reservations to live in poverty and starvation, the Five Civilized Tribes had to make constant concessions to the U.S. government for assistance, tribes that were moved into the area from the Deep South brought their own black slaves, and free blacks created thriving all-black towns, and white settlers would bring their own version of racism that would continue to affect the state to this day.

Even with its difficulties, the state was the perfect hotbed for a mixing of a wide variety of peoples, and a wide variety of behaviors. Given how late the territory gained

statehood, much of the area was rather rough and tumble, with large metropolitan areas such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City becoming havens for lawlessness, and loose morals. This allowed a unique part of the world for early examples of American queer existence. With the mixing of diverse and hard-working peoples who gathered together to build cities out of nothing on the American plains came a willingness to turn a blind eye onto actions or behaviors that did not fit into the norm. This allowed queer people a relative amount of freedom in a space that either could not be bothered to care, or simply had bigger issues on their mind.

Aaron Bachhofer notes in his extensive study of queer, gay, and bisexual male culture in Oklahoma City during the earliest days of statehood, Oklahoma may not have been nearly as open as queer hotspots like New York City and San Francisco however, “The historical record is replete with examples of same-sex desire, queer restaurants, private parties, drag shows, gay bars, and gay sexuality expressed publicly, so that it is impossible to deny the presence of queer men from the turn-of-the-century.”¹ Not only were there out and visible moments of queer culture in Oklahoma City, there is also a long history of queer activism in the state. No, the queer community never had riots like Stonewall, and the community turned to activism much later than their peers on the coasts but it used the legal system as a tool and was “just as empowering and inspirational” and “some might argue it was more effective in the long run as well.”² And, as Bachhofer notes, the very fact that a traditionally conservative state like

¹ Bachhofer, Aaron II. “The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1889-2005”. Doctoral Dissertation, Oklahoma City University, 2006. p. 27

² Ibid, p. 27

Oklahoma was able to boast a queer subculture that kept pace with queer communities in New York City and San Francisco is an argument in and of itself for continued work within the LGBTQ community in the state.³

However, while the state may have started out with an ambivalent attitude to queerness and queer culture, the same cannot be said today. Within the last decade a flood of anti-LGBTQ sentiment has begun to drown the region with hateful and damaging rhetoric. However, Oklahoma does not exist in a vacuum and in the midst of a hot summer, wherein towns across the southern United States were recovering from torrential rainfalls that devastated thousands of acres of private and public land the United States Supreme Court passed ruling that declared bans on same-sex marriage to be unconstitutional. This ruling began paving the way for millions of people in same-sex partnerships to finally declare their union in the same way heterosexual couples had for generations, and they would finally be able to receive the same benefits of marriage that had been denied to them based on their sexual orientation. This ruling also took a step toward allowing younger lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identified individuals to see a future for themselves. Instead of growing up queer⁴ and knowing there were aspects of their lives that could never be realized, suddenly there was a glimmer of hope on the horizon.

³Ibid, p. 27

⁴ While the history of the term “queer” is filled with turmoil, it is considered a reclaimed label by the LGBTQ community, and as such will be used here interchangeably with the acronym LGBTQ, given that it also encompasses those who are typically left out of the greater LGBTQ+ community.

The Supreme Court ruling was a step in a direction toward greater acceptance and equality. However, while it was monumental, it could also be seen as a failing triage station for already mortally wounded LGBTQ communities across the country. For many, the acceptance of “gay-marriage” is too little, too late, and held no real impact on their lives.⁵ For those who identify with a sexual orientation that is not gay or lesbian, such as bisexual or pansexual individuals who can feel attraction to people of multiple gender identities, the popular acceptance of terms like “gay-marriage” further alienated their identity. And the ruling has yet to demonstrate a significant influence on how American schools address the issues faced by LGBTQ students within their classrooms, hallways, and cafeterias. However, there is hope that this will promote the need to understand the breadth of family diversity within set curricula.⁶

It is not enough to say that LGBTQ rights were suddenly bolstered by the acceptance of same-sex marriage. While it is a win for the queer community as a whole, there is infinitely more work that has to be done. Issues that arise in American schools such as rampant homophobia, heterosexism (the belief that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation), rape culture (which normalizes male sexual violence and blames victims for acts of sexual assault), and toxic hyper masculinity (that causes men to act in violent, aggressive, and damaging ways to prove their masculinity), are just a few things that can be addressed by beginning sex and gender education with our youngest students. If we can begin to discuss with students the possibility of a fluid nature of gender and sexuality at an earlier age then the constraints of the binaries we

⁵ Mayo, Cris. *LGBTQ Youth & Education: Policies & Practices*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2014. p. 66

⁶ Mayo, p. 67

see today, which lead to many of those same damaging issues, could be circumvented. By instructing children from the moment they leave to womb into either/or mindsets about gender we create individuals who are incapable of entertaining the idea that things and people can exist outside of a gendered binary, with Susan Birden noting in her work *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education* “By the time children have reached first grade, they have already compiled a significant amount of data about what it means to be gay in a heterosexist society, even though much of what they have learned may well be incorrect, born of fear and prejudice rather than factual information.”⁷ The same holds true for gender expression and identity.

Even common language used to talk to young children instills a hidden and unconscious education. When we refuse to allow our sons to play with dolls, or tell our daughters that boys pick on girls because they like them, we are instilling educational experiences that will hold power in their minds throughout their lives. We create situations where a perceived sexuality can be as dangerous as a realized sexuality; where to be anything other than stereotypically heterosexual and cisgendered (consistently identifying with one’s assigned gender at birth) is wrong, and at times, incredibly hazardous. In order to move past casually overhearing sexist and homophobic slurs, move past mentally and physically violent bullying, move past toxic gendered standards, waiting to address such behaviors and attitudes when students are already near adulthood is too late. When children have already lived through fourteen,

⁷ Birden, Susan. *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2005, p. 2

sixteen, eighteen years of systematic heterosexism, or the assumption that heterosexuality is the “right” or “correct” or “normal” way of being⁸, these values are too deeply ingrained to be quickly washed away. Instead we have to educate in ways so that they never exist at all; educate in ways that those kinds of violent thoughts never even occur in the minds of students who will one day lead our communities.

However, with that being said, these goals for both better school and social communities, are not quickly or easily won. So there remains a very practical question, what can be done now, to at the very least, make the lives and realities of LGBTQ youth a bit more manageable and optimistic? Positive steps have been taken in English Education circles to argue for more female writers, for more girl characters, for more examples of people of color who are poets, who can give students of color the realizations that they too can do great things. This wonderful call for diversity in English classrooms has not, however, extended to a louder call for examples of queer writers or characters in the classrooms’ reading lists to an extent that has carried such a positive change.

Of course, anti-bullying policies are necessary and practical ways to attempt to ensure the safety of students, but young people then learn only to consider queer identities in negative and victimizing ways. By only addressing LGBTQ issues during a phase of punishment, during debates about same-sex marriage, or while policing students’ physical behavior, all students regardless of sexual or gender identity learn that to be anything other than heterosexual and cisgendered is a less accepted or correct

⁸ Ibid, p. 2

way to exist. As Cris Mayo notes in her invaluable work, *LGBTQ Youth & Education: Policies & Practices*, on the difficulties faced by students, educators, parents, and administrators when undertaking the task of creating inclusive schools, “thinking and teaching about LGBTQ issues only in the context of bias-related incidents reinforces the idea that LGBTQ students are only noticeable when they are threatened or only recognized as present when they are fully out in conventional ways.”⁹ Providing LGBTQ representation in literature and multimedia allows not only queer students to have a sense of legitimacy but it also creates opportunities for straight and cisgendered students to see the legitimacy of lives that are different from their own.

With issues such as these, it will not be enough to simply add a title pulled from a queer young adult literature list to the class curriculum, and call it done. English classes are perhaps the only place within the school building where students study what it means to be human, where they study and read the complexities of humanity, with all of the resulting emotions and struggles. As students grapple with realities of race with Scout’s story in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or discuss the importance of the green light that pulled Gatsby’s attention, they can also discuss Scout’s tomboy-like gender construction, or what some could argue was a less than platonic relationship between Jay and Nick. Essentially, English teachers can take the classics and core curriculum that are standards for English instruction and provide space for rethinking some concepts that are taken for granted. By including discussion of the classics that allows for conception of queer lives, as well as inclusion of more obvious LGBTQ literature,

⁹ Mayo, p. 70

into high school English courses the overall school community can begin to allow the validity of queer identities to exist.

Therefore, this work will follow a path from an argument for a closer relationship between the school and the home, to discussing the hidden curriculum that many others in the field of LGBTQ education have begun to bring into the light, a preliminary excursion into queer curriculum theory, to finally considering the very real logistics of both curriculum policies and teachers' rights in Oklahoma. I intend to set the stage with a very realistic discussion of the realities of being queer in the United States, and even more so, the position of LGBTQ individuals and families in Oklahoma. Within this, a look at the common practices within American public schools toward LGBTQ issues will be examined, in order to highlight the ineffective nature of current education. Once those problems have been identified, a series of questions will be considered about how, should, and can educators create a high school English curriculum that is LGBTQ friendly and accepting. Still, the practicalities that arise out of possible solutions to these problems must be addressed. Teachers can have the best intentions in mind but there are still curriculum standards and issues of freedom of speech that need to be discussed in order to begin a step toward serious action on behalf of, not only LGBTQ students, but all students living in a diverse society. Hopefully, through this endeavor I can argue for increased queer visibility in high school English courses, as well as provide some beginning scaffolding for its implementation.

