

"Gay Is Okay:" Be Real, Be Bold, Be Better

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Abstract

This manuscript captures recent legislative policy and proposed practices that restrict the rights of LGBTQ+ students and allies in the classroom and disrupt teachers from creating affirming, supportive classroom environments. The authors, as activists and educators, want teachers to say, "It is okay to say 'gay'," and "It is okay to be gay" in opposition to "Don't say gay" ideologies. Teachers are provided with the tools to combat oppression in all forms and create inclusive classrooms focused on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Teachers are encouraged to be real, bold, and better to weather this legislative flurry. To "be real," teachers must be aware of the legislative initiatives, implications, and impact. To "be bold," teachers should educate themselves with district policies, curriculum standards, and national LGBTQ+ networks. Finally, to "be better," teachers must validate students through connections to critical literacy practices, culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy, and LGBTQ+-themed literature.

Keywords— teachers' rights, LGBTQ+ agency and advocacy, children's literature, young adult literature, culturally responsive practices.

While sitting in a family restaurant, a boy about 12 years of age entwined his arm at the elbow with his father. Before the family exited the restaurant, the father separated from the boy and grabbed his 10-year-old daughter's hand instead. With this one swift and subtle move, what was the father teaching his son and daughter? What was the father thinking when he made this adjustment? What was the son thinking when his dad abruptly repositioned himself to demonstratively share affection with his sister instead of him? What lessons were taught to both youngsters?

As the authors reflected on this incident, we felt that the depositional stances about gender and affectional orientation (preferred term instead of sexual orientation) are often transferred and instilled into the hearts and minds of our young people through incidents such as this one. One author stated, "I know from my upbringing as a Black, queer person growing up in the South, I learned navigational skills through a series of a thousand paper cuts – these were small successive injuries to my mind, body, and spirit." This

present encounter allowed us to reminisce about our collective lives and teaching experiences, and our concerns about the future of our young people and their affectional orientation, gender expression, as well as their understanding of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (Watson, 2010).

We recognize that socialization begins at birth. The pre-determinants of class, religion, affectional orientation, cultural group, ability status, and age are physical realities and inculcated truths that are cemented in our persons (Logan et al, 2014). From birth, we are socialized by the people we love and trust the most: our families. As depicted in the example above of the father, son, and daughter, girls receive hugs and affection, while boys are not allowed to embrace their fathers in public. These innocuous and overt social incidents shape self-concepts and self-perceptions, the norms and rules we must follow, the roles we are taught to play, our expectations for the future, and our dreams. These childhood incidents are reinforced and amplified by the social institutions we

participate in, such as schools, sports teams, churches, medical facilities, companies, and laws and legal systems. The results of this systematic learning can be empowering and devastating as we examine our privileged or targeted identities (Adams, et al., 2018). Because self-identification is an essential aspect of being queer, the choice of language represents the best attempt at balancing countless interests, including historical accuracy, accessibility, clarity, and respecting individual identity. For the sake of inclusivity and accuracy, the term 'queer' is used to refer to different kinds of people who come together in the same space for a common cause (Riemer & Brown, 2019, p.20).

Be Real

The consequences of these slights and microaggressions shape the psyche and socialization of young people. To offset this bombardment of images and actions that marginalize emerging feelings of affectional orientation and gender expression, teachers need to be equipped and empowered to create affirming and validating curriculum and instruction. Unfortunately, teachers and administrators have been restricted in engaging in courageous conversations about LGBTQ+ curriculum and instruction in which they can speak their truths, experience the discomfort, accept and expect non-closure, and stay engaged (Singleton, 2015). These restrictions are due to proposed, pending, and promulgated state legislations and laws based on identity politics and marginalization. Real teachers recognize the poisonous presence of judicial and executive branch actions, and the harmful effects of passed and pending state legislations; the political pendulum has swung from positive support to legislative hatred. Real teachers should have an articulated understanding of how these political actions affect their students, schools, and the community. Once armed with information, the teachers are then prepared to be bold as they integrate social justice into their daily teaching and be better as they prepare all learners to become their authentic selves as agents and advocates of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI).

Be Real: Celebrate LGBTQ+ Rights in the Schools and Community

In *Gavin Grim vs Virginia's Gloucester County School Board* (2015), Grim sued the school board over its refusal to allow him to use the bathroom consistent with his gender identity. This case attests to the need to legalize safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people, especially fundamental private spaces, such as public restrooms.

The Equality Act, the most sweeping rewrite of civil rights laws since the 1960s, would offer protection from fair access to housing, education and even jury service without regard to sexuality or gender. But the legislation is stuck in the Senate (Elliot, 2021, p. 28). Meanwhile a bevy of efforts are underway to roll back existing protections: dozens of bills are winding their way through capitols to make it more difficult – if not impossible – for transgender students to play school sports or use restrooms aligning with their gender identity.

The case of *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (1996) held the school personnel and the district accountable for LGBTQ+ prejudice and discrimination. Jamie Nabozny sued the principal and other administrators of Ashland, Wisconsin school district for failure to create a safe space from bullying in middle and high school. The suit brought a claim that the administrators were violating the Fourteenth Amendment by not providing equal protection and discriminating against him based on his gender and sexuality. The administrators were not simply permissive in allowing bullies to harass, and physically and verbally abuse the student, but also mocked the student for reporting the incidents. Nabozny won a settlement of \$900,000.

Some states were pioneers in LGBTQ+ support against prejudice and discrimination. Wisconsin was called the 'gay rights state' because of its statewide ban on discrimination against homosexuals, a law that passed in 1982. In February of 2020, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a ruling that the state of Idaho must provide gender confirmation surgery for Adree Edmo, an inmate in the custody of the Idaho Department of Correction. The decision marked the first time a federal appeals court ruled that a state must provide gender assignment surgery to an incarcerated person. On June 15, 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that federal law protects LGBTQ workers from discrimination. The landmark ruling extended protections to millions of workers nationwide and was a defeat for the Trump administration, which argued that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which bars discrimination based on sex, did not extend to claims of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Even though a recent wave of anti-transgender bills has been passed at the state level, some states score medium to high for gender identity according to the Transgender Law Center. These states are Maine, Vermont, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Delaware, Virginia, New Hampshire, Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Washington, Oregon, Nevada,

Colorado, California, and New Mexico. These states have either explicitly or through court cases declared gender identity to be covered by anti-discrimination laws (Locke, 2023).

The election of President Biden and Vice President Harris in 2020 increased positivity toward queer support, advocacy, and policy. Since day one, the Biden-Harris administration worked to make America a safer and more welcoming place for LGBTQ+ people. The administration continuously took steps to ensure equality and became the most pro-LGBTQ+ presidential administration this country has ever seen. The Biden-Harris White House delivered tangible results for the LGBTQ+ community and stood firm against growing attacks against LGBTQ+ Americans. Below are just some of the administration's accomplishments on the many issues facing LGBTQ+ people:

- On day one, the Biden-Harris administration issued an Executive Order preventing and combating discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation.
- President Biden signed the Respect for Marriage Act into law, ensuring that all Americans have the right to marry the person they love, has ended the discriminatory ban on transgender people serving in the military, and has strengthened LGBTQ+ student's rights under Title IX (Kyaw, 2024).
- President Biden established a White House-led interagency working group on anti-transgender violence and released a White House report uplifting the voices of transgender people on gender-based violence and discrimination.
- President Biden has appointed more LGBTQ+ and transgender officials than any previous administration, including the first out gay cabinet secretary, Pete Buttigieg, and Assistant Secretary for Health, Dr. Rachel Levine, the first-ever out transgender official confirmed by the Senate. He appointed Chantale Wong as the first lesbian ambassador, and many other high-level officials including: Karine Jean-Pierre, Daniel Calabretta, Ana Reyes, and Stuart Delery.
- The Biden-Harris administration has been consistent defenders of health equity by improving access to and affordability of health coverage through the Affordable Care Act. They have also prioritized enforcing policies to

protect LGBTQ+ people from discrimination in health care, increased funding for research on gender-affirming procedures to develop the evidence base for improved care and defended access to abortions and other reproductive health care by calling on Congress to codify abortion protections into law.

