# Moving from Inaction to Action: Challenging Homo- and Transphobia in Middle School English Language Arts

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What happens when teachers have opportunities to engage in LGBTQ-affirming practices but choose not to? In the following essay, the authors present a vignette from a middle school context and consider ways to challenge silences to support LGBTQ students in middle school English classrooms. The authors provide discussion and resources to help teachers engage in LGBTQ affirming practices with middle school students.

## Introduction

*In my school, my 7th-grade teacher showed us CNN 10 every week. In 2017, there was a situation where two gay male fiancées tried to buy a cake from a man whose religion didn't allow gay people (to be married). He refused to sell them the cake and they sued him in a case which went all the way to the supreme court. After my teacher showed us this CNN 10, we didn't discuss it, so that is the only time we heard about it in school. Talking about this makes me uncomfortable because there is a huge controversy around the world. There are many things about it that makes it a huge controversy, such as religion and being gay not going together. This is because I think some religions don't allow it.*

*I feel that it might be a good idea to introduce LGBTQ issues and discuss them in Junior High because if adults like teachers talk about it, kids might think of the idea more openly and not be uncomfortable with it. They also might be more empathetic toward the challenges of gay people. So far, I have read no books on this topic in English class. In 7th-grade English, we read A Long Walk to Water, the Outsiders and the Adventures of Tom Sawyer. None of which included anything on it. In 8th-grade English, we have only read Call of the Wild, a classic which doesn't include gay rights.*

At the time of this vignette Matt (pseudonym), one of the author's sons, was in middle school and he had yet to encounter a curriculum that centered gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) topics. Matt wrote the reflection when a conversation about his day led his mom to inquire if inclusive and affirming conversations and texts were incorporated in Matt's classroom experiences—and clearly—they were not. This reality is alarming considering that LGBTQ middle school students face hostile school environments that deny access to affirming resources and curriculum (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Matt's experience in middle school, described in the vignette above, is reflective of both the "worldwide discrimination of LGBTQ people and [the] oppressive nature of heteronormative schools" (Mitton-Kukner et al., 2016, p. 20). As conceptualized by theorist Michael Warner (1991), heteronormativity is the social assumption that heterosexuality underscored by a strict gender binary of male and female is the "normal" sexuality. Anyone who falls outside of the binary and whose sexuality exists outside of heterosexuality is seen as abnormal and thus marginalized. The CNN clip shown in Matt's class provided an opportunity to address homophobia and transphobia— and engage in critical conversations. Why not embrace this time to talk— not to debate people's humanity, but rather to understand LGBTQ topics and texts. Some researchers (Darvin, 2011; Hartman, 2018) suggest that teachers may worry how to "appropriately" respond to unexpected comments that may arise during class conversations. This uncertainty and lack of preparation in discussing LGBTQ topics can result in teachers not including LGBTQ texts in their curricula and sends a message that LGBTQ identities are controversial (Hartman, 2018). It is imperative that we interrupt this damaging

message by taking action. Teachers' inaction is an action. The decision to not include LGBTQ voices has ramifications regardless of any teacher's intent. Teachers send the message that LGBTQ identities are controversial or deviant when they exclude LGBTQ topics from their curriculum (Lewis & Sembiante, 2019; Linville, 2011). Educators must acknowledge that oppression of LGBTQ students is not limited to policy and bullying. In fact, the "silencing of LGBTQ voices within our classrooms and curricula is another, more implicit, form of oppression" (Miller, 2017).

In this article, we suggest that *not* discussing LGBTQ topics in middle school is an action; a homo- and transphobic action. Students who identify as LGBTQ must constantly negotiate homo- and transphobic school environments that do not honor their identities in classrooms and curriculum. Teachers can and should ensure that their classrooms are responsive spaces that support and affirm LGBTQ identities. In this article, we illustrate how middle school English teachers can work to overcome common barriers in teaching LGBTQ texts, and we provide readers with resources for their own teaching contexts. As Matt suggests in the vignette above, if teachers would engage in talk with their students, "kids might think more openly," and all students will come to feel they too can have a place at school. Taking action is vital because not all LGBTQ students feel their schools acknowledge them or ensure a space for them at school.