Growing Up Queer

From this point it seems as if there is a serious ignorance about LGBTQ issues

in American schools, especially within Oklahoma schools, where it seems as though queer students are largely absent from the school community, or imperceptibly told they should not inhabit those spaces. Not only are schools in the United States entrusted with ensuring education for the nation's children, they also have the legal responsibility of ensuring those same children's safety while on school grounds. However, by ignoring the issues that surround their queer students, schools open themselves up to a long list of damaging outcomes. As Mayo simply notes, "kids learn in contexts where LGBTQ information is largely missing from the curriculum. As a result, all students learn that this exclusion is meaningful to who they should become."¹⁰ By never allowing discussion of LGBTQ issues with public schools, these institutions still manage to send a very clear message to their students, and "Classroom silence about lesbian and gay identity speaks loudly," which furthers to "contribute to a hidden curriculum of compulsory heterosexuality where every child is presumed heterosexual until proven otherwise."¹¹

For many queer students the only time they might hear about LGBTQ issues within the school walls is either after a bullying incident, or during a school debate on same-sex marriage.¹² Nonetheless, what seems to occur from these examples of queer exposure is an allowance for homophobic and transphobic (the intense dislike or prejudice against transgender people) voices to become the loudest, and further place queer students into an othered position within the greater school community, and "reinforces the idea that LGBTQ students are only noticeable when they are threatened

¹⁰ Mayo, p. 48

¹¹ Birden, p. 2

¹² Mayo, p. 65

or only recognized as present when they are fully out in conventional ways.”¹³ In 2013 a GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network) National Report found that nationally over seventy percent of all middle and high school queer students heard the term “gay” in a negative connotation regularly at school and nearly all found this disturbing. Nearly sixty-five percent of these students also heard homophobic remarks and slurs often while at school.¹⁴

However, these numbers are a national average, and therefore do not exactly line up with specific reports by GLSEN about school environments in Oklahoma and other southern states. In that same year, 2013, GLSEN notes that in Oklahoma schools “Nearly all [surveyed LGBTQ students] heard ‘gay’ in a negative way (e.g. ‘that’s so gay’) and 9 in 10 heard other homophobic remarks (e.g. ‘fag’ or ‘dyke’) at school regularly.”¹⁵ Across the spectrum of issues measured by the report, Oklahoma was again and again higher than the average, except for how often LGBT students heard homophobic remarks from adult school staff. On this point the national average came in at just over fifty percent, whereas for Oklahoma, it was somewhat significantly lower at twenty-eight percent. Still, that number would rise to nearly forty percent of Oklahoma queer students who heard “school staff make negative remarks about someone’s gender expression.”¹⁶ While Oklahoma is much higher than the national average on most accounts, unfortunately it is not alone. Many other southern states, such as Texas and Missouri, also have very high rates of homophobic language usage,

¹³ Ibid, p. 70

¹⁴ GLSEN. "2013 National School Climate Survey." 2014. p. 16

¹⁵ GLSEN. "2013 Oklahoma State Snapshot." 2014. p. 1

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 1

and physical or verbal bullying, within their school walls.¹⁷ Instead of taking this as a comforting fact, that at least Oklahoma is not the only state to grapple with these issues, it simply paints an even worse picture for queer students living in the South. This can also make it difficult for those working to create a safer LGBTQ climate, in that there are few examples to be called upon for a vision of how an inclusive Southern school could look and operate.

With such high rates of homophobic and transphobic language in schools there have at least been some common themes and attempts to curtail such behavior. Most schools are slowly coming to understand that blatant bullying is a liability that cannot be accepted. However, anti-bullying and anti-biases policies that only manage to police speech in the hallways does little for both queer and non-queer students. When a teacher disciplines a student for using a homophobic slur in the hallway but does not continue to create a dialogue about the student's choice to use such language instead gives the community an understanding that to say "fag" or "dyke" is no different from saying any other vulgar word, although as Birden argues, these instances could stem from "teachers' lack of knowledge and their feelings of ineffectiveness when addressing such highly charged issues."¹⁸ Still, these moments detract from students' queer identity, and show everyone that to be queer is a negative, and unwanted existence. And as S.J. Miller notes, "When a person cannot be readily understood or identified, there may be a psychological need to minimize, hurt, or make the person disappear

¹⁷ GLSEN. "2013 Texas State Snapshot." 2014. p. 1

¹⁸ Birden, p. 4

altogether.”¹⁹ This attempt to diminish the visibility or presence of someone whose identity falls outside of the greater perceived norm can manifest itself in some truly costly, and harmful, ways. Also, while GLSEN reported that nationally a near majority of students noted that they “had an anti-bullying policy at their school, only 10.1% of students reported that their school had a comprehensive policy (i.e., that specifically enumerate both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression).”²⁰ This figure drops even further into the single digits, with just three percent of questioned Oklahoma LGBTQ students stating they attended schools with comprehensive anti-bullying policies.²¹

With these statistics in mind it must be remembered that bullying can take many forms, and can create a very hostile and dangerous school environment. Nationally GLSEN reported that in 2013 nearly seventy-five percent of LGBTQ students were verbally harassed within the year due to perceived sexual orientation and with over half being harassed due to gender expression.²² Even worse, nearly forty percent were physically harassed and over fifteen percent were actually physically assaulted for their sexual orientation.²³ These numbers do drop for harassment or assault based on gender expression but they are still alarmingly high at nearly twenty-five and twelve percent, respectively.²⁴ In the Oklahoma specific report acts of verbal/physical harassment and assault were higher, but thankfully not extremely so, with only a few more percentage

¹⁹ Miller, S.J. "Speaking My Mind: Mythology of the Norm: Disrupting the Culture of Bullying in Schools." *The English Journal* 101, no. 6 (July 2012): 107-09. p. 107

²⁰ GLSEN “2013 National School Climate Survey.” p. 61

²¹ GLSEN “2013 Oklahoma State Snapshot” p. 2

²² GLSEN “2013 National School Climate Survey.” p. 18

²³ *Ibid*, p. 23

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 23

points in each category. What is distressing, however, are the high rates of property damage (47%), sexual assault (69%), and deliberate acts to exclude queer students from the school community (92%) in Oklahoma schools.²⁵ Through these countless and relentless acts to other a school's LGBTQ community it is no wonder so many queer students do not believe their school environment to be safe.

With unsafe school environments queer students are at a serious educational disadvantage compared to their straight and cisgendered peers. Rates of truancy, lower achievement scores, and school dropouts are significantly higher for many LGBTQ school communities²⁶, and this can be directly linked to queer students feeling that their school environments are not spaces where they can learn and feel safe. While the 2013 GLSEN National School Climate Survey noted that the majority of LGBTQ students surveyed had goals to continue their education into college, there were still a large number of students who were unsure if they would complete high school due to their school environment, "Many students in this category mentioned negative experiences at school and/or feeling alienated from their school communities".²⁷ Many also worried that they would not meet graduation requirements due to a high number of absences, with an 11th grade student noting, "I have failed the last three years because I didn't go to school because I didn't feel comfortable there."²⁸ A large number of queer students develop a tendency to skip school due to constant verbal or physical harassment and exclusion from their peers.

²⁵ GLSEN "2013 Oklahoma State Snapshot." p. 1

²⁶ Mayo, p. 56

²⁷ GLSEN "2013 National School Climate Survey." p. 43

²⁸ GLSEN, "2013 National School Climate Survey." P. 43

Of course, a lack of physical presence in school is detrimental to academic achievement. However, there is more at play which affects queer students' test scores and overall grade point averages. Students who reported a higher rate of harassment and victimization due to their sexual orientation or gender expression also reported lower grade point averages.²⁹ As Mayo explains, "because LGBTQ youth may not find support at home, school-based support and advocacy for their access to education is all the more crucial."³⁰ Therefore, it is up to schools to recognize the difficulties faced by their queer students and the obstacles the school climate itself sets in front of LGBTQ youth.

Even more concerning than school attendance and test scores is the toll harassment and bullying can have on queer students' mental and physical health. GLSEN notes a direct relationship between levels of victimization and LGBTQ students sense of self-esteem and rates of depression, with those who experience higher rates of bullying and harassment having lower self-esteem and higher depression.³¹ With issues of depression and anxiety come even more dire issues of self-harm and suicide. In a 2011 study Joseph Robinson and Dorothy Espelage found that "although less than half of 1% of straight-identified students reported thinking seriously about killing themselves 'almost all of the time,' 5.6% of bisexual-identified students reported doing so,"³² while the CDC states that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are twice as likely to

²⁹ Ibid, p. 47

³⁰ Mayo, p. 57

³¹ GLSEN, "2013 National School Climate Survey." p. 48

³² Robinson, Joseph P., and Dorothy L. Espelage. "Inequities in Educational and Psychological Outcomes Between LGBTQ and Straight Students in Middle and High School." *Educational Researcher* 40, no. 7 (October 2011): 315-30. p. 320

attempt suicide as their straight peers.³³ Also, Richard Liu and Brian Mustanski found in 2012 that “LGBT victimization was associated with both suicidal ideation and self-harm, as was a history of attempted suicide.”³⁴ Lack of queer visibility, outright harassment, and an absence of teacher support all combine to create a school environment that is unfriendly and, at times, overtly hostile to LGBTQ students.

Imposing Heteronormativity

While some schools may see discussion of LGBTQ issues inflammatory, or outside of the school’s prerogative,³⁵ or in some way not appropriate for their students’ age,³⁶ research has concluded a direct relationship to unsafe school environments and student development, both mentally and educationally. What should first be noted, however, is that the lack of visibility and discussion surrounding queer identities and communities within the school atmosphere is destructive for not only those who identify as queer in some way, but is also destructive for straight and cisgendered students alike. All silence achieves is to give credence to strict gender and sexuality rules that individuals should adhere to in order to be acceptable members of their societies. As students learn within a vacuum of heteronormativity they learn that conformity is the best option, and to punish those who do not conform.³⁷

³³ Center for Disease Control and Prevention. "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health: LGBT Youth." 2102. <http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>.

³⁴ Liu, Richard T., and Brian Mustanski. "Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 42, no. 3 (2102): 221-28. p. 225

³⁵ Mayo, p. 61

³⁶ Birden, p. 15

³⁷ Miller, p. 107

Given that children are raised in the construction of a binary gender expression from the time of conception, it is hardly surprising that children continue to grow up with the fear of being different from what seems to be expected. Boys and girls are given vastly different upbringings, even in ways that many parents and other adults do not recognize.³⁸ Still, these subtle cues about what is right and wrong for the two binary genders are easily picked up by even the youngest children, and are then carried forward into adulthood, sometimes in destructive and devastating ways, some of which make verbal bullying seem tame and lighthearted.

Heteronormativity is the prevailing opinion that heterosexuality and cisgendered identity are the normal and preferred sexual and gender identities.³⁹ This concept is developed in most aspects of society, and is one that is expressed not only against queer individuals but also against straight and cisgendered members of communities, and as Mollie Blackburn and Jill Smith note, “Heteronormativity is so prevalent that it largely goes unexamined in mainstream conversations about education; it is simply *in place*.”⁴⁰ Heteronormativity is “in place” in ways that often go unnoticed, or not appraised, in common everyday actions. Individual families begin gendering their children as soon as the sex can be determined on an ultrasound with pink and blue themed clothing, nurseries, and the ever-growing popular trend of gender reveal parties.

³⁸ Blackburn, Mollie V., and Jill M. Smith. "Moving Beyond the Inclusion of LGBT-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms: Interrogating Heteronormativity and Exploring Intersectionality." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 53, no. 8 (May 2010): 625-34. p. 627

³⁹ Lambda Legal. "Glossary of LGBTQ Terms." <http://www.lambdalegal.org/node/21075>.