- The administration has issued several Executive Orders aimed at strengthening access to contraception and will continue to defend access to safe and legal medication abortion in court.

These landmark cases, judicial actions, and executive orders provided validation and legitimized the rights of all citizens regardless of affectional orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Unfortunately, many of these actions are under siege as some current legislators are intentionally and purposefully legislating harm.

Be Real: Recognize the Threat - Intentionally and Purposefully Legislating Harm

According to the Anti-Defamation League (2023), there are more than 400 proposed bills throughout the United States positioned to restrict the rights, freedom, and fair treatment of LGBTQ+ people. These regressive and retrogressive efforts by conservative legislators have targeted impact on queer folk, but also restrict the rights of all people, because in general these laws limit people's ability to live safely and freely, feel included in school and society, and be treated with dignity, respect, and equity.

Although the following legislative actions that are in place or pending are currently situated in mostly Republican states, the wider media impact and optics of these actions are affecting the educational and lived experiences of LGBTQ+ citizens and have significant pedagogical impacts in school settings. Some of the pending bills prevent or censor discussions of LGBTQ+ people and topics in schools, force school staff to out LGBTQ+ students, and allow teachers and staff to refuse to call transgender students by the pronouns they use.

The most widely known bill is Florida Republican House Bill 1557, *Parental Rights in Education: "Don't Say Gay"* bill, which was passed in 2022. "The bill prohibited classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels, required districts to notify parents of health care services, authorized parents to bring action against school districts to obtain declaratory judgment,

provided for additional awards of injunctive relief, damages, and reasonable attorney fees and court costs to certain parents” (Thomas, p. 12). Florida also created Senate Bill 266, which took effect on July 1, 2023. This bill prohibits public educational institutions from receiving state or federal funds to support equity, diversity, and inclusion. This bill has had drastic effects on the closing of LGBTQ+ centers on college and university campuses throughout Florida (Elfman, 2024).

Other states soon followed Florida's lead. In 2023, the state senate of Tennessee passed a *Don't Say Gay* bill that prohibited openly discussing LGBTQ+ content in the classroom. The unspoken rule was that schools in general, and elementary schools in particular, are spaces where only heterosexuality and its accompanying categories of feminine girls and masculine boys are assumed, approved, and allowed.

Republicans in the Iowa State Senate passed a bill to complete the governor's education priorities for 2023, including: required written permission from parents before a teacher or school can acknowledge a trans or nonbinary student identity; preventing teachers from acknowledging LGBTQ+ people in any lessons before 7th grade; and removing library books conservative activists find objectionable.

Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt has signed several bills into law that critics claim unfairly target the LGBTQ community. These include a bill that requires public school students to use only the bathroom that matches the sex listed on their birth certificate; a ban on the use of nonbinary gender markers on IDs; restrictions on gender-affirming care for trans youth; and bans on transgender girls participating in girls' sports, citing concerns about fairness.

Arizona's Senate Bill 1005 (2024) stated that a public entity shall not require an employee to engage in any equity, diversity, or inclusion program, and that these entities cannot spend money on such programs. The bill also stated that ideology training is prohibited, which includes the promotion or adoption of any theory of allyship, transgenderism, social justice, intersectionality, neopronouns, inclusive language, heteronormativity, disparate impact, and gender identity. This is one of many state bills that claim these are divisive concepts and create a sense of shame and blame towards White people.

Teachers should recognize the threat and realize that in some states, elected officials are legislating harm and are using LGBTQ+ students and

their families, especially transgender youth, as political pawns (Ogles, 2023; Rings, 2023). Despite clear and ample research supporting LGBTQ+ identity and expression, conservative governors and legislators have no qualms bringing a political culture war to classrooms (Glass, 2023; Gleason, 2020). The classroom should be a space for freedom of expression for those questioning their sexuality; be it LGBTQ+, straight, or cisgender allies in middle school, high school, college and the occasional elementary schooler. For many, the classroom is the first place to come out to peers, test drive new pronouns, or encounter an affirming adult (Lane, 2019, McClatchey, 2023). Whether students are queer or queerspawn (students with queer parents), all queer coming out stories have their similarities. The coming out experience is a revealing of one's true self to friends and family, as living in hiding is nearly a universal experience for LGBTQ+ folks. Some people come out at fifty, some in their first decade of life, but there is no singular queer experience for all that we have in common (Beam, 2007; Dawson, 2022; Casey, 2023). Some are lucky enough to have supportive families and communities, but being queer in many parts of the country is perilous. There are still places in America where no one is out. Places where being queer is not an option. The media prominently show queer culture where it thrives: New York, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco. Even though gay liberation has transformed American culture, there are places where queers are still fighting for fundamental human rights, especially transgender folk who are presently under attack and are excluded from bathroom access, athletic participation, job opportunities, and medical support due to identity politics (McClatchey, 2023).

Be Real: Transgender Exclusion and Identity Politics

Identity politics is politics based on a particular identity, such as race, nationality, religion, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, social background, or social class. As people of the world become more united, economic inequality, cultural insecurity, and ethnic, religious, gender, sexuality, and racial rivalries renew old antagonisms and engender new conflicts, leaving us paradoxically more divided than ever before. Understandably, under these circumstances, people might be wary of any identity politics in which racial, religious, gender, sexuality, and ethnic identities become the basis for political solidarity and cultural practice (Duggan, 2012). Identity politics allows political parties to magnify an

identity to the point of frenzy, which rallies partisan defamation and creates platforms of descent.

The transgender community has always faced discrimination, and now conservative political parties and transphobic leaders are pushing more anti-trans legislation, which discriminates against transgender identities. The assault on corporeal freedoms (the policing of one's body) is significant. In 24 states, Republicans have enacted laws restricting abortion access. At least 20 states have passed legislation restricting access to gender-affirming care. "Additionally, laws targeted drag queens performing in public, transgender Americans' access to bathroom facilities, the removal of books by and about LGBTQ+ people, and the general erasure of queer and trans experiences from American society, conservatives are pushing LGBTQ+ people back in the closet" (Wiggins, 2023, p. 35).

In Wisconsin, State Representative Barb Dittrich reintroduced several bills banning transgender athletes from playing sports on the team of their gender. Fair Wisconsin, an LGBTQ+ advocacy organization, released the following statement in response to the bills:

"Once again, far-right extremists in the Wisconsin State Legislature have introduced a transgender athlete ban. It may be a new legislative session, but they are still playing the same partisan games. We know that even just the consideration of such legislation harms our queer and transgender youth. The Trevor Project's 2023 Youth Mental Health Survey found that nearly 33% of LGBTQ+ youth report that their mental health is poor most or all the time due to anti-LGBTQ+ policies. On top of this, nearly 41% of LGBTQ+ youth have considered suicide in the past year, while 14% have attempted it. There are very real solutions to addressing the mental health crisis facing our youth, but attacking and demonizing transgender kids is not one of them" (Fair Wisconsin, 2023).