**Curriculum as a Tool of Homo- and Transphobia**

Schools can never be removed from the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which they are situated. Schools have a long history of being tools of oppression (Kumashiro, 2000; Kumashiro & Ngo, 2007; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), in which dominant ideologies are replicated through curricular and pedagogical decisions that perpetuate homo- and transphobic systems (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Quinn & Meiners, 2011; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). School systems as well as individual classrooms have served as sites for dominant social groups to impose their values and maintain social control. Such control has been maintained through the ideologies such as homo- and transphobia.

Teaching Tolerance (2018), a nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting forms of oppression in K-12 schools, defines homophobia as a "fear or hostility toward lesbian, gay and/or bisexual people, often expressed as discrimination, harassment and violence" (p. 43) and transphobia as "fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, transgender people" that "may manifest into transphobic actions, such as violence, harassment, misrepresentation or exclusion" (p. 44). Both ideologies are defined by the violence they enact on LGBTQ people. Such violence is not always physical. For example, curriculum can be a vehicle to enact violence upon LGBTQ students whether intentionally or not. When discussing curriculum violence, Jones (2020) points out that "leaving queer history out of the curriculum or teaching it in ways that are irresponsible is violent. It harms how LGBTQ students learn history and see themselves in it" (p. 48). The blink of LGBTQ representation outlined in Matt's vignette that offered no additional dialogue is irresponsible teaching.

At a deeper level, the omission of LGBTQ texts in a classroom replicates homo- and transphobia by denying LGBTQ people's stories and experiences in the institutional knowledge that is curriculum. The official curriculum of school is important because it is a vehicle in which the institution signals what is valuable for democratic citizenship (Banks, 1990, 2015, 2017). Curriculum also works as a "script" providing students with institutional roles about gender identity and sexuality that are homo- and transphobic and reinforced through society (Harper, 2017). That denial of representation imposes the dominant group's values on LGBTQ students, families, and educators who are in the institution of school. From a broader perspective, schools can ban LGBTQ content entirely and enforce rules that altogether silence LGBTQ teachers, thus enforcing institutional control over LGBTQ communities.

Reflecting on the vignette above from Matt, note that in no instance did an individual educator use explicit language that was broadly understood to be homo- and transphobic. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) remind, individuals from the dominant group do not need to "do anything specific" to perpetuate oppression because oppressive structures as "built into the society as a whole" and become "normalized and taken for granted" (p. 62). Schools as they exist perpetuate oppressive systems and those systems are upheld through passivity on the

actors in schools (Gorski & Pothinit, 2013; Kumashiro, 2000). Further, educator Cornelius Minor (2019) reminds that oppressive systems "don't change just because we name them; they change because we disrupt them" (p. 31). We consider ways middle school English teachers can be disruptors of homo- and transphobia in the remainder of the article.

## LGBTQ English Curriculum in Middle Schools

Nearly a decade ago, Wickens and Wedwick (2011) noted the lack of emphasis on LGBTQ curricular material in middle grades English. The scholars argued that through "effective text selection for classroom libraries, small-group instruction, read-alouds, and whole-group instruction," middle school English teachers could "create more fully inclusive middle grade classrooms and schools" (p. 50). In some regards, progress has been made since their clarion call.

Indeed, the inclusion of LGBTQ texts in middle school English classes has been shown to create more affirming spaces for LGBTQ middle school students (Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Hartman, 2018; Malo-Juvera, 2016; Wood et al., 2016). Despite its affirming potential, typically both practicing (Thein, 2013) and preservice (Greathouse & Diccio, 2016) English teachers who profess pro-LGBTQ politics and views still tend to avoid including LGBTQ texts and topics in their curriculum. When texts under the umbrella of LGBTQ are included in English classrooms, they are often featured in high school classrooms (Meixner, 2015; Wickens & Wedwick, 2011) and still largely ignore narratives centering on transgender characters (Cramer, 2018). How students respond to text should also be given consideration. For example, Wargo (2017) argues that "interrogating and remixing dominant narratives of gender and technologies in print-based text" can support middle school students in deconstructing dominant archetypes about gender identities (p. 41).

Given the homo- and transphobic nature of schools we outlined in the previous section, it should unfortunately come as no surprise that LGBTQ books continue to constitute a notable portion of frequently banned books lists (Aviles, 2019; Curwood et al., 2009; National Coalition Against Censorship, 2019). This socio-political landscape is the reality middle school English teachers and middle school students must navigate.