⁴⁰ Blackburn and Smith, p. 627

From these societally located gendered stereotypes and traditions can come issues of toxic masculinity and physical and sexual assault. It is not just queer teenagers being harassed and assaulted in the hallways or the locker-room. There are straight and cisgendered youth who meet much of the same kind of bullying and violence as their LGBTQ peers, simply because something about who they are, how they act, or how they dress fails to fully conform to the strict confines of heteronormativity that they have been raised within since birth.⁴¹ In many instances, teenage boys have far less leeway in their standards of behavior and appearance than their female counterparts, and more distressingly, the repercussions are far more brutal.⁴² Boys and men are raised in such a way that to be perceived as even possibly anything other than perfectly straight and cisgendered is cause for alarm. Many men and boys seem to be constantly on guard against being seen as gay (weak and unmasculine) or female (weak and unmasculine), and therefore, act in ways that are seen as overtly masculine and dominant.⁴³

Some examples of this forced, or assured masculinity, are fairly benign and sources of popular and internet culture. Phrases like “No homo” are bandied about constantly between young teenage and adult males, and even break into some female vernacular as well. In some ways, the phrase could be seen in a positive light, in that it allows young men to provide truly kind compliments to one another. Commenting on a male friend’s clothing choices one day, or new haircut, or simply after a display of

⁴¹ Mayo, p. 76

⁴² Toomey, Russell B., Jenifer K. McGuire, and Stephen T. Russell. "Heteronormativity, School Climates, and Perceived Safety for Gender Nonconforming Peers." *Journal of Adolescence* 35 (2012): 187-96.

⁴³ Blackburn and Smith, p. 629

physical affection, is often followed up with a quick “No homo,” just to make it clear that the instigator does not hold homosexual feelings for his friends.⁴⁴ However, this still reinforces the stigma against homosexuality, and the male group members’ assurance that they themselves are not gay and still maintain their outward masculinity.

Other examples of played-up masculinity and heteronormativity, however, can be far more overt and hostile. Countless school activities, sports, and rituals are riddled with problematic behavior and rhetoric. Nearly all aspects of school life are segregated by gender, and as Blackburn and Smith note, “Gendered adult-positions in many high schools mirror traditional, patriarchal hierarchies in which administrators and coaches are male, secretaries and school nurses are female, and teacher positions can vary depending on subject area.”⁴⁵ Student groups and activities, sports and class type, also tend to adhere to traditional gendered stereotypes, which serves to constantly reinforce heterosexism within public school communities. Smith also relates school rituals that circle around student spaces, and how what many would consider expression of school spirit are actually hateful and violent acts of both homophobia and misogyny. In one example, students are permitted to paint large rocks in front of their school prior to a special sporting event and typically do so with slurs and depictions of penises and, as Smith recounts, the students were “lauded in staff lunchrooms for keeping their shenanigans within sanctioned, traditional ‘boys will be boys’ behavior. Such praise reinforces the heterosexual matrix in which boys behave like boys by asserting their

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 627

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 628

masculinity over others.”⁴⁶

In far more dire circumstances, assertion of masculinity and heteronormativity can play out through sexual and physical violence. In recent years there has been a growing concern about the existence of a rape culture in public schools, and a perpetual lack of action on behalf of many school administrations. In 2014 a case of sexual assault in a Norman, Oklahoma high school made national news after protests and the campaign Yes All Daughters began to gain steam.⁴⁷ Student and community protesters flocked to support multiple teenage girls who had suffered from sexual assault and rape by the same male student. One of the victims was intoxicated, could not consent, and was later sent a recording of the incident which began to circulate around social media. She and the other victims, who later came forward to report similar incidents, were then bullied and harassed when they tried to return to school.⁴⁸ Students and community members accused the school administration of failing to ensure the girls’ safety and comfort at school, and students organized a silent walkout and were joined across the street from the high school by protesters from throughout the Norman community.

Unfortunately, this case at one Norman high school was hardly a singular event. Norman public schools would be riddled with rape cases throughout the following years, with one in 2016 where two boys, aged twelve and fourteen, were assaulted

⁴⁶ Blackburn and Smith, p. 629

⁴⁷ Noland, L., Ashley Kringen, and Chellie Mills. "Norman Students Protest over Rape and Bullying Allegations." KOCO Oklahoma City. 2012.

<http://kfor.com/2014/11/24/norman-students-plan-walk-out-protest-over-rape-and-bullying-allegations/>.

⁴⁸ Ibid

repeatedly by four fellow wrestling teammates while on an activity bus.⁴⁹ Both rape cases, at two Norman high schools, are not unique to this city alone, and are far too common in other school districts throughout the nation. While the Norman Public School District has taken steps to educate students on sexual assault and harassment, little is being done to address the underlying issues implicit in this rape epidemic.⁵⁰ Clearly, educating teenage boys that rape is “bad” and “inappropriate” does little actually to alleviate the problem. Instead all students must be raised in such a way that rape is so unconceivable a notion that actions of sexual assault fade from existence. However, in order to begin raising children in such a manner, issues of compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexism must be understood for what they are, which is far more complex than the use of homophobic slurs and bullying.

Ultimately, when beginning to address issues of LGBTQ bullying and safety in American public schools, understanding issues of heteronormativity and heterosexism can also go a long way in creating an overall school environment that is welcoming for, not only queer students, but all students who spend the majority of their day together. Once school staff, administrators, and educators begin to think critically about the causes of homophobia, transphobia, sexism, assault and violence in their schools, greater attempts can be made to address these issues in constructive, educative ways that their students will be able to carry outside and into their greater communities and families. For many queer students the feeling of being unwanted and unwelcome in

⁴⁹ KOCO Oklahoma City. "Preliminary Hearing Dates Set for Norman North Wrestlers Accused of Rape." <http://www.koco.com/news/norman-north-teens-accused-of-rape-released-on-bail/37779994>.

⁵⁰ Ibid

school is only echoed at home within their own families⁵¹, and that should not be a trend that continues within their school communities.

⁵¹ Birden, p. 13

II

SWITCHING UP THE NARRATIVE

Separating Queer Identities

Those who find themselves on the outside looking in toward the majority have a tendency to find others like themselves, those who have similar identities, and similar experiences, and band together for safety and comfort. This is an incredibly common theme within the queer community, which given its very title, sets itself apart from the mainstream straight and cisgendered world. Gay-Straight Alliances, gay and lesbian clubs, queer spaces on social media, LGBTQ lounges on college campuses, among countless other strategies are all examples of how queer individuals cloister themselves away from a straight and cisgendered majority in order to find a sense of safety and acceptance.

While these spaces are extremely important to queer youth, they also highlight the otherness of their very existence. Moreover, these LGBTQ spaces are rarely the queer utopias they strive to embody. Many of these social spaces fall prey to the issues of class, gender, and race biases that affect their straight and cisgendered counterparts.⁵² Only recently has significant concern been raised about the importance placed on whiteness and cisgendered identities in spaces that should be open to all queer individuals, as a matter of course. With more focus placed on the intersections of identity, and with the horrific rates of violence and death experienced by trans women

⁵² Mayo, p. 88

of color,⁵³ members of the queer community have begun to better understand that many of the biases leveled against gender and sexual minorities have been perpetuated by the LGBT community itself.

Still, while queer communities may not be perfect, they nevertheless do exist and serve the purpose of beginning to provide some sense of solace and solidarity with others that few queer individuals manage to find among straight and cisgendered friends, peers, or family members. However, while LGBTQ youth are a creative and resilient bunch, any lack of concrete support within their schools still sends the signal that their way of being is lesser or not correct. Countless school administrations have fought back against the creation of in-school GSAs, and schools that do allow for a Gay-Straight Alliances to meet tend to have low numbers of members, few regular meetings, and in some communities, more straight allies than queer participants.⁵⁴ By relegating any discussion of queer identity and LGBTQ issues to an extracurricular group the school still conveys the idea that queer topics are not meant for everyday classroom discussion, and exist beyond the scope of traditional school curriculum.

Regardless whether or not schools have or support in-school GSAs, many do make some attempt at what they would argue is an inclusion of LGBTQ issues in average school curricula in the way of what is commonly known as “You Can’t Say Gay” anti-bullying policies.⁵⁵ With the surge of physical and verbal harassment, and

⁵³ Bolles, Alexandra. "Violence Against Transgender People and People of Color is Disproportionally High, LGBTQH Murder Rate Peak." GLAAD. 2012. <http://www.glaad.org/blog/violence-against-transgender-people-and-people-color-disproportionately-high-lgbtqh-murder-rate>.

⁵⁴ Mayo, p. 92

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 60

the subsequent consequences such as suicide, self-harm, and lawsuits against the school, most districts have taken a proactive step toward shutting down bullying behavior on their campuses. What many of these campaigns amount to is a policing of student behavior and speech in the classroom and hallways in an attempt to keep kids from using homophobic slurs. Often these policies play out with teachers on the lookout for students calling other students “fags” or using phrases like “that’s so gay” in order to insert themselves into the situation and shut down such language usage, either through a verbal reprimand or the sentencing of some kind of punishment.⁵⁶

This kind of action then breeds a school climate wherein the teacher is seen as some kind of prison guard or judging overseer. The teacher stands in a unique and difficult position, for on the one hand, if they do not intervene in homophobic acts the surrounding students will learn that “such acts are acceptable, not only in the school but in the broader community, and that no authority figure will provide LGBTQ students and their allies with support.”⁵⁷ On the other hand, however, teachers can rise too quickly to action and reprimands which can be an equally miseducative experience, for as John Dewey notes, “When education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader.”⁵⁸ Dewey is adamant that the teachers and school staff must be considered members of the school society because “As the most mature member of the group he has a peculiar responsibility for the conduct of the interactions and inter-communications which are

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 70

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 61

⁵⁸ Dewey, *Experience and Education*. p. 620

the very life of the group as a community.”⁵⁹ With that being said, policing student behavior is not the same as taking on responsibility for the group’s communication and conduct. In most cases the action of shutting down offensive language also severs the connection between the incident and what educators call a teachable moment.