On May 17, 2023, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed new laws targeting the state's existing "Don't Say Gay" law, which placed bans on gender-affirming care, restricted what bathrooms transgender people were allowed to use, and heavily censored drag shows. Even though the drag ban was lifted on November 17, 2023, due to the fact that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Florida could not enforce its drag ban, many drag performers lost significant income during the hiatus (Sim, 2024).

As legislatures across the country enact anti-LGBTQ bills, one group has taken center stage in our national conversation: trans youth. According to the Williams Institute, in 2022, 1.6 million people in the United States, ages 13 and over, identified as transgender – 1.3 million were ages 18 and over, and 300,000 were youth between the ages of 13 and 17. This means that trans people made up 0.5% of the United States population and 1.4% of youth (Kyaw, 2024). In the 2023 legislative session, there were 491 anti-LGBTQ bills, with 118 of the bills seeking to restrict or ban gender-affirming care for trans kids. Wiggins (2022) noted that trans kids are simply kids. And they, like everyone else, do not want to grow up fast or be thrust into the spotlight. They want to manage their cheer team, build robots in their bedrooms, and go to homecoming with their friends (Wiggins, 2022).

Be Real: Transgender Physical and Mental Health Care

Though the attacks differ – some ban gender-affirming health care, some ban participation in school sports, and others create barriers to accessing accurate IDs – they represent a coordinated effort by state legislators who deny the very existence of trans people. By stoking fear, spreading misinformation, and preying on constituents' lack of knowledge about the trans community, they create a problem that isn't real and push trans people out of public life (Vellner, 2022, p. 26).

In May 2021, the *Save Adolescents from Experimentation (SAFE) Act* became a law in Arkansas. The law prohibits physicians in the state from providing "gender transition" treatments such as hormones, puberty blockers, and gender-affirming surgeries to those under 18. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit challenging this discriminatory piece of legislation and stresses the importance of allowing families to make their own decisions when it comes to gender-affirming care.

Bills to ban or restrict gender-affirming care have been introduced in more than 20 states this year – in conservative states such as Kansas, Texas, and Tennessee, as well as liberal strongholds, like Hawaii, New Jersey, and Oregon. Politicians, all Republicans, are using words like “experimental, castration, and mutilation” to describe gender-confirmation procedures (Ring, 2023, p.13). State legislative attacks on transgender equality have dramatically escalated in recent years, primarily targeting children and young adults.

The ACLU is prioritizing three issues to advance transgender social justice: Health Care, School Sports, and accurate identification cards (IDs) (Vellner, 2022, p. 24). Legislators want to mandate “that *female and male* are the only existing gender-marker options for states across the country. Only two options in a world full of non-binary people? As a result of showing an ID that listed an incorrect name or gender, trans people have faced harassment, discrimination, and even violence” (Vellner, 2022, p. 29).

In the state of Wisconsin, Republican state legislators have introduced the *Help Not Harm Act* – a Transgender Medical Care Ban. These bills seek to limit the freedom of transgender and non-binary youth to access lifesaving and gender-affirming health care. The intent of these bills is to insert politicians into private medical decisions that should be made between patients, their doctors, and their families, just like their attacks on reproductive freedom. These bills are part of a coordinated national political war on the transgender community, designed to distract and divide the public and eradicate the gains in social acceptance and lived equality that the LGBTQ+ community has fought so hard to project and protect.

On February 22, 2022, Governor Greg Abbott stated to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, calling gender affirming care of young people a form of abuse, and directing state authorities to conduct investigations into parents for neglecting and abusing their children (Butler, 2024). Almost half of the nation’s states have enacted laws banning access to gender-affirming care for transgender youth, and about 25 have policies restricting access to sports for trans students. These anti-transgender legislative attacks come at an exceedingly dangerous time, as they seek to restrict access to critical, life-saving health care.

The Trevor Project’s 2022 Youth Mental Health Survey found that more than 56% of trans and

non-binary youth have seriously considered suicide in the past year, while more than 21% of them have attempted it. More than 74% of LGBTQ+ youth have experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, and more than 35% of LGBTQ+ youth in the country have been threatened or harmed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. “Fear, isolation, and violence were recurring themes for those growing up gay, yet their plight went generally unnoticed or at least unremarked on by teachers, counselors, or administrators” (Lane, 2019, 4). Teachers must recognize this reality. This data indicates that these legislative atrocities that are targeting young LGBTQ+, especially transgender students, are causing irreparable harm, both mentally and physically. Teachers should be advocates and change agents once they recognize that legislators are using gay and transgender youth as political pawns. According to Abigail Swetz (2024), the Executive Director of Fair Wisconsin, “Creating a hostile environment for trans and nonbinary kids is creating a hostile environment for every kid. Our children are watching, and when elected officials and school boards weaponize the identity of some of our most vulnerable children, we must take action to stop them.”

Be Real: Understand that Book Banning and Censorship Limit Civil Liberties

Censorship and book banning are often products of religious evangelism, conservative posturing, and legislative actions and are a direct affront to citizens’ civil liberties (Oltmann, 2023). “The right wing’s escalation in legislative proposals seeks to mandate what can and cannot be taught, which means a state-backed form of thought police is pitted against gender ideology” (Butler, 2024, p. 95). In statehouses around the country, legislators are trying to make gay folk invisible. Bills claiming to combat critical race theory and “divisive concepts” in education are being signed into law. These concepts are typically race, social justice, and diversity-related, including sex education, and LGBTQ+ rights. The concepts are demonized, so their elimination in schools is seen as an act of justice, not discrimination. This demonization is currently evident in recent actions to censor and ban queer-themed literature.

In the *American Love Poem* (Figure 1), Kwami Alexander (2023) captures the current threats to the field of education that include the anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) ban on books at the K-12 level and the targeting of DEI and LGBTQ+ support resources. Censorship is unilateral decision-making on what

students can learn about their culture, history, and identity. Efforts to ban books have sparked counter-movements to find new ways to keep those books in circulation.

Figure 1

American Love Poem by Kwami Alexander

I want those championing freedom
the patriots of peace
the ones who march into our schools
handcuff our history
hold our imaginations hostage
the so-called American dreamers
illustration of a seedling sprouting from a book

I want them
to uncage their hearts
to cast off their chains of fear
to remember the bedtime stories
that comforted them
when nightmares chased sleep away
illustration of a seedling sprouting from a book

to remember the first-grade teachers
who read them pictured fables
that showed them how to love themselves
and planted the seeds of possibility
that blossomed into their becoming
illustration of a seedling sprouting from a book

to remember how hopeful it felt
to be held by their mother's songs and poems
on nights when thunder
ravaged the sky.

In Texas, where hundreds of schoolbook bans have been reported in recent years, some teachers and students have been building underground libraries. One teacher started her secret library a couple of years ago, after a Texas lawmaker named Matt Krause sent public schools a list of 850 books, which he wanted banned because he felt they would make students uncomfortable about race and sex. That made this teacher furious, and she had to be brave and bold to

provide her students with the support they needed. In Oklahoma, legislators received petitions for over 1,000 books that conservative citizens wanted to ban to protect the children. What is ironic is that these states have the most aggressive gun laws, which counters the cry to "protect the children." A Texas teacher was fired last year for assigning a book to her students. It was a graphic novel about Anne Frank that showed Anne having a romantic daydream about another girl. There are other documented cases in Texas of teachers leaving their jobs because of pressure over challenged books.

