



Inclusion Cannot Be Optional: Using LGBTQ Books in All Classrooms

By Jessica Lifshitz

It was April 28, 2016, and before me was a scene that plays out in hundreds of classrooms on hundreds of days.

I sat on my rocking chair, holding a picture book in my lap, my fifth-grade students gathered in front of me on the carpet. But that day, something was different; I was nervous. That day, I was joining educators across the country in reading the picture book *I Am Jazz* (Herthel and Jennings 2014), about the transgender activist Jazz Jennings, as part of an event organized by the Human Rights Campaign to show support for transgender students. It was the first time I would be reading this picture book out loud to one of my classes.

I was ready. I knew that it was important to read this book, in this space, to these students. But I was also nervous because my students are ten and I didn't know how they or their families would respond. Before I began reading, I shared with my students that this book had been banned from many schools. I told them that some adults did not believe this book was appropriate for young children. And then I started reading. By the time I reached the end of the book, I was at ease.

Until I looked up and I saw many of my students' hands up in the air. And then I felt my breath catch in my chest. What would they ask? Would I know how to answer their questions? Would their questions be respectful? Part of me wanted to avoid all eye contact and move us on to our next lesson. Instead I called on the first student. And then the next. And then a third. And in all three cases, they simply wanted to know why on earth any adult would have a problem with this book. One boy brilliantly proclaimed, "A lot of times kids are the ones who are just fine with hearing stories like this one. It seems that the adults are the ones who come and mess everything up."

Another student said, "Now I understand what it means to be transgender. Now I understand that it means you were born into a body that does not feel right to you."

And yet another student shared, "I think that most of the hate that people feel really comes from people not understanding what it is like to be a person who is transgender."

In the course of that conversation, I realized the wide gulf that often exists between what I fear will happen and what actually happens. How quickly we can let fear stop us before we witness the beauty of what happens when we trust our students to learn about the lives of the people with whom we share this world.

The Necessity of LGBTQ Books in Classrooms

As Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop has written, our children need to see themselves reflected in the books they read. These books serve as mirrors. She explains, "Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books" (Bishop 1990).

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For LGBTQ students and those with LGBTQ family members, bringing books with LGBTQ characters into the classroom allows students to be seen and to feel valued.

For other students who do not identify as LGBTQ, these books serve an important purpose as well. Bishop also speaks of the need for all children to have opportunities to use books as windows, where they can see, through books, into the lives of others. She writes, "Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds" (Bishop 1990). These books help students build empathy for



those whose experiences might not match their own. Hearing these stories can be a way to better understand others, to have their questions answered, to be prepared for the people they will encounter in this world.

For many LGBTQ students, schools continue to feel unsafe. According to recent GLSEN research in their 2017 National School Climate Survey, “59.5% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 44.6% because of their gender expression, and 35.0% because of their gender” (Kosciw et al. 2018, 14).

Spaces that feel unsafe for LGBTQ students need to visibly and audibly send the message that all students are welcome and loved. But too often, that is not done. According to the GLSEN 2017 National School Climate Survey, “Only 19.8% of LGBTQ students were taught positive representations about LGBTQ people, history, or events in their schools; 18.4% had been taught negative content about LGBTQ topics” (Kosciw et al. 2018, 56).

This silence, this lack of inclusion, speaks volumes. It sends a message to *all* students that there is something that is not “school appropriate” about who LGBTQ students are; that their very identity and existence is something that should be left outside of our classroom walls. We need to fight against that dangerous message to make our schools feel safe for everyone. One simple way that we can do that is with books.

Using Books to Create Safe Spaces

There are many ways that, even in the earliest grades, we can bring in books that honor and make space for people within the LGBTQ community. There are plenty of resources to turn to for recommendations of books for all ages that include LGBTQ characters. One of the best places to look is within the Human Rights Campaign’s Welcoming Schools curriculum. They have several booklists for all ages

(www.welcomingschools.org/resources/books). In addition, Common Sense Media also has a well-curated list for all ages (www.commonsensemedia.org/lists/lgbtq-books).

We can start by bringing these books into our classrooms. However, we must make space for these books not just on our shelves, but in our instruction. Make sure that you are reading and discussing books with LGBTQ characters aloud with your students. Do not leave it to chance that students will find and read books in your classroom that include LGBTQ characters. Offer them as options for your chapter book read-alouds, give book talks about them, use them as mentor texts for writing lessons, use them as you model reading comprehension strategies, and include them as a part of your history, science, and math lessons.

Recently, in my fifth-grade classroom, it was time to choose our next read-aloud. In my stack of book options was *The Pants Project*, a middle-grade novel written by Cat Clarke (2017) that tells the story of a transgender student who fights the school’s discriminatory dress code policy. After giving the kids a summary of the book and sharing the first chapter with them, I noticed how much more willing they were to ask questions and discuss people who are transgender in conversations. My students didn’t end up selecting that book for our next read-aloud, but it led many of my students to notice the other books in our classroom that included transgender characters. Books that had been sitting on the shelf, untouched for months, were now flying between my students’ hands.

When reading these books in your classroom, start from where you are most comfortable. For young kids, simply reading books that acknowledge the diversity that exists in our world can be an easy place to begin. Diversity is simply the presence of difference; to acknowledge that there are many ways to be a boy, many ways to be a girl, many ways to be a human, and many ways to be a family, are concepts that all kids can understand. Start with gender diversity, with a picture book like *Sparkle Boy* by Leslea



Newman (2017), or discuss family diversity, with a picture book like *A Family Is a Family Is a Family* by Sara O’Leary (2016). Once you and your students have built a culture of comfort, continue to push the conversations based on where your students are.

Although reading and talking about picture books and chapter books is one way to honor and make space for the experiences of LGBTQ people, we can also look to the world around us and notice the issues that currently affect LGBTQ people. Students frequently bring questions into our classrooms.

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Digging into current social issues as readers and writers is one way to bring the lived experiences of LGBTQ people into the classroom. We can push beyond acknowledging diversity to critically examining the unjust beliefs, laws, and systems that continue to affect members of the LGBTQ community. These issues might include discussions around transgender bathroom laws, antidiscrimination laws, laws requiring inclusive school curriculum, and unjust school dress codes.

It is important that we approach these topics through an inquiry stance and not through a lens of debate. We do not ever want to allow our students to debate another person’s humanity or right to exist with equal rights and freedoms. This can have a damaging effect on all of our students. Instead, we can help our students learn more about an issue and about a variety of perspectives. We are not teaching our students what to think; we are teaching them a process through which they can learn how to think for themselves and base their beliefs on research and valid information.

This is not only work our students can handle, it is work that has the potential to engage them and help them become more understanding and empathetic. I know that we can be hesitant about this work, and some questions nag us, such as: “What if I upset parents?” “What if I make someone uncomfortable?” “What if I am questioned by my administration?” I think we might be focusing on the wrong questions. Instead, we need to ask ourselves, “How can I continue to exclude entire groups of people knowing that it is causing damage and harm to the children I teach, nurture, and love?” Perhaps when we start with this question, we will realize the necessity of leaning into our fears and moving forward because it is what is best for our children and best for this world.



Works Cited

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