Not only do such actions disrupt moments that could lead to discussion and dialogue about LGBTQ issues, but they also consistently place queer students into the category of victim.⁶⁰ Queer and other minority students may feel safer in schools where teachers consistently take action against bullying and harassment, but they could still feel like a victim and other who stands on the outside of the school community. As Mayo indicates, even those who support LGBTQ youth are at risk of such negative behavior; “The pressure on straight allies of LGBTQ students to not express their opposition to homophobia may indicate that not supporting gay people is an integral part of indicating one’s own heterosexuality.”⁶¹ Not only does policing student language often serve to break down a learning moment for all parties involved, Mayo also argues “Anti-bias pedagogies, in other words, reinforce the distance between members of a minority group and those of the majority, as if gender, sexuality, and pressure to be normal weren’t structuring features of everyone’s lives.”⁶² Without connecting a student’s abhorrent action to the underlying negative causes, and the culture that has propped up such mindsets as acceptable, educators fail to bridge the distance between LGBTQ young people and their straight, cisgendered peers.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 615

⁶⁰ Mayo, p. 70

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 55

⁶² Ibid, p. 70

Connecting Homes, Schools, and Society

In the first pages of her book *The Schoolhome* Jane Roland Martin muses on the bridge viewed by Virginia Woolf as a crossing between the outside, industrial world, and the inner world of the home.⁶³ As more women entered the work force, and joined the countless women who had already been there for generations, the model of the quintessential home began to change drastically. However, this shift toward all parents working outside of the home, whether they be two parents who hold full-time jobs, or single parents supporting whole families on their own income, has a significant effect on the nation's youth and raises questions for the relationship between the home and the school.⁶⁴

Still, it is not simply a lack of parents at home that has a negative effect on young children. There are more explicit issues that affect children's general health, wellbeing, and development. The state of Oklahoma has seen a steady rise in reported child abuse cases in recent years, with the Department of Human Services (DHS) recruiting advice from other states and experts in an attempt to not only understand the reasons behind the increase but to begin work on shifting those numbers toward a decline in cases of neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.⁶⁵ However, with the state's drastic budget cuts in 2016 all state services, DHS topping the list, have taken a devastating hit. This hardly bodes well for the state's attempts to lower cases of child

⁶³ Martin, Jane Roland. *The Schoolhome*. N.p.: First Harvard University Press, 1992. p. 3

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 44

⁶⁵ Smith, Casey. "Child Abuse, Neglect Cases in Oklahoma Rise for Third Year." Tulsa World. 1992. http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/local/child-abuse-neglect-cases-in-oklahoma-rise-for-third-year/article_d40c0618-ff68-5b39-84d6-5e71c85753a2.html.

abuse, and issues of childhood hunger and homelessness are making headlines, with over forty thousand children living without permanent homes.⁶⁶

With such a possible lack of comfort and support at home, the question then arises, what position do American schools play in the lives of queer and other vulnerable students? There have long been arguments about the school's position in American culture, and its relationship to the American family unit. However, it could be argued that, at some point, the school must pick up where the family leaves off in the task of educating the nation's youth. In *The Schoolhome* Martin writes to show the delicate and vital relationship between the home and the school, and how neither can exist in a vacuum devoid of the other. By studying Maria Montessori's *Casa de Bambini* Martin explains the popular thought that there are basics of culture that societies take for granted, aspects of human life that the school assumes students acquire at home.⁶⁷ However, with Montessori's example there are many who do not have a home life that teaches the basics of living peacefully in a diverse human community.

Therefore, the relationship between the school and the home must be reconsidered. If students are spending nearly as much time in the schools as they do at home with their families, then it would seem common sense to re-examine how teachers, school staff, and peers all affect the upbringing of a community's children, for as Martin reminds her readers, "It is a fact seldom remembered that school and home

⁶⁶ Robson, Nate. "Study: Nearly 44,000 Children in Oklahoma are Homeless." Oklahoma Watch. 1992. <http://oklahomawatch.org/2014/11/17/oklahoma-ranks-fifth-worst-in-child-homelessness/>.

⁶⁷ Martin, p. 29

are partners in the education of a nation's young."⁶⁸ This relationship draws even more focus for children living in abusive, neglectful, or unloving homes. What students learn at home cannot, should not, also be learned within the school walls, especially if it is of a negative and harmful nature.

Still, there is another component to the relationships forged within children's lives between their homes and their schools, and that is the greater community that surrounds both homes and schools. To better understand this threefold partnership between schools, home, and societies John Dewey needs to be taken into account. In his work, *Experience and Education*, he writes that due to education's transmission through interaction between individuals "means that education is essentially a social process. This quality is realized to the degree in which individuals form a community group".⁶⁹ However, on this note he also writes in *Democracy and Education* that "Persons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a man ceases to be socially influenced by being so many feet or miles removed from others."⁷⁰ It is not simply enough to throw a group of human beings together and expect a productive and healthy social group to naturally form cohesion. Instead how this group was educated, and continues to educate new members, determines the society that is developed.

Although her work is typically classified as maternal theory there are concepts of Sara Ruddick's 1989 work "Maternal Thinking" that could be applied to this

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 6

⁶⁹ Dewey, John. *Experience and Education (Kappa Delta Pi Lecture)*. N.p.: Free Press, 1938. p. 613

⁷⁰ Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. N.p.: Free Press, 1916. p. 117

intersection of spheres within a child's life and the goals that each, specifically the schoolhouse, should have. She categorizes a mother's goals in raising her children as "The Interest in Preserving the Life of the Child," "The Interest in Fostering the Child's Growth," and "The Interest in Shaping an Acceptable Child."⁷¹ However, these three interests should also perhaps be adopted by the average American school system. Initially most schools are very concerned with preserving the lives of the children in their care; schools have liability issues to constantly address, and endless threats to their students that must be assessed. Conversely, most schools' administrations' concerns tend not to extend much further into the interests of fostering growth or shaping acceptable children, unless their test scores are concerned.

Naturally, schools would be concerned with the physical well being of the children in their charge, even if that concern stems from an unwillingness to be sued. Just as Ruddick notes, for the mother their⁷² first, and most overriding concern, is keeping their child alive.⁷³ The same goes for school staff and administrators. However, after this one interest is addressed with school safety measures of a wide variety, there are still two more interests to be considered. As the school begins to pick up the slack from unloving homes, it must be willing to ensure not only preserving the lives of their collective children but also must be willing to step up and foster the children's growth and acceptability as future members of the society in which the

⁷¹ Ruddick, Sara. "Maternal Thinking." In *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, 265-314. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007. p. 273

⁷² Gender neutral pronouns used for the understanding that not all individuals who give birth to children use female specific pronouns or identity as women

⁷³ Ibid, p. 2734

schools are situated.

For many, the primary goal of ensuring children's safety is not met in most American schools. Issues of verbal, physical, and sexual harassment, as well as issues that lead to self-harm, are matters that tend to fall by the wayside of more obvious concerns about school safety. It could be argued that, in the case of LGBTQ and minority students, as the school fails even to ensure their safety and wellbeing while on campus, schools cannot begin to address the tasks of fostering their growth and acceptability. Even if schools manage the basic physical wellbeing of their charges, ensuring that there are fire drills and safe spaces to duck into during extreme weather, schools must still be held accountable for other, far more frequent, points of vulnerability.

While bell hooks may have taken some of Ruddick's theories to task, there are enough similarities between the two to bring them together here. hooks argues in "Revolutionary Parenting" that the task of raising children should not, and cannot, be placed solely in the hands of biological, particularly female, parents.⁷⁴ In hooks' assertion that both men and women can be raised to act as effective parents leads into a call for collective child care, for as hooks states, "The childrearer does not have to be a parent. Childrearsers in our culture are teachers, librarians, etc.,"⁷⁵ and as such the responsibility of meeting Ruddick's three imperatives falls not only on a mother's shoulders but on the shoulders of every adult that becomes a member of a child's life.

⁷⁴ hooks, bell. "Revolutionary Parenting." In *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, 3971-4246. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007. p. 4132

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 4132

This can be difficult, however, when parents and other childrearsers have differing opinions on what it takes to raise a child, or what values a child should be raised to accept. Shared community childrearing is simply not possible when “parents regard their children as their ‘property,’ their ‘possession.’ Many parents do not want their children to develop caring relationships with others, not even relatives.”⁷⁶ This kind of attitude can be stifling for teachers living and working in communities that may have vastly different attitudes than they themselves hold, especially when the teacher’s relationship as a childrearser to their students is taken into account.

It is this need to create and develop a child into an adult who is deemed acceptable by societal standards that tends to put both parents and schools in a tough position. Mothers, Ruddick argues, are unable to determine for themselves what an acceptable child resembles because she is held fast by societal standards not of her own creation, for “[t]he practices of mothering take place in societies in which women of all classes are less powerful than men of their class to determine the conditions under which their children grow.”⁷⁷ The same could be argued for school systems. Both mothers and schools are stuck in the awkward position of perpetuating societal standards in an attempt to raise new generations according to culturally acceptable standards, regardless of how harmful or damaging it could be for the children themselves. However, through this process of bringing up acceptable children the childrearsers could fall into Dewey’s fear that the child “is trained like an animal rather than educated like a human being,”⁷⁸ but hopefully instead, “it realizes that it is

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 4186

⁷⁷ Ruddick, p. 2850

⁷⁸ Dewey, *Experience and Education*. p. 14

responsible not to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements but only such as make for a better future society. The school is the chief agency for the accomplishment of this end.”⁷⁹ Still, there can be struggles and arguments between the home and the school in what an acceptable child actually resembles.

This back and forth among the home, the school, and the surrounding community can cause a serious amount of strife, not only for the adult members but also for the junior members. With this in mind the position of the teacher ally and advocate should be considered, just as the position of the mother who wishes to put more emphasis on her child’s wellbeing than on societal standards of acceptability. In “Con el Palote en Una Man y el Libro en la Otra” Larissa Mercado-Lopez creates the argument for motherhood activism, for mothering from a position of politics and civic engagement, stating, “I cannot comprehend why my work as an academic and an activist is not considered work that matters to the well-being of my family, when my family – biological, cultural, and global – is the reason I do this work.”⁸⁰ While her call is to Chicana mothers, there are still threads of her philosophy that can be applied to teachers, and their unique position as non-relative childrearers. As she argues, there is a constant dismissive nature surrounding Chicana mothers’ ability to be intellectual or creative which many teachers would also argue applies to their profession. She candidly notes, “Whether by the demands of capitalism or the guilt from Catholicism, the Chicana mother has learned to quell her yearning to create in ways other than

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 22

⁸⁰ Mercado-Lopez, Larissa. " Con el Palote en Una Man y el Libro en la Otra." In *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, 22749-23408. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007. p. 22840

producing the goods of capitalism or birthing children.”⁸¹ For many educators, this statement reigns true, as day in and day out, they are forced to turn out students from their classroom assembly lines who are ready for the job market but not ready to exist in a peaceful and inclusive society.

Dewey argues in his work “My Pedagogic Creed” on the nature of the relationship between the individual and the society they find themselves located within, and how education serves to affect them both equally:

[...] the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass.⁸²

However, in the early 21st century we are confronted with far more diversity of race, class, and opinion than Dewey could perhaps have imagined in the early 20th century. It is not enough to simply want to educate an individual as a social being because the question then remains: whose society? Teachers are in the unique position of teaching students from diverse backgrounds, and at a certain point, perhaps some activism on their part has to come into play in order to decide their own moral standing, and to facilitate an LGBTQ inclusive education to their students.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 22787

⁸² Dewey, John *My Pedagogic Creed*, N.p.: Free Press, 1897. p. 48

Navigating Community Beliefs and School Constraints

We are then left to wonder how we as individuals develop certain beliefs or opinions, how those affect our lives and the lives of others, and how schools and teachers can help to shape those personal convictions . For many teachers and school staff, parents and the home are often adversaries in their attempts to educate new generations. What children do or do not learn at home will naturally bleed into what they learn in schools, and will affect their behavior while away from home. As Jane Roland Martin reminds her readers “Because home is the hidden partner in the education of our young, we tend to forget how much of who we are, how we act, and what we know was learned when we were very young.”⁸³ Still, it is not solely what is learned when a child is very young that affects how they act while at school. While Montessori’s educational philosophy was built around children who simply did not have mature members of the community to teach them what Martin calls “little ‘c’ culture,”⁸⁴ much of her educational strategy that schools take on that responsibility can be applied to schools with students with active parents, which can place teachers in precarious confrontation with parents as they begin to enact anti-bullying efforts.