Many books are causing uproar now among American conservatives, including an extremist group called *Moms for Liberty*. This group stated, "We do not co-parent with the government." The organization's mission is to organize, educate, and empower parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government. Unfortunately, the books they are protesting are mostly about queer kids, or written by queer authors (Cheves, 86). Unbanned, they might be read by countless kids across the nation. Banning books is not an objection to obscenity, but rather an objection to queer kids living. Banning books means that American conservatives, zealots, and angry moms are hell-bent on undermining one of our most precious rights (Hughes-Hassell et al, 2010).

The Sarasota, Florida libraries asked to end ties to the American Library Association over ideology pertaining to explicit books. "I've looked at summer reading books that were on display in our bookstores for years – witchcraft books, there were books on pornography, all kinds of books," said Weinrich, who said she was concerned children would be exposed to reading things that would cause them to "become uncomfortable and commit suicide" (Kimel, 2023). Another parent who homeschooled two children, said libraries are not safe for children because of books that can be found there, including the graphic novel *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, (2020), and *All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir – Manifesto* by George M. Johnson (2020).

Banning books and censorship are reasons why some school librarians have a conservative approach to collection development. Librarians fear community reactions, perceived challenges, and a lack of administrative support. Rather than risk the negative publicity of book challenges, some school librarians may choose not to include, promote, or support LGBTQ+-themed literature in the school library, which negates the one safe place and space for queer students

to find affinity with characters that portray positive, realistic images of the LGBTQ+ communities.

More than half a century ago, books like *1984* (Orwell, 1949) and *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1953), the classic novels of totalitarianism, warned of the domination of screens, the suppression of books, the narrowing of vocabularies, and the associated difficulties of thought. Banning books is an attempt to suppress thoughts and the freedom to express those thoughts (Snyder, 2017). Bold teachers must understand this oppression and provide avenues for restorative and social justice to counteract censorship.

Be Bold

In the *Be Real* section, the authors expressed the palpable realness of the legislative intents, community outcries to ban books, religiosity, and zealous censorship of expression. In this section, we inform educators on how to *Be Bold* and position their defenses to offset this oppression of expressive freedoms. To be bold, teachers must be competent and confident (Watson, 2020). Teachers are competent when they recognize the realities of recent legislation and are confident when they seek ways to provide a counter-narrative to these legislative actions. By being competent and confident, they find their courage and boldness. Bold teachers have growth mindsets that focus on equity. This mindset permeates the classroom, sets the tone for the school, and, if truly aspirational, encourages the core values of the district. The mindset involves people being open and affirming of affectional orientation and gender nonbinary students. Teachers must be cautious of exposing their students to “the single story,” because this approach provides reductive and false perceptions about entire groups of people (Poeh, 2023). Teachers and administrators should be aware of exclusionary practices and take responsibility for the success of all students. Educators should “interrogate institutional practices, policies, and structures - those that might be ingrained, and part of tradition - and subsequently rewrite and replace the ones deemed inequitable” (Kyaw, 2023, p. 6). To teach through a growth mindset, teachers and administrators must recognize that curriculum is a social-political entity, and one of the goals of teaching is to empower students to think critically and make meaningful connections to curriculum that is approachable, interesting, and accurate (O'Donnell, 2019).

Be Bold: Embrace Social Construction Theory and Social Emotional Learning

To combat oppression, bold teachers need to understand the tenets of social construction theory and cultural humility. Social constructivism is a sociological theory of knowledge in which human development is constructed through interactions with others and is socially situated. People work together to socially construct knowledge. Social construction is a theory of knowledge in which characteristics typically considered immutable and solely biological, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, are products of human definition and are interpreted and shaped by cultural and historical concepts. Cultural humility is a process that requires humility (every person has something of great value to share, and every person can learn from another) as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners (Meyer & Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2018; Vaid-Menon, 2020).

Bold teachers understand theory and use culturally conscious books. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) discussed the theory of windows, mirrors, and doors. A mirror opportunity is when queer students can see themselves in the curriculum, program offerings, and campus activities. These mirror opportunities provide a sense of belonging and validate, respect, and dignify individualized identities (Watson et. al., 2023). A window opportunity is when queer students are provided insights into how others exist outside of the queer gaze, and how to recognize the heteronormativity and micro/macroaggressions that they must navigate. These are opportunities to equip queer students with knowledge, skills, and dispositional stances that enable them to move beyond mere tolerance and acceptance, but to a place and space of emancipation (Woolley & Airton, 2020). A sliding glass door opportunity is when queer students are no longer eggshell walking but are strutting proudly their queer selves and stepping through doors of intersectionality. Miller (2015) stated “educators who engage in queer literacy do not essentialize students’ identities, but recognize how intersections of culture, language, age, religion, social class, body type, accent, height, ability, disability, and national origin inform student beliefs and actions” (p. 42).

To be bold, teachers must provide opportunities to equip LGBTQ+ students with a sense of agency and advocacy. “The first person you are ever an activist for is yourself. If I wasn’t going to fight for me, who else was?” (Johnson, 2020, p. 102) Bold teachers must provide students with the functional navigational skills they need to access power (Delpit,

1995). We empower students by sharing curriculum materials that are representative of who they are and the community in which they live.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process of developing social and emotional skills in children. Common terms for this set of skills include character education, personality, 21st-century skills, soft skills, and noncognitive skills. Each label draws from a slightly different theoretical perspective, and each has its related fields and disciplines. SEL is a vital component of academic achievement and later success in life (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

In the case of LGBTQ+ students, teachers need to embark on lessons about SEL to interrupt and disrupt potential bullying. The experience of being bullied can take a psychological toll on students and affect their emotional, mental, and physical health. Social emotional learning as a counselor adjunct in the classroom should consist of the following five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Weissberg et al., 2015). Self-awareness is the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes the capacity to recognize one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose and includes having a growth mindset. Self-management is the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacity to delay gratification, manage stress, feel motivated, and have agency to accomplish personal and collective goals. Relationship skills are the ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacity to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed. Responsible decision-making is the ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacity to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being.

Be Bold: Create Safe and Grace Spaces

The proposed and pending legislation prohibits classroom discussion about affectional orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels. In this environment of identity politics and divisive concepts weaponizing, establishing place, space, and grace has become a queer quest for access, affinity, and affirmation (Elliot, 2021; Harari, 2023). Bold teachers recognize that queer students feel unsafe in the school environment as soon as they cross onto school property. Miller (2015) stated that gaps in codes of conduct, posters that do not reflect realities, gendered and heteronormative events, locker rooms, gendered bathrooms, notes home that reinforce heteronormative or gender norms, and undemocratic classroom curriculum all create an environment of communal belonging uncertainty.

For school culture to change for LGBTQ+ students, they must be empowered to speak their truths and advocate for their safety and social-emotional well-being. Bold teachers must find spaces in the school where students can read, learn, and lead, or create rooms where these grace opportunities do not already exist. In classrooms, major reform can begin with small steps, such as declaring the space a safe place for learners. Creating a classroom covenant that focuses on dignity, respect, and social justice. Having students define kindness and affirm them when they show aspects of kindness daily. "When students leave school, they carry what they have learned into the world, to friends, families, and into the lives they create as they grow into adulthood. Education is perhaps the most powerful tool in reducing such mindless biases" (Lane, 2019, p.188).