In short, teaching LGBTQ topics in middle school English yields vital benefits for all students, with particular importance for LGBTQ students. Yet, too often oppressive forces such as homo- and transphobia work to relegate LGBTQ curriculum outside the parameters of school. In the following section we consider how homo- and transphobia create common barriers and concerns. Further, we consider how middle school English teachers can overcome those barriers and concerns.

## Attending to Common Barriers and Concerns

We want to consider what potential barriers may have prevented Matt's teacher from doing more than simply clicking "play" on a brief CNN clip. Many teachers report that they do not feel comfortable talking about issues related to sexuality or even confronting homophobic remarks (Darvin, 2011). Yet, if we as practitioners cannot have a thoughtful, constructive, critical dialogue with young people, who else are we expecting to do it? LGBTQ topics have been relegated as "tough" because of teachers' discomfort and uncertainty about where a conversation might lead, including religion, politics, sexual orientation, bodies, and sex (e.g., Voelker, 2013). However, as long as LGBTQ people and topics are perceived to be "difficult," then homo- and transphobic institutions continue to endorse systemic silencing and marginalization.

How LGBTQ texts and topics are included in classroom discourse, curricula, and on bookshelves deserves equal consideration. Framing LGBTQ texts and topics as "controversial" positions LGBTQ people as the problem rather than social prejudices such as homo- and transphobia. Relatedly, claiming that LGBTQ texts and topics are "tough" or "challenging" to teach places onus on LGBTQ people as both creating what can be perceived to be a problematic situation and/or responsible for needing to serve as the primary advocates for inclusion and explanation of queer topics. Payne and Smith (2012) critique "anti-bullying" policies for focusing on individual action rather than looking at homo- and transphobic from an institutional perspective. They argue that the framing of "anti-bullying" policies shape the questions we ask about how LGBTQ youth

experience schools. Similarly, framing LGBTQ topics as "controversial," "challenging," or "tough" shapes the questions and solutions English teachers consider when approaching how they will integrate LGBTQ topics into their courses. We can – and must – acknowledge the forces that create barriers for LGBTQ topics in ELA classes; thus, we must accurately describe the context and landscape that create the barriers resulting in the "tough" part of teaching LGBTQ topics rather than placing the hardship on the LGBTQ material.

Asking yourself, colleagues, and/or administrators, "*What* is making teaching LGBTQ curriculum 'tough'" is an important first step in overcoming a common barrier. Teachers can then evaluate the "rules" around LGBTQ topics in their schools, consider how to navigate the rules, overcome potential punishment for violating the rules, and consider what role they could play in changing the rules (Fredman et al., 2015). Such rules could relate to curricular mandates like aligning material with academic standards. Common school initiatives like standards-based grading can be a vehicle to justify the inclusion of LGBTQ books in English classrooms (Miller, 2019). Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2019) elaborate: "By strategically relying on discourses related to mandated curriculum, teachers, ally and LGBTQ alike, can provide rationales for LGBTQ-inclusive teaching to parents" (p. 96). Rules around standards could be used to overcome *what* is making LGBTQ curriculum tough to teach.

How can middle school English teachers advocate for including LGBTQ curricular material when they may face a hostile or ambivalent school environment? English teachers can invoke the language of supporting *all* students to justify the inclusion of LGBTQ topics within their curriculum (Miller, 2019). Shelton and colleagues (2019) call this tactic "de-politicizing" LGBTQ ally work. All teaching is political, of course; however, by framing LGBTQ affirming teaching as a strategy for supporting *all* students, English teachers can counter criticisms of being partisan or indoctrinating. The work of affirming LGBTQ students is part of the work for creating affirming schools that work for *all* students. In short, teachers should nestle LGBTQ curriculum within the language their school uses to talk about supporting *all* students. This move is not only a savvy navigation strategy, it also provides a rationale for all educators in the school that supporting and affirming LGBTQ youth is part of the school's mission.

We offered some ways to consider overcoming barriers to inaction in this section; thus, in our next section we offer concrete steps middle school English teachers can take to begin shifting their classrooms and eventually their schools.