The constant reprimands of language without compassionate discussion of the deeper problems at hand can lead students who bully to even greater feelings of animosity toward their targets. Just as shallow admonishments from teachers serve to set the queer students apart from the school community as a whole, it also furthers distances the bully from the queer students, and impedes the possibility of dialogue

⁸³ Martin, p. 18

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 30

between the two students, and the groups they ultimately represent. The 2011 study by Toomey, McGuire, and Russell also found that while schools with LGBTQ inclusive curriculum were perceived as safer by individual students, there were higher proportions of students who perceived their schools as less safe for gender nonconforming students.⁸⁵ However, the researchers argue this finding was due to the fact that students from schools with inclusive curriculum are more aware of biases and are more willing to report violence against themselves and others. The researchers also found that older students held fewer homophobic beliefs and “Our finding may conclude that older youth are more cognizant of heteronormative expectations for their peers, and may therefore be more likely to perceive a lack of safety for gender nonconformity.”⁸⁶ While this is a point of speculation on the part of the researchers, there is the argument that having spent more time learning in an environment that houses LGBTQ inclusive curricula, older students have a higher likelihood of understanding the queer community, and the lives and plight of LGBTQ identified peers. The 2009 GLSEN Research Brief also found that in schools that include examples and depictions of positive LGBT people, events, and history over sixty percent of queer students felt their classmates were accepting of LGBT people, versus over thirty-five percent in schools that did not include such topics in their curriculum.⁸⁷

Then again, for many school districts teacher confrontation and interrupting moments of harassment against queer students is already a step forward, and is one that

⁸⁵ Toomey, McGuire, and Russell, p. 187

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 194

⁸⁷ GLSEN “Teaching Respect: LGBT-Inclusive Curriculum and School Climate (Research Brief). New York. 2011. p. 2

countless other school districts refuse to consider. For many areas, due to the community that surrounds the school and the influences of school boards and parent groups, many teachers who would feel compelled to advocate for LGBTQ students fear doing so on threat of losing their jobs, which leads to “Teachers who could provide a wealth of support and information to students who are questioning their own sexual identity are silenced in school systems that are sorely lacking reliable information and credible resources.”⁸⁸ It is imperative to understand the overwhelming diversity of communities that make up the American educational landscape, and the vast differences in religious, political, and moral ideologies that carry over from the outer society into the inner school population. When dealing with kick back or resistance from school administration Mayo argues that starting with state and federal laws that do govern exactly what students are entitled to in countless situations is a great place to start the conversations of LGBTQ inclusion and safety,

Understanding that most schools are already obligated to provide such protections [Constitutional freedom of speech, equal protection of laws, and Title IX which protects against gender discrimination] may help educators ensure that their schools are compliant. But understanding that LGBTQ issues are not settled in the broader communities may seem to be an impediment for doing so.⁸⁹

As the most basic point of inclusion schools are compelled to provide at least the above protections to all members of their school communities, and teachers who feel duty-bound to advocate for their more vulnerable students can begin their arguments with parents and school districts on the basis of legality, and with the ever looming threats of litigation that seem to hang over the head of every school administrator.

⁸⁸ Birden, p. 16

⁸⁹ Mayo, p. 8

Conversely, while some school administration may be willing to ensure that LGBTQ students are not overtly discriminated against, or face verbal and physical harassment, many are of the opinion that discussing queer identity is inappropriate for minors, and the scope of the school curriculum. There is a constant hypersexualization of queer identity in American society that plays out in a discomfort to create an open and candid discourse on LGBTQ issues, particularly when children and young adults are involved.⁹⁰ A prevalent inability, or unwillingness, to separate sexuality, gender identity, and physical sexual acts creates an uncomfortable situation for many adults who strive to ensure a degree of professional space between themselves and their students. This trend again comes into conflict with Montessori's and Jane Roland Martin's premise that there is little about human life that is not educational, and therefore within the purview of the schoolhouse.

Some schools have been forced to confront issues of sexual assault and consent, such as the Norman School District mentioned before, but very little comprehensive and inclusive sex education exists in the Oklahoma. Also, as Mayo argues, there is a prevalent trend to undersexualize LGBTQ youth which often leads to a failure in including the differing needs of queer students in sex education courses and "It is hard to understand how so many school districts decided to avoid addressing HIV/AIDS even when it was a leading cause of adolescent death (Mayo, 2004a), and yet such exclusions continue even today."⁹¹ When little discussion is given surrounding sexuality in sex education, all students regardless of sexual orientation, are left without the ability

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 74

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 75

to give critical thought to their sexual identity and to the practices of safe sex and healthy relationships.⁹² While Oklahoma does not require schools to teach sex education, they do require teaching that encompasses the spread of HIV/AIDS; however they are one of eight states that require instruction to include language that ties the spread of HIV/AIDS to homosexual activity.⁹³ This attitude and practice further places LGBTQ identity into an othered and negative space.

Arguing for Inclusive Curricula

Birden argues, “Thus, it would appear that while efforts are certainly taking place to change school climates, such efforts have not yet reached broadly or deeply enough to significantly disturb the consonance of compulsory heterosexuality in most of our nation’s schools.” However, the devastating realities that surround queer youth, and the statistics that surround toxic masculinity and heterosexism, can be lessened through the creation of inclusive school curriculums. GLSEN’s *2011 Teaching Respect: LGBT-Inclusive Curriculum and School Climate Research Brief* noted that students who attended a school with an LGBT inclusive curriculum, one that included “positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events” lead to “less-hostile school experience for LGBT students as well as increased feelings of connectedness to their school communities.”⁹⁴ Not only did schools with inclusive curriculum have more accepting environments for queer students but their chances of experiencing “victimization because of sexual orientation or gender expression” were slashed in half

⁹² Ibid, p. 75

⁹³ GLSEN “‘No Promo Homo’ Laws”

⁹⁴ GLSEN “Teaching Respect (Research Brief)”, p. 1

compared to LGBTQ students in other schools.⁹⁵ Also, their chances of experiencing verbal and physical harassment fell from one in three to less than one in five at schools with curricula with positive examples of LGBTQ topics.⁹⁶

The 2011 study by Russell Toomey, Jenifer McGuire, and Stephen Russell of 28 high schools in California found that more students felt or perceived their school to be less safe for gender non-conforming students than those who identified as a sexual minority, and even more so for male identified non-conforming students which is “consistent with the observation that breaking male gender norms elicits more violence than breaking female gender norms”.⁹⁷ This trend is also consistent with the effects of toxic masculinity, and the constant fear of being labeled gay which is felt by many male students. This study is important to note because it gives a certain focus to trans and gender non-conformity that is often lumped together with sexuality, and begins to highlight the different plights of each letter represented in the ever growing LGBTQ+ acronym.

Toomey, McGuire, and Russell’s study also has similar findings to GLSEN’s 2009 report on the importance of school curriculum that is LGBTQ inclusive. The study’s findings show that when students have access to LGBTQ information, inclusion of LGBTQ issues in curriculum, and teacher intervention in harassment students “perceive their schools as safer for gender nonconforming male students” and “having a GSA was normative among participants in this survey, and nearly half reported

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 1

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 1

⁹⁷ Toomey, McGuire, and Russell, p. 193

inclusive policies.”⁹⁸ The researchers are also quick to note that the entirety of the study was set in California, which has nondiscrimination and anti-harassment policies on the books for all schools based on gender and sexual orientation, whether perceived or actual. This study also found that:

Beyond individual experiences, students reported more perceived safety for gender nonconforming male peers when they attended schools in which the formal curriculum and extra-curriculum included challenges to heteronormativity, or in which these challenges were visible and known to students.⁹⁹

What is significant here is the inclusion of formal curriculum within their study. One great place to begin tackling these overarching issues of oppression and abuse is the English classroom, wherein a great many issues can be discussed through literature in ways that allow students to grapple with preconceived notions of what it means to be human, what it means to live with one another, and how gender, sexuality, race, religion, class, and disability, can all effect themselves and their peers.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 194

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 194

III

ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE

Positioning the English Classroom in Inclusive Curricula

All teachers have some measure of control over their own classrooms, and high school English teachers stand in a unique space and subject that lends itself well to bridging the gaps between systemic heteronormativity and LGBTQ inclusive school curriculum. The language arts have long served as pillars of human development and the creation of culture. It has become a discipline that encompasses not only poetry and fiction, but draws out dialogue of history, philosophy, morality, and religion, all of the diverse and unique aspects that make humans stand a bit apart from the rest of the natural world.

While STEM fields are currently all the rage in the study of education, with science and math being far easier to measure on standardized tests, English courses and the arts still manage to serve students by encouraging readers to step into the minds of authors, into the lives of characters. Some would argue that teachers are born out of students who fell so in love with their subject that they decided to devote their lives to passing that love on to new generations, and this is hardly more evident than in those who decided to become English teachers. This passion for a subject becomes necessary when teachers decide to take liberties with course curriculum in order to begin addressing subjects that cannot, should not, be handled with the clinical detachment that so often pervades math and science courses. English literature courses serve as the perfect place not only to bring in clear, positive representations of LGBTQ people or

events, but it is also a space that allows young people to grapple with preconceived notions and beliefs that are typically brought on from a simple lack of exposure to something different.

Ralph Ellison, a man who lived and existed in the unique position as a black man who was raised in what was Indian Territory before Oklahoma became a state, muses on the position of the novel in American life. He argues that the novel is born out of change, is a vehicle for man to attempt to situate himself within a world of chaos in a way that even science and technology cannot achieve. For Ellison, the novel was a moral instrument for those who wrote in some of the modern world's most turbulent and ever-changing moments. He asks what the novel can achieve for the reader:

How does one in the novel (the novel which is a work of art and not a disguised piece of sociology) persuade the American reader to identify that which is basic in man beyond all differences of class, race, wealth, or formal education? How does one not only make the illiterate and inarticulate eloquent enough so that the educated and more favorably situated will recognize wisdom and honor and charity, heroism and capacity for love when found in humble speech and dress? And conversely, how does one persuade readers with the least knowledge of literature to recognize the broader values implicit in their lives? [...] How give the reader that which we do have in abundance, all the countless untold and wonderful variations on the themes of identity and freedom and necessity, love and death, and with all the mystery of personality undergoing its endless metamorphosis?¹⁰⁰

His answer lies not only in the novel, but also in the novel writer, for they will take those who are willing and capable to transform their very existence and experiences into literature for others to explore. When an individual is able to confront something different from their own selves and their own lives through the written word there is the comfort of allowing oneself to mature and progress in their own minds, and in their own

¹⁰⁰ Ellison, Ralph. *Going to the Territory*. New York: Random House, 1986. p. 273

unique ways. Every piece of literature, whether read by millions or only a few, affects each reader in a way that is distinctive and exclusive to their soul alone.