The National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) is an international leadership organization that provides training in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in community organizations, K-12 schools, college and university campuses, corporations, and law enforcement. NCBI affirms that teachers should create safe, grace, and brave spaces for students to engage in critical dialogue, cultural and identity-affirming experiences, and transformative learning that values identity expression and intellectual justice. Bold teachers have conversations with students about justice and what it looks like. These teachers engage students in social justice actions and civic engagements in which the students get to participate in action and advocacy for others. Simple acts of social justice could include helping an elderly neighbor, collecting blankets for a shelter, participating in a food drive, or attending

a community pride event that includes support for LGBTQ+ persons.

Specific spaces that support individuals who consider themselves gender non-conforming and are expressive beyond the gender binary are needed, and not necessarily social spaces, but utility spaces such as bathrooms, locker rooms, and medical facilities. Vaid-Menon (2020) states that as gender non-binary folk face heightened prejudice and harassment every day, more policies and public statements deriding them continue to be made. This disconnect is not a coincidence; it is a calculation. Bold teachers should recognize these societal disconnects and provide opportunities to discuss what it means to be marginalized and disenfranchised. Bold teachers should embrace the intersectionality amongst sexuality, faith, race, and religion and make classrooms a safe refuge for all and a bastion for social justice and open, welcoming, and affirming support for LGBTQ+ students.

The authors envision an expansion of the idea of family beyond the heterosexual, biological family to include broader, diverse social groups that come together and combine for a common goal. Queer spaces are important cultural and social places, which weave together leisure, work, and community, and results of homosocial associations of same-gender people working together for a shared purpose (Bronski & Chevat, 2019, p. 103).

“Safe spaces for all include those who are still in the closet. You are still valid if you remain in the closet. Not everybody comes from a family that loves to hug them and tell them they love them. Not everybody has a group of friends who will start crying with joy and asking if they can hook them up with other LGBTQ+ friends. Not everybody works in a place where they will have a job on Friday if they come out on Thursday. Not everybody attends a school that will respect their pronouns and their name and let them use the facilities they need. For some people, coming out can literally be a matter of life and death. It could also mean the loss of housing, family, and financial security. It’s a sad, ugly reality, but it is a reality some people live in” (Powers, 2020, p. 32).

Bold teachers open spaces for students to self-define chosen genders, sexualities, pronouns, and names. These teachers engage in ongoing critique of how gender is reinforced in literature, media,

technology, art, history, sciences, and other subject areas. Bold teachers employ instructional practices using LGBTQ-themed literature to investigate structural oppression and recognize that heterosexism sustains violence, bullying, misogyny, and homophobia. In a bold classroom space, students become embodied change agents who are proactive against (and not engaged in) nullifying ideologies (Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth, 2015).

Be Bold: Adhere to English Language Arts and Social Studies Curriculum Standards

Teachers should be highly aware of the standards that focus on voice and choice in English Language Arts and justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) in Social Studies. Embedded in the Social Studies standards are goals and objectives that promote multiculturalism, which include goals and objectives to address social, emotional, physical, and sex education. The National Council of the Teachers of English (NCTE) passed a resolution calling for the inclusion of LGBTQ topics in the curriculum and professional development for teachers. Pedagogy needs to incorporate techniques to dispel prejudices and strengthen positive identities of queer students (Sanders & Mathis, 2013). Once teachers are aware of the curriculum rationale for teaching subject matter about history, culture, and identity, they will be better equipped to challenge policies and practices that stay in place, because they have a legacy at the school. Bold teachers should ask critical questions such as: Are these policies benefiting all students? Are these policies or practices creating barriers for students? Who is being harmed, and what can be changed? The standards should set the tone that enables teachers to provide holistic support for students, design pedagogy that centers students’ lived experiences and backgrounds, incorporate input from faculty, staff, and students, and partner with the local communities.

Teachers may worry about lacking guidelines to discuss gender-binary and transgender identities with their students when they read certain stories. Fortunately, the *Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework - A Road Map for Anti-bias Education at Every Grade Level* (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014) offers grade-level appropriate standards and scenarios for teaching diversity and inclusion in K-12 classrooms and can be a valuable curricular tool. The Anti-bias Framework (ABF) is a set of anchor standards and age-appropriate learning outcomes divided into four domains—identity, diversity, justice, and action (INJA). The standards provide a common language and

organizational structure. Teachers can use them to guide curriculum development, and administrators can use them to make schools more just, equitable, and safe. The ABF is leveled for every stage of K-12 education and includes school-based scenarios to show what anti-bias attitudes and behavior may look like in the classroom. Teaching about IDJA allows educators to engage in a range of anti-bias, multicultural, and social justice issues. This continuum of engagement is unique among social justice teaching materials, which tend to focus on one of two areas, either reducing prejudice or advocating collective action. Prejudice reduction seeks to minimize conflict and generally focuses on changing the attitudes and behaviors of a dominant group. Collective action challenges inequality directly by raising consciousness and focusing on improving conditions for underrepresented groups. The ABF recognizes that, in today's diverse classrooms, students need knowledge and skills related to both prejudice reduction and collective action.

Teachers who are bold would embrace these standards in their classrooms and coordinate learning activities to meet these standards. One of the identity standards states, "Students will express pride, confidence, and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014, p. 5). By using LGBTQ-themed literature, bold teachers can discuss pride in one's affectional orientation and gender expression and provide models for self-identity, self-expression, self-determination, and self-affirmation (Logan et al, 2016).

Be Bold: Teach the Topic of Sex Education, Sex/Gender, Sexuality, and Sexual Health

Bold teachers should not shy away from teaching various aspects of sex education, which include sex/gender, sexuality, and sexual health. According to Bittner (2012), 36 states require some sort of teaching of abstinence as the best method of avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, but also teaches about contraception, safe sex, and healthy relationships; only 18 states stipulate information on contraceptives, while only 12 states require the inclusion of information related to sexual orientation. Unfortunately, of these 12 states, three of the states stress negative implications of queer sexuality.

In Figure 2, Logan Edwards (2023), outlined the roles and responsibilities of teachers in supporting learners' understanding of sex, sexuality, and sexual

health and well-being. Note that an emphasis on body positivity is essential to the development of mental health and physical maturation of children and young people. Television, movies, books, music, apps, commercials - most of us cannot protect children from the pervasive untrue messages about bodies that saturate our media. We can, however, equip children with the skills to consume media with a critical eye. When reading books with students, pause and notice out loud some of the unfair patterns you see. Tell the students how this makes you feel and ask them about their feelings. Pay attention to what is being said about bodies, providing positive talks and affirmation to promote body positivity (Poth, 2023).

Figure 2

Comprehensive Sex Education Topics Descriptions - Sex/Gender, Sexuality, and Sexual Health and Well-Being (PreK-12)

Beginner (PreK-8)

Healthy Relationships (grades PreK-5)

- Knowledge and skills needed to successfully navigate changing interpersonal relationships and cultivate positive relationships among family, peers, and partners, with special emphasis given to body autonomy, personal boundaries, verbal consent, communication skills, technology, and personal agency within relationships.

Sexual Anatomy and Physiology (grades 6-8)

- Knowledge and understanding of the structures and functions of the internal/external male and female reproductive organs/systems, and how the relate to human reproduction and/or sexual desire, pleasure, and satisfaction.

Puberty and Reproductive Health (grades 6-8)

- Knowledge and skills needed to understand pivotal, developmental milestones for adolescents that impact physical, social, emotional, and psycho-sexual development, with an emphasis on understanding that changes are natural, normal, and healthy, as well as how to nurture and protect one's sexual and reproductive health.