## Action Steps to Disrupting Homo- and Transphobia

Matt's experience from the opening vignette compels us to carefully consider how teachers can work to include use of LGBTQ-affirming practices in our classrooms (Mitton-Kukner et al., 2016) and to help teachers develop the language needed to alleviate their discomfort in order to disrupt homo- and transphobia (Clark, 2010; Darvin, 2011). We offer three actionable steps (and additional resources in the Appendix) in the remainder of this section; however, these are not the *only* action steps. Nor are they a "checklist" to accomplish. In fact, the work of eradicating homo- and transphobia from schools is constant. Rather, these three steps are ones that teachers could take to begin shifting classroom culture. We believe these are the types of steps Matt's teacher could have taken to create a different middle school experience for Matt and his peers.

### *Teachers Can Read Resources Together to Ensure They Use Best Practices When Discussing LGBTQ Topics in Schools*

In order for teachers to interrogate their own assumptions, gaps in knowledge, and bias, one recommendation is for teachers to create reading groups to discuss a book or article with their peers. Publications like Teaching Tolerance's (2018) *Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ Students* and GLSEN's (2016) *Safe Space Kit* are free resources available online that would make for powerful group readings. This would enable teachers to hear others' perspectives and practice conversations that they may otherwise feel uncertain in handling. It also shifts the pressure from teaching a text, to participating in a shared experience in which they do not need to have the right answers. Creating a reading group would also serve as a space for teachers to build a coalition of LGBTQ-affirming teaching in their building.

It is important that teachers select texts that offer a multi-dimensional view of LGBTQ students and topics. Shelton (2017), reviewing scholarship on LGBTQ ally identities, notes that many resources address LGBTQ topics "without ever mentioning race" (p. 17). Texts in teacher-friendly publications by Carrie Gaffney (2016) and Monita Bell (2016) offer tools for teachers to consider the multiple layers of oppression that can work in tandem to harm LGBTQ students of color. Additionally, GLSEN's (2012) guide, "Working with LGBT Students of Color: A Guide for Educators," would make for an important read for teachers. These readings, when paired with room for discussion and accountability measures, can be an important first step to move beyond inaction.

### *English Teachers Can Increase LGBTQ Visibility Through Curricular Choices That Include LGBTQ Authors, Characters, Events, Policies, or Images*

LGBTQ visibility in curriculum is one of the most impactful ways to affirm LGBTQ identities. We understand that visibility looks differently in different contexts and schools. Like Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2015), we suggest that teachers do "what they can" in their contexts. If reading a whole class book featuring LGBTQ characters is doable then follow that course of action. However, if including LGBTQ books in book clubs is the most viable option, then do that. Teachers should familiarize themselves with the Lambda Literary and Stonewall Book awards to stay updated on the most recent books centering LGBTQ characters and stories.

Books are not the only avenue for LGBTQ visibility in middle school English curriculum. English teachers can include nonfiction articles that center LGBTQ history, politics, and narratives. Both Teaching Tolerance and GLSEN offer curricular resources for teachers including nonfiction texts. These texts are often multimodal in nature. For instance, Teaching Tolerance offers a podcast series called *Queer America* while GLSEN offers LGBTQ history cards and audio recordings of pivotal LGBTQ activists like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. The popular publication *Teen Vogue* often features articles written by LGBTQ journalists that highlight contemporary political and social movements LGBTQ people are engaged in. Finally, teachers can incorporate art and images from LGBTQ artists to analyze and discuss. English teachers could also have students do rhetorical analysis of LGBTQ activists' protest signs used throughout history. English teachers should start by "doing what [they] can" (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015, p. 436) and expand upon that foundation as they learn and grow.

Teachers should work to ensure that the diversity of LGBTQ communities are represented in their curriculum. LGBTQ young adult literature has a history of centering white, cisgender gay characters (Garcia, 2013; Garden, 2014). English teachers working to craft LGBTQ curriculum have noted that in rare instances when English textbooks mention any author's sexuality that is outside of heterosexuality, it is frequently a white author like Walt Whitman (Shelton, 2017). This scholarship reminds us that too often LGBTQ curriculum is heavy on the white "G" at the expense of the rest of the communities. Scholars like Durand (2016) and Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2013) have called for teachers to locate and include books that center LGBTQ people of color. We heed that call. Middle school English teachers should include the following titles in their classroom libraries: *Hurricane Child* by Kacen Callendar, *The Best at It* by Maulik Pancholy, *Happy Families* by Tanita Davis. This list is a sampling, not an exhaustive one. Middle school English teachers should stay up to date on new middle grade books through the previously mentioned awards and social media.