The novel is, of course, not the only kind of literature discussed in high school English courses, nor should it be for human experience can be conveyed in a variety of ways, through poetry, spoken word, song lyrics, and countless other vehicles that have gained traction in an ever growing world of multimedia studies. In reality, the inclusion of a wide variety of literature and media in language arts classrooms allows a greater availability of queer inclusion as well. However, what must be remembered at this junction is that the statistics noted previously which argue that the inclusion of LGBTQ related topics, events, and people creates a safer, more accepting school climate included one important standard, the visibility of these queer examples were of a positive nature. Teacher allies and advocates should be sensitive to the messages their chosen materials will send so as to not perpetuate damaging LGBTQ narratives or stereotypes.¹⁰¹

As popular media have brought to the forefront in the minds of many queer viewers and readers, there seems to be a popular writing tool that has permeated most common television shows, movies, and teen literature. The “Bury Your Gays” trope gained even more recognition after a popular TV show, *The 100*, killed one half of its lesbian couple. During fan uproar many found greater realization that *The 100* was in no way breaking new literary ground.¹⁰² Many Young Adult genre readers have

¹⁰¹ Banks, William. "Literacy, Sexuality, and the Value(s) of Queer Young Adult Literatures." *The English Journal* 98, no. 4 (March 2009): 33-36. p. 33

¹⁰² Snarker, Dorothy. "Bury Your Gays: Why 'The 100', 'Walking Dead' Deaths Are Problematic." *The Hollywood Reporter*.

lamented the unfortunate trend toward sad and depressing storylines for most queer characters, and others have long cried out for queer character representation that is not riddled with death, heartbreak, abuse, and any number of other violent events that are not universal for the LGBTQ community.¹⁰³

With this in mind, educators who are willing to allow for LGBTQ visibility and inclusion in their language arts courses must also be willing to understand what kind of messages their chosen literature and discussions convey to their classes as a whole, not just for their queer students, as well as understanding that LGBTQ classroom readings occur in environments that “[a]re inevitably shaped by homophobia and heteronormativity.”¹⁰⁴ Although many queer students will be able to relate to some aspect of a queer character’s life there is something to be said for a reader also envisioning what their futures could include through the progression of a character’s storyline. However, as William Banks cautions not all story lines are encouraging; “The characters that inhabited gay literature in the 1960s to the 1990s, even if at times positive and sympathetic, taught me to disconnect and move on.”¹⁰⁵ Through providing literature choices that have positive queered storylines LGBTQ students can not only see themselves in the characters but they can also have a sense of futurity, and straight and cisgendered students can see and explore lives that are different from their own. Therefore, it is imperative that through their teachers, queer students have access to lists

¹⁰³ Banks, p.33

¹⁰⁴ Clark, Caroline, and Mollie Blackburn. "Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People: What's Possible?" *The English Journal* 98, no. 4 (March 2009): 25-32.

p. 26

¹⁰⁵ Banks, p. 36

of reading and multimedia materials that truly highlight not just the difficulties they face in their lives, but also all of the positive life experiences that can await them.¹⁰⁶

Rethinking English Curriculum

In the current culture of high stakes testing, budget cuts, and a seemingly constant war against teachers many educators are understandably hesitant to buck the system or dare to begin including materials that are not commonly used across the English curriculum or could be considered inflammatory.¹⁰⁷ Still, even with the fear of losing their job constantly weighing on their minds, so many teachers continue to keep their students' wellbeing and overall growth as individuals as priority number one. It certainly helps to know that even with the pressure of adhering to a curriculum that is designed to raise standardized test scores, and not necessarily educate students, there are ways to include LGBTQ related materials without compromising a teacher's or administrator's job.¹⁰⁸

As English teachers move through units designed to meet state standards on reading, writing, comprehension, and analysis they are able to bring in unique materials in order to achieve those aims. Therefore, when teachers are designing class curriculum and lesson plans it is not too much of a stretch to include a few examples of queer literature here and there to begin to provide moments of discussion and learning about sexuality and gender in as close to an organic way possible. Many teachers choose to

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 33

¹⁰⁷ Scott Curwood, Jen, Megan Schliesman, and Kathleen Horning. "Fight for Your Right: Censorship, Selection, and LGBTQ Literature." *The English Journal* 98, no. 4 (March 2009): 37-43. p. 40

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 40

include examples of spoken word and choose poetry that they know will resonate with their students, and when questioned about their content choices, they can give informed justifications based on curriculum standards.¹⁰⁹ Teachers can also find partners in metaphorical crime with librarians, who are one of the best resources for all members of the school community. Librarians are typically at the forefront of what literature is new, popular, or powerful for young readers to expand their horizons and begin to encounter worlds and people who will challenge their worldviews.¹¹⁰ It must be remembered, that some schools have little or no library services, especially in rural schools, but teachers can also reach out to neighborhood and city libraries that could serve as a pivotal tool for determined teachers.

Teachers are encouraged to choose literature and media that encompasses the vast diversity of American life, either queer, straight, or cisgendered. There is probably very little that the average American high school student cannot understand, if only they are taught in a way that speaks to who they are and what prerequisite knowledge they bring to the classroom. Every student can, and should, learn the concept of intersectionality, which rationalizes that every individual has a complex range of intersecting identities that have impact on their lives. By including queer literature, and queer literature with a diverse set of characters and situations, teachers can begin to broach the subject of what makes us human. By bringing forth examples of people, either fictional or real, students can start to learn that simply because someone looks different, acts differently, thinks in a different way, or loves a different type of person

¹⁰⁹ Scott Curwood, Schliesman, Horning, p. 40

¹¹⁰ Mayo, p. 78

does not automatically make them bad or wrong. And this is the moment that concepts of privilege through race, gender, and monetary wealth, can be broached but first care must be taken to ensure that the materials chosen for the class do not repeat old biases or assumptions. As Mollie Blackburn and Jill Smith state,

Focusing on the sexual identities of LGBTQ people, as so often LGBT-themed texts do, typically comes at the expense of attending to intersecting identities. Sexual identities cannot be effectively separated from the race, class, gender, and other identities embodied by people since no one is solely sexual.¹¹¹

There is a very fast growing trend toward general acceptance for gays and lesbians, given their presence in popular media, but acceptance for gays and lesbians of color, or trans people, or gender non-conforming individuals is moving at a much slower pace. This does not mean that the nation can simply stop work on the inclusion of gays and lesbians, but it should not be at the expense of the other members of the ever-growing LGBTQ+ acronym, or those who exist within other vulnerable communities and identities.

At the same time, teachers should not have to see the inclusion of queer identities and issues as adding work to an already overflowing plate. While creating relationships with other language arts teachers and librarians can make the work of discovering new and influential queer literature more manageable, teachers can also begin this shift toward inclusivity by queering their discussions of works already common to their syllabi. There are countless classic novels and poems that span the average American English classroom, and how those works are discussed can go a long way toward LGBTQ inclusive curriculums. English education need simply to allow

¹¹¹ Blackburn and Smith, p. 633

and facilitate discussion around books like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *the Great Gatsby*, and any Shakespeare play that creates space for students to play with the inherent status quo that has become imbedded in literature analysis.

Putting Theory into Practice

To Kill a Mockingbird: Understanding Character Creation and Development

Overall Goal for the Lesson: Students will examine and explore how an author creates and develops a character's personality and individual place within the plot.

Student Objective(s) for the Lesson: (1) After completion of the book students will brainstorm on how the author develops Scout's character. (2) Students will dissect context clues, author language, character description, character dialogue, and setting to examine character story development and growth. (3) Students will examine the significance of Scout's name and the description of character as a "tomboy" and how this ties into the plot as a whole. (4) Students will brainstorm on different ways Scout's character could have been written, and their affects on the story as a whole.

Assessments: (1) Student groups will share their group's brainstorming on the author's development of Scout's character with the class. (2) Students will individually write one to two paragraphs showing points of character creation and development in the book with quotes that are cited according to MLA standards. (3) Students will individually write one to two paragraphs that examines the significance of Scout's name and the description of her character as "tomboy" and how this ties into the plot as a whole. (4) Students will present group brainstorming on the possible different ways of creating and presenting a character to "replace" Scout.

Description of the Classroom, Grade Level, and Students: 9th grade, standard students

Prior Knowledge of the Subject: (1) Students will have read the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* over the previous weeks. While reading the novel, they will have had classroom discussions about setting, stereotypes, character development, and character creation. (2) Students will have discussed how characters a built into the story, how

authors build setting and plot, and how the characters' personalities and decisions affect the overall story.

Length of Lesson: Two class periods

OK Academic Standard(s) Addressed: 9.3.R.3., 9.3.W.3

Schedule of Activities:

1. After finishing the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* students will be placed into groups
2. The teacher will give instructions for the activity
3. Student will begin brainstorming on the development of Scout's character development
4. During brainstorming, students will assist each other on finding sources from the text
5. After they share their work with the class, students will individually write a paragraph to turn in the next class period
6. Second class period students will begin working privately to write a paragraph discussing Scout's moniker and description as a "tomboy"
7. This paragraph will be due the following class period
8. Half way through the second class period, students will rejoin their original groups
9. In these groups they will brainstorm on how the story could be different if Scout was portrayed differently
10. They will present their brainstorming to the class

Accommodations: (1) Instructions will be broken down in an easy to read format. Assist any student needing additional help understanding the instructions by giving them one step to focus on at a time (2) Have a designated group reader/leader(s) (3) Encourage groups to assist their peers, and to see each other as important members of the group

IV

FINDING YOUR VOICE

Remembering Teacher Rights

Some obstacles that keep teachers from introducing LGBTQ inclusive materials into their class curricula have already been discussed, from questions about why such actions are necessary to standardized testing pressure, but there are also legal obstacles that lie heavily on the average teacher's mind. Uncertainty surrounding teachers' rights both in and outside of school keep many educators from taking the chances needed to begin creating inclusive classrooms for all students, regardless of gender, sexuality, or race. When teachers' behavior is policed outside of school settings, and with a seemingly constant overlap of a teacher's professional and personal life, it is unsurprising there exists a constant fear that discussing taboo or risky subjects would lead to reprimands or the loss of their job, which ultimately leads to teachers who could provide resources and advocacy to their students being silenced out of concern for their livelihood.¹¹²

Far too often teachers are only seen in their place in the school classrooms and hallways, leading others to forget that teachers are people, are citizens, and as such are afforded the same rights as their non-teaching peers. Once a teacher steps into the school each morning their Constitutional rights do not cease to exist. However, educators do hold a unique position in their faculties as the community childrearers mentioned by hooks. The educator's influence on their students' growth and

¹¹² Birden, p. 16

development cannot be overlooked, and for some parents this causes a significant amount of concern and distrust.