Intermediate (grades 6-10)

Body Positivity (grades 6-8)

- Practicing the acceptance, embrace, celebration, and appreciation of all the variations and combinations of body types across the human body spectrum (i.e., body diversity and inclusivity), as well as valuing the health and functionality of the human body over its look or appearance to promote body peace, confidence, and personal empowerment.

Sexual Identity (grades 9-10)

- Healthy self-identity development and awareness of who a person is regarding biological sex, gender identity and expression, social roles, and sexual/romantic orientation, and how peers, family, media, culture, and society can influence beliefs, attitudes, and expectations regarding one's intersecting identities and overall sexuality based on sexual attraction and behavior.

Personal Safety and Protection (grades 9-10)

- Knowledge and skills needed to understand STIs/STDs (including HIV/AIDS), their signs, symptoms, and outcomes, and how they are prevented, transmitted, and treated, as well as how to advocate for the increased awareness, creation, and maintenance of safe school and community environments that promote sexual health and prevent sexual illnesses and diseases.

Advanced (grades 11-12+)

Sexual Assault Prevention

- Awareness, knowledge, and skills needed for the education, prevention, and intervention of sexual harassment, sexual abuse/assault, and interpersonal and sexual violence (i.e., rape culture), with special emphasis on how to recognize, respond to, and refer to local services or resources when one suspects victimization by unhealthy, harmful, dangerous, or illegal sex acts.

Sexually Healthy Relationships

- Knowledge and skills needed to openly, safely, comfortably, and confidently express and experience one's sexuality in sexual and/or romantic relationships, with special emphasis given to sexual consent, communication skills, technology, and sexual agency, novelty, variety, and exploration within sexually intimate relationships.

Pregnancy and Family Planning

- Knowledge and understanding of how pregnancy happens, responsible decision-making to prevent pregnancy or avoid unintended pregnancy, as well as family planning options and familial goal setting if pregnancy does occur (either intentionally or unintentionally).

Be Bold: Use of Correct Pronouns

For students to be visible and present, using correct pronouns is essential. For gender non-binary students, they feel recognized when their affirmed names and pronouns are used appropriately and correctly. This step shows the most basic of human kindness and acceptance and shows that others appreciate the courage it takes to be who they are in this world (Nealy, 2017). Schools should be intentional about codifying pronoun policies to offset the cycle of socialization in which people are born and are first socialized with people in their families, the people they love and trust. LGBTQ+ students' personalities, values, expectations, and gender expressions are shaped further through institutional and cultural socialization in which society tells them who has the power. This inculcation through the media, schooling, and religion can lead to those who conform and those who do not. Those who do not tend to have misconceptions about those who think otherwise tend to internalize these feelings for the future. This can lead to racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Bold teachers see the big picture and begin to challenge the system that has been set against gender nonbinary students from the beginning. The changing of one's name and pronouns is an act of resocialization. Teachers should vocalize inclusion so that pronouns are a part of introductions; visualize inclusion by making sure pronouns are on email signature lines, bios, name tags, social media profiles, and resumes; and validate pronoun usage by having anchor charts, talking points, and class covenants that ensure that others understand why pronouns are important (Safe Zone Train, 2023).

Be Bold: Recognizing Gender Nonbinary Roles in the Classroom

The first messages we receive about gender happen in early childhood. We learn in early childhood that gender is an important social category and that there are things we should or should not do, want, or be based on the gender and sex we are assigned at birth. Thanks to the tireless work of feminist organizers and

activists of all genders, so much has shifted and changed in our lifetime! But those messages are still out there, and young children need support from trusted grown-ups in their lives to help them make sense of what they are seeing, hearing, and feeling (Madison et al., (2021).

Most people think of gender as a binary choice; that there are only two genders, male and female. However, scientists have come to recognize that in any society, there can be much more than an either/or choice. “The term *fluid* is used to reflect that gender is not fixed into male and female roles. They exist in a whole range of behaviors that can combine different aspects of both” (Bronski & Chevat, 2019, p.15). A person's gender identity may be the same as or different from their birth-assigned sex. Gender expression is how a person publicly expresses or presents their gender. This can include behavior and outward appearance, such as dress, hair, make-up, body language, and voice.

Bold teachers need to provide supportive and affirming environments for gender non-binary students so that students can walk in their truths and embrace their authentic selves (Lenning, 2017). To do this, teachers should eliminate traditional gender stereotypes in the rituals and routines of the classroom and the playground. Teachers should move away from giving girls first preference in activities, such as asking girls to line up first when filing out of the class. Teachers should not assign the boys physical tasks in the classroom and the girls domestic chores in the classroom, such as boys stacking books and chairs and emptying the trash, while the girls are washing the desks and sweeping the floor.

In primary grades, teachers should have dress-up corners that have a variety of clothing that can be worn by all genders and not relegated to occupations that are traditionally gendered, such as nurses and firemen. In fact, all gendered terms should be eliminated and replaced with terms like firefighter, police officer, mail carrier, and flight attendant. Dress up should include androgynous items like vests, purses, boas, and a variety of hats. In fantasy play, try to eliminate gendered roles like kings, queens, princesses, and princes. Discuss fantasy play as the royal court or a fancy dress ball, and have students dress in ways aligned with their gender expressiveness.

On the playground, all students should be allowed to participate in all activities. Have the physical education teacher teach wrestling and football to all

students. Have all students learn how to jump rope, use jump rope rhymes, and learn Double Dutch. Encourage all-gender teams when playing team sports, such as basketball, soccer, kickball, and even flag football. Note that tackle football should not be played in elementary school during recess time.

When selecting books for the classroom, teachers should evaluate the gender roles of the characters in the book (Naidoo, 2012). To evaluate, the teacher should ask questions such as: Are female characters portrayed as very emotional and dependent? Are male characters depicted as independent and unemotional? To offset these stereotypes, teachers should seek books where male characters show sensitivity and a wide variety of emotions, and female characters are depicted as bold and courageous.

Teachers should ensure that all characters have active roles and are not depicted as passive or demure. Also, teachers should analyze illustrations to ensure that females are outdoors and adventurous, and males can be inside, enjoying cooking and caregiving responsibilities for younger siblings or dolls. The books should engage readers in understanding transgendered characters who are proud, capable, and dependent and not always trauma-burdened or mentally unstable. The books should be realistic, in which characters are dealing with social navigation and identity construction and depict ways in which the character solve problems (Nealy, 2017, 2019; Poth, 2023). Merely having the texts available is not enough, bold teachers need to use these books to rescue queer and non queer students from the dangerous and sometimes deadly effects of homophobia, transphobia, and intolerance (Banks, 2009).

To be bold, teachers must be intentional about gender nonconforming rituals and routines, play activities, classroom roles, and imaginative play. Make sure that your classroom covenant indicates that all students can participate in the classroom in gender roles they are comfortable with and can try on gender roles for fluidity and experimentation. This is a safe zone, and all gender expressions are welcome. By creating a gender-expressive and gender-nonconforming environment, students can cultivate healthy peer relationships and learn social navigation skills.

Bold teachers should support emancipatory, validating, and transforming instructional practices. They should provide opportunities for students to

learn more about the transgender community. Bold teachers engage in critical literacy exercises, using LGBTQ-themed literature to investigate and interrogate topics to discuss essential topics about transgender identity and development. A bold teacher, an author observed, provided a window opportunity for students to learn more about persons who are transgender. The teacher discussed that in the transgender community, the decision to pass as cisgender all day, every day is called going *stealth*. The teacher provided an article about stealth, and through interactive reading and discussion, the teacher asked the students to answer critical questions about stealth and the lives of transgender people. Together, the class discovered:

- What is the difference between sex assigned at birth and the gender binary?
- What's the difference between transgender and nonbinary?
- Why are gender pronouns important?
- When do trans people realize something is different?
- What percentage of trans people are "stealth"?
- How are trans people treated in the workplace?