### *Teachers Can Build Coalitions to Support Each Other in Teaching LGBTQ English Curriculum*

English teachers need to build coalitions to support each other and learn from each other, as isolation can be a barrier. For example, when Authors Miller and Colantonio-Yurko, were high school teachers, they worked to include more LGBTQ texts in their curriculum along with their 8th-grade teaching partner. This support system allowed the teachers to consider and ensure that LGBTQ texts were honored in meaningful ways across the ELA middle school and high school grades. Additionally, Shelton (2019) argues that doubt and demoralization can occur when teachers do LGBTQ ally work because of negative institutional messages. Such doubt can be challenged by working with other teachers who share a common commitment to affirming LGBTQ youth. Coalitions do not have to be face-to-face. English teachers can build networks of

support through social media like Twitter. Common Twitter chats dedicated to English teachers like #NCTEChat and #ILAChat have dedicated monthly chats to supporting LGBTQ students through curricular choices. Coalitions can be used to share doubts and frustrations in addition to sharing curricular ideas like book titles and lesson ideas.

In building coalitions, teachers should also be "aware of and conversant with policy that may actually enable their capacities to act as allies" (Clark, 2010, p. 712). Anti-LGBTQ laws frequently make headlines, and rightfully so. Teachers must be aware of such laws that could be interpreted to support LGBTQ youth. For instance, educational legal scholar Stuart Biegel (2010) has outlined how constitutional amendments already embed the "right to be out." Laws and policies that outline the mission to support *all* students could be used to justify English curriculum that includes LGBTQ voices.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Inaction is a type of action. We recognize barriers and concerns exist, but those barriers and concerns have real and tangible impact on students. The inaction of Matt's teachers throughout his middle school career resulted in the opening vignette. Fortunately, teachers can be change agents in challenging homo- and transphobia. As Lewis and Sembiante (2019) remind, teachers are tasked with a "professional duty to support all students and are the first agents of change" in creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ students (p. 7). Middle school English teachers need to consider how their own curriculum can affirm LGBTQ voices and experiences. In doing so, teachers may uncover their own bias and places of discomfort that need to be addressed before engaging with students. If we expect middle school students to engage with LGBTQ texts and topics, we must ensure LGBTQ topics are included in their coursework.

At the time of publication, Matt is in high school and he has yet to encounter an LGBTQ book in his early high school career. Matt's experience is far too common in schools across the country. The inaction, whether born from fear, apprehension, or teacher bias, abets homo- and transphobia in schools. It is our hope that middle school English teachers consider our steps and turn their inaction towards action. Such steps, even if seemingly small, work to create a more affirming and inclusive future for LGBTQ students.

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## Appendix: Additional Resources

| Resource Type | Material |
|---|---|
| Articles and Podcasts | "Anatomy of an Ally" by Carrie Gaffney, https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/anatomy-of-an-ally.<br><br>*Queer America Podcast*, Teaching Tolerance, https://www.tolerance.org/podcasts/queer-america.<br><br>"Teaching at the Intersections" by Monita Bell, https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/teaching-at-the-intersections. |
| Guides and Toolkits | *Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ Students*, Teaching Tolerance, https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/TT-Best-Practices-for-Serving-LGBTQ-Students-Guide.pdf.<br><br>*Safe Space Kit*, GLSEN, https://www.glsen.org/activity/glsen-safe-space-kit-be-ally-lgbtq-youth.<br><br>"Working with LGBT Students of Color: A Guide for Educators," GLSEN, https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/LGBT_studentsofcolor.pdf. |
| Middle Grades Literature | *The Best at It* by Maulik Pancholy<br><br>*Happy Families* by Tanita Davis<br><br>*Hurricane Child* by Kacen Callendar<br><br>Lambda Literary Awards, https://www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/.<br><br>Stonewall Book Awards, http://www.ala.org/rt/rrt/award/stonewall/honored. |
| Other Curricular Material | "LGBTQ History and Why It Matters," Facing History and Ourselves, https://www.facinghistory.org/educator-resources/current-events/lgbtq-history-and-why-it-matters.<br><br>"LGBTQ History Cards," GLSEN, https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/LGBTQ-History-Cards.pdf.<br><br>"The Rainbow Revolution: An Oral History of LGBTQ Rights, Activism, and Organizing in the 2010s," *Teen Vogue*, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/rainbow-revolution-oral-history-lgbtq-rights-activism-organizing-2010s. |