In many parts of the country, and up until very recently, the very concept and acts that are commonly associated homosexuality were illegal. In 2013 the United States Supreme Court deliberated on the case *Lawrence v. Texas*, which set national precedent for the overturn of state laws that made sodomy illegal¹¹³. There have also been countless court cases surrounding students' rights to organize GSAs on school property, with arguments surrounding whether or not such clubs violated the morality of the school by discussing inappropriate and sexual content. There are also numerous reports of the termination of teaching positions after the teacher was either outed as queer or openly supported LGBTQ issues and students.

In most cases, the courts rule in favor of those on the queer side of the battle, citing a number of Constitutional rights and previous precedent cases. A great many of LGBTQ related court battles revolve around the First and the Fourteenth Constitutional Amendments which state:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.¹¹⁴

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without

¹¹³ Mayo, p. 65

¹¹⁴ U.S. Constitution Art./Amend. I

due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.¹¹⁵

Through these two amendments come the Freedom of Speech Clause and Equal Protection Clause, which are used in a variety of anti-discrimination cases in U.S. history. Another influential precedent is the Tinker Rule, which arose out of student protests of the Vietnam War. Finally, the Equal Access Act that was passed by President Ronald Reagan in 1984 and was a basis for allowing religious organizations to form groups in public schools is also the basis for the allowance of GSAs and other LGBTQ related clubs.¹¹⁶ Through these Constitutional rights, precedent cases, and government acts most teachers and students have the clear ability to discuss LGBTQ issues in public schools. Moreover, in an Oklahoma state legislature attempt to enact a law that would allow school districts to terminate teacher employment for any advocacy on behalf of homosexuality or practiced homosexual activity, the U.S. Supreme upheld the 10th Circuit Appeals Court's decision against the passing of the law.¹¹⁷ With this in mind there are numerous examples of state and national courts upholding the rights of teachers and students in regards to queer identity and expression.

Involving Teachers, Families, and Students

Remembering teachers' right to their freedom of speech and their right to be active both as members of their communities but also as civic agents allows deeper discussion of teachers' involvement with student and parent organizations located both in and out of official school settings. Teachers do not live, teach, or exist within a

¹¹⁵ U.S. Constitution Art./Amend. XIV, Sec. 1

¹¹⁶ Mayo, p. 90

¹¹⁷ Mirga, Tom. "High Court Split on Homosexual Teachers' Rights." Education Week.

vacuum wherein their only interactions with students occur in the classroom, nor are their students the only members of the community in which they do have access to, or experience with on a day to day basis. Most educators have long held close ties with the parents of their students, with many who developed close friendships and partnerships with parents who are active in their children's academic lives. In an ever increasingly connected world, where teachers and parents have seemingly constant access to one another through technology, online grade posting sites, and social media, students, their teachers, and their families are able to associate on a far more frequent basis.

With educators' and school staff's influential position in American communities, call for emphasis on student diversity, intersectionality of identity, and the creation of inclusive environments begin with the education of teachers and school staff. As Mayo notes,

Preparing teachers and school leaders to be advocates for all students means working against those prejudices that circulate widely and, further, making sure school personnel learn about the ways schools as institutions exacerbate already existing divisions and biases. Because schools do more than teach basic subjects but also teach students how to become members of communities and part of the progress of the nation and the world, teachers, school leaders, school staff, and counselors all need to be prepared to work with diverse learners, community members, and parents, and to advocate for the equitable learning of all students.¹¹⁸

As teachers move from passive conduits for the perpetuation of toxic or damaging community beliefs, and into positions of support, alliance, and advocacy for their students they open avenues of civic and political engagement wherein they can work

¹¹⁸ Mayo, p. 14

closely with students, parents, and community members to create not just school environments that are inclusive to diverse identities but also societies that are supportive as well.

Not only can teachers be educated in preparation to work with diverse learners but organizations such as Gay-Straight Alliances which are located in schools, can serve as spaces for students and their teacher-advocates to also prepare themselves to work in civic and social corporation with those who experience life differently, and similarly, to themselves. As Mayo explains, “Students involved in GSAs are often all, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, involved in rethinking norms around gender and sexuality and involved, as well, in interrogating how bias shapes the lives of gender and sexual minorities.”¹¹⁹ GSAs provide a space within the school walls for like minded students to gather and begin deconstructing, and rethinking, issues of heteronormativity, heterosexism, gender expression, and sexual identity, regardless of the students’ own gender and sexuality.

Teacher involvement, then, is equally important in social construction of the school’s GSA. While a faculty member may serve as the one teacher needed as the group’s official advisor, that does not mean the advisor exists as a silent partner, or that other educators cannot be involved. GSAs often serve as safe spaces in schools where students who are queer or queer allies can connect with one another, and often serve as spaces of community socializing. However, with involved teacher leadership and guidance, regular GSA meetings can become spaces of safe socializing, as well as,

¹¹⁹ Mayo, p. 88

spaces of learning across difference. As Dewey reminds his readers, teachers cannot be set apart from the school community, instead they are simply the most mature members and therefore have the responsibility of guiding and steering the younger members in positively educative directions. The queer community is plagued with issues of racism, sexism, classism, and ableism and the schools' GSAs are rarely devoid of these problems. These are moments when interactive teacher guidance can go a long way in helping students overcome differences in not only gender expression and sexuality, but also the frequent differences that keep much of the nation's population segregated and at constant odds.¹²⁰ Finally, being active and present at a school's GSA gives teachers the momentum to move from passive LGBTQ ally with a rainbow sticker on their door and into a position of advocacy that more strongly shows their students that they can be seen as a safe and supportive member of the larger school community.

Other organizations that are located less within the school, and more within the sphere of the greater community, are also important resources for teacher advocacy and are places where corporative relationships between educators, families, and community members can be developed and nurtured. No one teacher can, or should, fight the overwhelming battle for inclusive and safe school environments alone. Instead, by forming partnerships with not only fellow teachers and school staff but also with parents and supporters within the community, LGBTQ advocates can find encouragement and cooperation to achieve a shared goal. Through organizations like Parents and Friends for Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), teachers can work closely with parents of LGBTQ students, LGBTQ parents, and LGBTQ community members to

¹²⁰ Mayo, p. 88

provide a voice to queer students and families alike. Regardless of its moniker, PFLAG supports all members of the queer community, not just those identified as lesbian or gay, and it is an organization that has built its foundation on the understanding that parents should love their children regardless of their gender or sexual identity.¹²¹

PFLAG's earliest and most foundational purpose was to provide education and support to parents of LGBTQ children, and to provide advocacy for those children as they face difficulties and discrimination for their identity.¹²² This principle has expanded to providing community based chapters that are focused on providing the love and care that family can provide to all members of their queer community, regardless of actual familial ties. This is a great resource for teachers looking to find allies and supporters who are more concerned with the safety and wellbeing of their children than what society deems acceptable or morally appropriate.

In an article titled "Doing 'Real Family Values': The Interpretive Practice of Families in the GLBT movement", K.L. Broad, Sara Crawley, and Lara Foley embarked on a study how PFLAG organizations attempted to take the rhetoric used by the "Religious Right" about what constitutes "real family values", and show that members of PFLAG displayed those values more effectively than their homophobic and transphobic peers.¹²³ Through their research the authors included written and spoken material that highlighted the organization's expressions of community love and care

¹²¹ PFLAG. 2016. community.pflag.org.

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Broad, K.L., Sara Crawley, and Lara Foley. "Doing 'Real Family Values': The Interpretive Practice of Families in the GLBT movement." *The Sociological Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2004): 509-27. p. 515

with the authors noting: “Indeed if one examines what PFLAG is advocating, it is clear that the organization challenges narrow meanings of family and religious values but does so from within the constraints of culturally accepted notions of what count as good ideals and standards for families.”¹²⁴ By broaching difficult issues surrounding teacher advocacy for queer students, not only being a member of a local PFLAG chapter, but also using their approach to LGBTQ support by using the language and cultural norms already in place, educators can approach the subject in ways their peers will hopefully already understand.

However, while organizations such as PFLAG incorporates a wide variety of families with differing structures and different arrangements of queer members, from queer children to queer parents, much of this work so far assumes the majority of teacher advocates for queer students for queer students to be straight and cisgendered. Still, the teacher profession is hardly devoid of queer members, and understanding their position in the school both as educators and as parents or members of familial units also has to be addressed. Just as students and young people are subjected to the unwritten rules of heteronormativity, so are teachers and school staff. As Blackburn and Smith noted earlier, the majority of school structures are organized around the gender binary and the expectations that carries, and teachers do not escape these boundaries any easier than their students. As teachers are culturally placed in certain subjects or positions based on their perceived gender stepping outside of those positions can be dangerous, and as Birden notes, “[...] issues do not stop with students. While lesbians and gay men may be growing more visible in many walks of North American life, teachers who

¹²⁴ Broad, K.L., Sara Crawley, and Lara Foley. p. 515

come out in school still risk harassment, dismissal, and physical violence.”¹²⁵ Adults within the school community can experience homophobia and transphobia based on their real or perceived gender and sexual identify in many of the same ways as their younger counterparts.

In his book, *In a Queer Voice: Journeys of Resilience from Adolescence to Adulthood*, Michael Sadowski interviews a number of queer identify students over a six year span in the hopes of better understanding their lives and experiences moving from a queer adolescence to a queer adult, and for many there was a common thread of the impact educators, specifically queer teachers, had on their lives both positively and negatively. For one interviewee, the kinship she felt as a closeted lesbian with her guidance counselor, who was also a closeted lesbian, and their shared fear of being out in the school setting was a powerful and supportive relationship.¹²⁶ However, for another student, a closeted gay teacher’s fear kept him from reaching out to the student and providing any sense of protection or understanding.¹²⁷ The decision to be visibly “out” is an intensely personal one, and for teachers it can be a dangerous and precarious one. Queer teachers can play a precarious game in their attempts at self-preservation and also wanting to provide support and nurturing to their LGBTQ students and “Even more tragically, these teachers believe, almost to a person, that when they are forced to hide their sexual identity, they become less available to their students owing to a fear of being ‘outed.’”¹²⁸ Finally, all teachers, regardless of gender or sexual identity, have to

¹²⁵ Birden, p. 16

¹²⁶ Sadowski, Michael. *In a Queer Voice: Journeys of Resilience from Adolescence to Adulthood*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 19

¹²⁸ Birden, p. 16

be prepared to work closely with not only diverse student populations but also with the diverse families that are attached to their students. Teachers who advocate for their queer students should also be prepared to advocate for and extend their inclusive environment to queer parents and family members.