Having courageous conversations about socially significant topics is an act of bravery and boldness. According to Singleton (2015). Bold teachers can have civil discourse around topics that give voice to students and validate their lived experiences. Through the guidelines of courageous conversations, students are allowed to speak their truths, experience discomfort, accept non-closure, and stay engaged.

Be Better

Teachers are real when they know current laws and pending legislative action, they forge ahead to be bold by investigating their curricula standards and preparing themselves for affronts to their pedagogical expression. To move from validation of curricula standards to pedagogical emancipation, teachers need to be better. Teachers become better when they use culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusion-valued instruction in their classrooms. Culturally responsive pedagogy is manifested through affirming dispositional stances; the use of critical literacy instruction; a focus on social justice practices in which everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities; and the incorporation of queer-themed literature. Teachers who are better move beyond

"Don't Say Gay" to "Gay is Okay." These teachers recognize that schools must help students manage and affirm their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish positive goals, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal decisions effectively (American Library Association).

Be Better: Use Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for Inclusive Teaching

In an article by Hines and Ford (2023), they described how culturally responsive educators can become co-conspirators in decolonizing education for students. These educators use an ally, accomplice, and co-conspirator framework.

"Allies are culturally responsive in words more than action; accomplices are anti-racist in philosophy and action, but risk-taking is minimal and reactive; and co-conspirators are both; they are culturally responsive and antiracist. They take on the status quo and are willing to take professional risks and reject white privilege. These professionals are proactive" (Hines & Ford, 2023, p. 10).

This framework is akin to what teachers must do to support LGBTQ+ students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Better teachers move beyond being allies and focus on implicit centralization. Implicit centralization provides a more welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ students, as teachers confront homophobic and heterosexist comments made by others (Evans, 2000). Teachers who are better become co-conspirators that disrupt the status quo with a focus on explicit centralization by intentionally including curriculum on LGBTQ+ topics and using inclusive language and examples in the classroom. They disrupt by refusing to implement discriminatory, negative, and demeaning curriculum and instruction; not succumbing to pressures regardless of the sources; and introducing a curriculum that is open and affirming of all, especially LGBTQ+ students (Evans, 2000).

Be Better: Incorporate Social Justice Education with the Use of Inclusive Literacy Practices

Better teachers become social justice educators, and they recognize that society is stratified in many ways, including race, gender, ability, proficiency, and sexuality. As social justice educators, they understand these power relations and accept their role in the identification and examination of instances of injustice so students can reflect and analyze their thinking, actions, and ideologies (Sanders and Lopez, 2020). Teachers must allow their students to learn

from multiple perspectives of different cultures. Students must experience hearing others' views and make sense of their stance. The social justice practices of using a critical literacy approach, modeling this approach through interactive read-aloud, and selecting queer-themed literature to support students' gender expressions and affectional orientations. This perspective-taking practice pushes students beyond their natural egocentrism and provides critical literacy tools of discernment (Levine, 2010).

Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) provided a set of objectives that students should inculcate to offset biases. They stated that every child should demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities. Once students are aware of their agency, then they can express their comfort and joy with human diversity in accurate language for human differences that shows deep caring human connections. Finally, the classroom should be a place to demonstrate empowerment and to develop the skills to act with others or alone, against prejudices and discriminatory actions.

When students see injustice, they should be prepared to say something and do something. Through critical literacy, students should increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts. For instance, a classroom teacher posed questions about body protective rights in a Social Studies class. These simple questions were: "Who has the right to your body?" and "Who makes decisions about your body?" The students were adamant that they have the right to their bodies, but when the teacher asked about sexual practices, reproductive rights, and gender affirming care, the students engaged in civil discourse about the role of parents, families, and doctors informing body-based decisions. They concluded that consultative decisions were probably best but thought that it was an act of unfairness for anonymous people, such as politicians, religious leaders, or strident voices to dictate what they viewed as their personal freedoms. Better teachers are not afraid to discuss social justice issues through a critical literacy lens that focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Critical Literacy. Critical literacy helps students recognize that the text that surrounds us actively shapes our lives. Through critical literacy, we learn the language for describing ourselves, narrating our lives, and articulating our values (Banks, 2009). Critical literacy is actively analyzing texts and includes strategies for what proponents describe as uncovering

underlying messages. Tenets of critical literacy focus on the empowering role of language, using language to communicate, solve problems, and persuade others to a course of action, emphasizing the interactions among students in a classroom, and enabling language as a means for social action.

Critical literacy approaches share the basic premise that literacy requires consumers of text to adopt a critical and questioning approach. For instance, when is it fair not to represent both sides of an issue? Can a teacher decide that it is not acceptable practice to present racist arguments, but legitimate to let students hear antigay stances? (Levine, 2010). When teachers assist students in examining the writer's message for bias, they are practicing critical literacy. This skill of actively engaging with the text can be used to help students become more perceptive and socially aware. Better teachers must push students to question the power structures in society and instruct them on how to dispute literature regarding gender expression, affectional orientation, biases, and social injustices against marginalized groups in their schools and communities.

According to Madison, Ralli, and Passchier (2023), an early tenet of critical literacy is to have students question the world around them and the text. Questions such as, What is love? What is family? Why do some grown-ups kiss each other on the lips? Do I have to get married when I grow up? Young students have important questions and observations about love, relationships, and family, but these conversations are often postponed. A critical literacy lens would explore that there are many ways that people love one another. These different ways are not always what we see represented in books or media. Instead, students are bombarded with images that define a family as a straight, married couple with a few children, a minivan, and a white picket fence. Teachers can examine many kinds of loving relationships in the early grade levels, which is the time to start laying the foundation.

Critical literacy examines all aspects of heteronormative, homophily, and homonormative aspects of literature. Homonormative is a term used by queer activists and scholars to critique mainstream civil rights organizations' assimilation tactics. "As gay culture dissolves into something more flexible and accessible, queerness can be tapped into by those who do not share the pain (and painfully unifying) experiences of social isolation, violence, rejection, and coming out. Can anyone be queer?" (Cheves, 2023, p. 87). The more inclusive one becomes, there is the

possibility to forget collective and personal histories based on shame, which inhibits community-building and justice-oriented activism.

Books that place queer characters in heteronormative situations where there is nothing uniquely queer about the characters except the fact that same sex coupling is in place throughout the book are viewed as homonormative. Another example would be queer students who are maintaining heteronormative tropes and not truly being expressive about what it means to be queer. Through critical literacy, teachers can help students investigate the relationship between human practice and the production, distribution, exchange, refinement, negotiation, and contestation of what it means to be queer. Teachers who strive to be better take a social stance that recognizes literacy as configurations of social practices that permeate and inform students' lives and provide a foundation for what lies ahead in adulthood (Jenlink, 2022). Better teachers use critical literacy elements in queer-themed literature to offset the narrative of reduction that situates affectional orientation and gender expression as inherently controversial and conflicted, and should select books that are expressive of queer joy (Banks, 2009).

Interactive Read-Aloud. Teachers recognize that schools can be seen by many as unsafe places that are restrictive, constrictive, and reinforce multiple forms of systemic oppression (Miller, 2015). To be better, teachers should use the interactive read-aloud technique to interrogate and disrupt oppression. An interactive read-aloud provides opportunities for open-ended responses, combined with specific reading (text structure, reading comprehension, and literary understanding) and social justice (inclusion, diversity, and equity) instruction as students comprehend the text. Within the interactive read-aloud, comprehension is constructed through dialogue and classroom interaction, providing an important opportunity for students to respond to literature in a way that builds on their strengths and scaffolds knowledge (Wiseman, 2010).

Better teachers select books that focus on the experiences of queerness, self-identity, and queer autonomy. These books are explicit about self-determination. Students' self-determination is the right to make choices about their self-identity so that their realities are reflected, affirmed, and made legible (Miller, 2015). By encouraging conversations about identity, teachers can increase pride in students' self-identities and celebrate others who are different from

each other. Better teachers start conversations about differences based on gender, identity, skin color, ability, body shape, and even sex, and sexuality (Jordan & Hendrick, 2024). Often, issues of sex and sexuality are seen as private subjects, needing individual exploration. Parents and teachers can be helpful resources, but oftentimes students are shy and scared to speak to adults about sex-related issues; therefore, "literature can explore, learn, and play with themes of sex and sexuality without the perceived invasion into spaces of exploration" (Bittner, 2012, p.360).

Allington and Gabriel (2016), stated that there are six essential aspects of literacy development which are 1) choose one's texts to read, 2) read text that can be read accurately, independently, and with comprehension, 3) write and read about something personally meaningful, 4) discuss with peers about what they are reading, 5) discuss with peers about what they are writing, and 6) listen to adults as models of reading fluency. Teachers should use these essential literacy aspects, coupled with literature that focus on queer visibility, queer consciousness and community, and queer affirmation (Blackburn et al, 2015). This approach offers multiple benefits: 1) it provides an illustrative example of literature for students to consider in their thinking, writing, speaking, and listening, 2) it allows students to explore multiple texts in a relatively short time, and 3) it introduces students to variety of texts that they can choose to read independently (Cramer & Adams, 2016).

LGBTQ-themed Literature. Teachers who are better select books that focus on LGBTQ+ characters and their lives, because they are aware that just like heterosexual students, queer students must have opportunities for self-affirmation and socialization if they are to develop into healthy adolescents and adults.

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of the world that can be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience (Bishop, 1990). A mirror opportunity is when LGBTQ+ students can see themselves in the curriculum, program offerings, policies, and campus activities. Reading LGBTQ-themed literature through a critical

literacy lens can provide self-affirmation, offer characters with whom to identify, and decrease feelings of isolation and alienation. Critical literacy paired with queer-themed books provides opportunities "to understand what it means to be queer, to learn gay social norms, to vicariously experience the coming out process, to know they are not alone, to connect with others like them, and to find positive role models" (Hughes-Hassel et al, 2013, p. 4). Teachers who strive to be better will self-critique the books they are using in the classroom and ask themselves the following questions: Whose voices are represented in my school's curriculum? Whose voices are left out? What texts should I eliminate from my instruction? What texts would enhance students' knowledge and provide additional perspective?

When analyzing LGBTQ-themed literature, Cart and Jenkins (2006) created three categories – homosexual visibility, in which characters come out voluntarily or involuntarily; gay assimilation, in which the world assumes a melting pot of sexual and gender identity; and queer consciousness, which shows queer characters in the context of community. To assist teachers in becoming better at selecting LGBTQ-themed books for the classroom, Logan et al (2014, 2016) provided a series of criteria that expanded the initial categories. These criteria aligned with Jenkins and Cart's (2018) revised version, which gave readers a clear understanding of how the trajectory of LGBTQ+ literature developed from almost minimal and problematic representations to diverse gender expressions and affectional orientations.

One of the criteria consisted of *curriculum relevance*: does the book align with core goals, objectives, and standards? Another criterion was *windows and mirrors*, in which the books reflected gender expressions and affectional orientations of the students in the classroom as a mirror or provided a perspective on queer characters as a window opportunity. The next criterion was *literary merit*, which is literature that unsettles the reader and makes the reader rethink what was thought as certain. Another criterion was *social justice and equity*, in which the literature examines the power imbalances from historical oppression of queer people, and focuses on themes of power, privilege, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. The criterion of *stereotypes* encourages teachers to choose literature that discourages false images of queer persons and influences healthy perceptions that do not oversimplify, generalize, or carry derogatory

implications. The criterion of *pride, resilience, and self-actualization* champions characters' abilities to maximize assets, function effectively, and grow when facing adversity and challenge. Teachers should select books based on the criterion of *affectional expressiveness*, in which characters are depicted in affectional and intimate relationships that are parallel to the explicitness and expressiveness of those in typical heterosexual literature. Another criterion is *inclusion and diversity*, in which characters of all types of affectional orientations and gender expressions and their intersections with age, religion, race, ethnicity, national origin, ancestry, disability, ability, and socio-economic background are represented. The final criterion was the *offsetting of heterosexism, homophobia, and the challenging of heteronormativity*. Teachers who are better should select literature that challenges assumptions of heterosexuality, which regulate the school norms and language of the school with regards to topics of love, family, attraction, and affectional relationships.

Better teachers should expand their reading repertoire by selecting, reading, and analyzing children, adolescents, and young adult literature to align with the criteria listed. Teachers should select books aimed at educating the majority to accept, embrace, and celebrate gender and affectional diversity (Macleod, 2014). A bold teacher who strives to be better uses critical literacy strategies and interactive read-aloud integrated with LGBTQ-themed literature to transform, validate, and emancipate the lives of all, especially queer students.

CONCLUSION

At a time of unprecedented anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, policies, and hate crimes directed at the queer community, it is now more important than ever to have teachers' continued support in the intersectional fight for equality, democracy, and liberation. We hope that teachers read this article and create an inclusive classroom to save the lives of our students who are developing their gender identity and affectional orientation. These inclusive classrooms challenge the status quo and deconstruct false or oppressive stereotypes. These classrooms must recognize and address anti-LGBTQ+ bullying and name calling; understand the differences between sex, gender, identity, gender-expression, and affectional orientation; provide instruction about the gender spectrum, gender identities, and using correct

pronouns; recognize hidden biases and microaggression; learn what all the letters mean in the acronym LGBTQ+, as well as the history and continued evolution of its use as an umbrella term; and correcting common language mistakes that can be offensive to the LGBTQ+ community (Jha, 2017).

For teachers to be culturally competent, they must recognize that others in the world have different experiences, values, viewpoints, and perspectives. Teachers must situate pluralism in their classes so that communication, culture, diversity, historical biases, and values are synergized through rich agency, advocacy, and action (Howe & Lisi, 2024). "A casual joke, a careless remark, even an inadvertent expression could reinforce a student's expectation or belief about the school community and plunge the student further into isolation" (Lane, 2019, p. 79). However, the essence of teaching is exactly this type of work: advocating for constructive change, ensuring support for all students, and fostering the growth of students into citizens who contribute positively to society.

The legislative bills and actions discussed in this article shortchange teachers and students' First Amendment Rights to learn and discuss issues that affect their everyday lives. These legislative actions further marginalize communities and create unsafe learning environments (ACLU Foundation, 2022). Students deserve better; therefore, teachers should foster inclusive education free from censorship or discrimination and ensure affirming classrooms where everyone's histories and stories matter. Teachers must hold firm that queer students are beautifully and wonderfully made. Queer students are worthy of love and protection from systems of oppression. Schools should be bastions for queer joy, in which queer students feel that they belong, are seen, and are heard (Martin & Strom, 2019).

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