CHOOSING YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Looking Toward the Horizon

In Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, he wrote, "When I discover who I am, I'll be free."¹²⁹ Ellison's writing revolves around his experiences as a black man born in Oklahoma shortly after the Indian Territories gained statehood, and his existence which was rendered invisible because of the color of his skin. For many LGBTQ identified youth in America, the feeling of invisibility is one that crosses from race into sexual and gender expression, with queer people of color often experiencing such an existence second fold. For many queer youth, the future has arrived, with more Americans expressing support of the LGBTQ community each and every day. With the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that made same-sex marriage legal in all fifty states, it definitely seems like the future of the queer community is finally taking a turn toward the positive. But, once the curtain of mainstream media and human rights cases is pulled back, the looming threat of violence, harassment, and bullying remains for the majority of the nation's LGBTQ community.

There are not quick or easy answers to the issues that continually dog the heels of queer individuals, and it would sound like defeat to think it will simply take time and the evolution of new generations. While, to some extent that is the case, with LGBTQ peoples steadily gaining more rights and acceptance with each passing generation, it gives today's youth a bit of a short stick. Also, if work is not done now to ensure that

¹²⁹ Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1980

future generations are more accepting and inclusive to all members of their communities then we cannot rely on time alone. Young people face constant hardship in any number of ways, from abuse, to poverty, to systematic racism, to issues of suicide and self-harm. With this in mind, it can be disheartening to know that no quick solutions exist. Still, those who are determined to create better school environments than perhaps the ones they grew up in, are positive forces in the right direction.

In the best possible cases, school districts will begin to enact full school LGBTQ inclusive curriculums, but in reality, that goal is sitting far out on the horizon. For most schools, simply cutting back on homophobic slurs and violent bullying is a huge improvement in the lives of their queer students, and each teacher advocate has to come at the problems of homophobia and transphobia from the unique composition of the communities they live and work in each day. However, there are still small actions that can begin to create welcoming and inclusive school environments for all students, queer, straight, or otherwise and regardless of race, class, or ability. Actions as small as engaging perpetrators of homophobic actions in dialogue or including queer authors and characters in English classrooms, can create ripples of positive change that grow upon each other until substantial and constructive change takes place not only within the confines of the school but also as they seep out into the students' greater community spaces.

Advocating for queer youth is hard, and in some regions of the U.S., it can be dangerous but there have always been those who are willing to disregard cultural norms in order to break down preconceived notions of what is proper for what is right. Teachers are at the forefront of what it means to exist in a democracy, they are the

nurturers and educators of a nation' youth, they are responsible for crafting children into future citizens. What teachers decide to instill in their students will reverberate throughout civic society for generations. Naturally, this concept puts all teachers on a bit of a pedestal, and perhaps assumes that all teachers have the best intentions, that they all want what is best for their students. However, every once in a while, a little optimism is needed and surely, for the most part, teachers are those who hold not only their choice of subject close to their hearts but also their students as well. All change requires is one person, one bright eyed educator who is not complacent with the status quo, and who is willing to strive and fight for those kids who just need someone to tell them their lives are valid. For many, that favorite teacher who cared and believed in them, who acted as a saving grace, was their high school English teacher. Human connection is made and remembered through the written word, and the argument to include LGBTQ subjects in English classroom is the perfect example of what can be achieved through just reading a book.

Going Forward

The following is a brief list of resources that can be used for individual continued research in LGBTQ issues and how they relate to the classroom. This is a collection of educational theory classics, feminist scholars, works in Queer Theory, Oklahoma and national LGBTQ organizations, and queer literary works and authors. This list is in no way comprehensive, but it should serve as a spring board into self-education and critical thought on creating LGBTQ inclusive curriculums, classrooms, and school environments.

LGBTQ AND QUEER EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Bilodeau, Brent L. and Renn, Kristen A.

The article, "Analysis of LGBT Identity Development Models and Implications for Practice," serves to educate staff in student affairs style positions on the plethora of influential LGBT identity development identity models, and how they can be used to better serve their student bodies. This article is useful in that it includes not only gay and lesbian identity development models, but also models and literature around the identity development of LGBTQ people of color, women, bisexuals, transgender folks, and life span specific models. This article is useful for those interested in identity development models, and it can be helpful to be versed in the popular models that are often referenced by administration and student services.

Birden, Susan

An Oklahoma author herself, Birden presents a philosophical rethinking of sexual identity and its position in the field of education, in her work *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education*. This work strives to challenge the conceptions of heteronormativity, the position of LGBTQ students and educators in the classroom, and to provide a new and challenging way to understand and discuss sexuality.

Butler, Judith

Butler has a number of works that have become significant to the canon of queer theory and queer scholarship with perhaps her most notable including her theory of gender performativity. Through her works, Butler theorizes on gender as performances,

and strives to challenge conventional notions of gender and gender expression. Butler's writing serves a perfect beginning point to embark on a critical look into the importance placed on gender and gender expression and how these notions have come into fruition, and how they can be damaging or oppressive.

Carlson, Dennis

Carlson's work, *The Education of Eros: A History of Education and the Problem of Adolescent Sexuality*, includes a comprehensive history of adolescent sexuality education, its situation within formal education, and the variety of factors that have influenced the teaching of adolescent sexuality, or the refusal to do so in some cases. His work discusses the historical impacts that have defined how institutions, whether they be private, educational, or religious, have understood and considered sexuality and its connections to young people and students

Johnson, Dominique

In the brief article, "This is Political!", Johnson begins a study of the nation's first Gay-Straight Alliances, through organizing among people of color in public schools to the later, more known, histories of GSA organizing in private schools in the mid-1980s. While this work is clearly not a complete history of student led GSAs in American schools, she is more concerned with the political undertones and constraints of LGBTQ organizing. Through the history she touches on, Johnson writes for the importance and need for student activism and political participation in their schools and communities, and the common lack of visibility of LGBTQ civic history in relations to other discussions of class and race.

Mayo, Cris

LGBTQ Youth and Education: Policies and Practices is a perfect foundational text for exploration into the major issues plaguing LGBTQ students, teachers, and parents in American school systems. Mayo addresses the practical concerns faced by administrators and school staff in meeting Title IX and other federal policies and how these intersect with issues of bullying, harassment, equal opportunity, and student expression. Mayo gives the reader insight into the typical negative experiences many queer students face in schools, and Mayo sheds light on how issues that reach beyond the school walls, such as same-sex marriage, can affect students in a myriad of ways. Mayo gives real life examples of student experiences, highlights matters of truancy and lower academic achievement, suicide and mental health concerns, substance abuse and sexual assault. However, Mayo is adamant in also addressing students' resilience and their creativity to create safe space for themselves and their ability to band together to whether the storms they face. Finally, Mayo gives great examples and tips for educators to become student advocates and LGBTQ allies, to act as vehicles of change within their schools, and Mayo tackles the tough position many teacher advocates are in who teach in school districts that are not as open or tolerant of LGBTQ identity as others.

In the article "Obscene Associations" from 2008 Mayo addresses concerns around policies created to limit student access to in-school Gay-Straight Alliances and their connection to abstinence-only policies in conservative states and educational systems. Mayo traces the development of this trend, and discusses issues of student expression, religion, and sexuality, in relations to the Equal Protection Act of 1984, and

students' right to various extracurricular activities. Mayo notes the connections between abstinence-only sex education policies and schools' assertion that discussion of sexuality or Gay-Straight Alliances are obscene and do not adhere to the schools' abstinence-only policies.

CLASSICS IN EDUCATIONAL AND FEMINIST THOUGHT

Dewey, John

While there are a number of influential works by Dewey that can have profound impact on critical thought into the relationships among community, schools, and family these are those used most in the body of this project. Dewey has a number of critics, and sometimes for good reason, but his work is still important to any educational scholar's library. His work *Democracy and Education* is necessary for discussions surrounding the school's connection to American civic structure and political process. In this work he reminds his readers of the school's purpose in shaping future members of a social society. In *Experience and Education* he breaks down education as a collection of experiences each student encounters throughout their lives, and how these experiences can serve to positively or negatively educate. These two works are perhaps his most well known and most well read but others such as *My Pedagogic Creed* and *Schools and Society* are also equally useful.

Martin, Jane Roland

Martin has a collection of works that are invaluable to the study of both American education but also the education of girls and women during the industrial age. Martin is not afraid to take Dewey to task for some of his oversights on the importance

of the home and education of women in his works. In *Reclaiming a Conversation* Martin studies five classical texts in educational thought, such as Rousseau's *Emile* and Woolstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and deconstructs and reconstructs historical thought on how and why women should be educated. In *The Schoolhome*, which was referenced extensively in this work, Martin theorizes how American schools could look if educators rethought the connection between the home and the school, and reimagined the school as another home for their students, their children.

LOCAL AND NATIONAL LGBTQ SUPPORT

Freedom Oklahoma <http://www.freedomoklahoma.org>

A local, Oklahoma City based, LGBTQ advocacy group that serves the state's queer community in a variety of ways, from social groups for LGBTQ youth and adults, to more prominently serving as a power political organization that combats discrimination against the queer community as a whole.

Gay and Lesbian Support Network <http://www.glsen.org>

The national organization more commonly known as GLSEN provides fantastic resources for anyone interested in LGBTQ issues and advocacy. The organization compiles original research and data on issues relating to LGBTQ youth in K-12 schools, provides information and tools for educators, parents, and community members, as well

as, acting as working with state and national policy makers to create safer more inclusive schools.

Oklahomans for Equality <http://www.okeq.org>

A Tulsa, Oklahoma based organization that serves to provide the state's LGBTQ community with political advocacy, resources for understanding individual and social rights, and a plethora of opportunities for school and social involvement.

PFLAG <https://community.pflag.org>

This organization has both national and local chapters, and some very active ones surrounding Oklahoma schools. These chapters are built around school, community, and family involvement and provide members access to safe spaces and social activities, as well as, serving as advocates for students in school board meetings and through partnerships with teachers and administrations.

University of Oklahoma Ally Training

http://www.ou.edu/studentlife/diverse_communities/lgbtq.html

University of Oklahoma's Gender and Equality Center offers Ally Training in a workshop style that serves as both a crash course in LGBTQ terms, and the overlaps of gender expression and sexuality, as well as, providing information on LGBTQ identity development and tools on how best to serve as an ally to a queer community as an educator and peer.

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