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Breaking Down the Last Taboo: LGBT Young Adult Literature in the Preservice Classroom

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On February 12, 2008, Lawrence Fobes "Larry" King was brutally killed by a gun shot to the head. The assailant, a fellow classmate in Oxnard, California, faces fifty-two years to life in prison. Larry, an openly gay fifteen-year old, had recently endured harassment directed at his sexuality. As teacher educators, we can't help but wonder what happened. What do we need to do in schools to keep this from happening? What are we doing wrong?

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. As Jim Reese points out, "lesbians and gay males are still by and large an invisible minority in middle and senior high schools" (132). As English educators at a state school in the Midwest where we teach preservice teachers, we are appalled at the lack of knowledge most of our students have about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues, but more importantly the lack of compassion shown by some of our students towards creating a *safe environment in their classroom for ALL students.*

In a national study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, www.glsen.org) in 2005, the number of LGBT students who were harassed, attacked, and generally made to feel unsafe in their own schools was staggering. Consider the following statistics:

- 68.6% of 900 LGBT youths from 48 states reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation.
- 80% of gay and lesbian youth report severe social isolation.
- 15% of LGB youth have been injured so badly in a physical attack at school that they have had to seek the services of a doctor or nurse.
- 20% of LGB youth report skipping school at least once a month because of feeling unsafe while there.

The Lambda organization, a non-profit organization "dedicated to reducing homophobia, inequality, hate crimes, and discrimination by encouraging self-acceptance, cooperation, and non violence" (www.lambda.org), also reports that the typical high-school student hears anti-gay slurs 25.5 times a day. The same GLSEN survey noted above also questioned the attitudes of current and future teachers. As educators ourselves, what was (and continues to be) even more horrifying to us was that educators in the schools were contributing to this climate of fear.

- 53% of students report hearing homophobic comments made by school staff
- 80% of prospective teachers report negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian people
- 77% of prospective teachers would not encourage a class discussion on homosexuality
- 85% oppose integrating gay/lesbian themes into their existing curricula
- Teachers fail to intervene in 97% of incidents involving anti-gay slurs at school

Background

In a research brief published by GLSEN entitled *From Teasing to Torment: A Report on School Climate in Michigan,* we found a lot of reason for concern. They found that Michigan's schools were not safe for many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. In a GLSEN study, specifically in Michigan schools, significant percentages of Michigan's students experience bullying and

harassment at school, often because of sexual orientation and gender expression. In addition, most LGBT youth in Michigan lack access to important school resources, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, and were not protected by comprehensive safe schools policies.

If teachers teach the way they are taught, as research by Marshall and Smith show us, then we are also led to believe that the climate of public education must change from within, that is, change must come from teachers, both in preservice programs and in-service teachers in the schools. If future teachers are going to include texts in their classrooms with explicit LGBT themes and characters, teacher education programs need to teach these texts as well. As with multicultural themes and issues, preservice teachers need the opportunity to challenge their own beliefs concerning gender and sexuality and to work toward accepting students and ideas that are different from their own. Few would argue that the majority of literature that students are exposed to is primarily canonical and heteronormative. Our literature classes seek to address this lack of exposure to non-heteronormative young adult literature.

Simply reading additional literature will not solve the problem, however. In the age of "Don't ask; don't tell" and the push to standardize education, making our classrooms open and inviting for all students is more of a challenge than ever. Discussions about sexuality and gender variance will likely remain the last taboo. Further, media portrays LGBT issues on television shows and films such as *Will & Grace* and *Brokeback Mountain* as if they're readily accepted when, in fact, reality is considerably different. An article in *The Lansing State Journal* (5/21/08) stated that homophobic attacks have doubled in the last year in our state. The author attributed this increase to several things but included recent anti-gay legislation among them. The openness of society is still under question.

In a society where issues of race and social class seem to be "easy to talk about," Wollman-Bonilla found that these are issues that are still not acceptable to talk about in schools. In this study, elementary preservice teachers expressed reluctance at bringing picture books into the classroom that they felt would "disturb" students or that would expose them to anything "outside of societal norms." These subjects included homelessness, violence, divorce, and non-heteronormative families.

As Blackburn and Buckley found in their graduate-level preservice classroom with future middle school teachers, LGBT issues are not particularly welcome in the views of future public school teachers. Some students were offended that they were asked to read this material and were "appalled by the suggestion that [a text with LGBT themes] is appropriate for middle school students." Blackburn and Buckley also found that LGBT texts and issues were not welcome in local schools as teachers and administrators were opposed to including such curriculum. However, we need to ask, "What about the students in these schools who identify as LGBT?" Not including these texts silences their voices and misses an opportunity for the school community to engage in conversation about heteronormative values.

We agree with Metcalf-Turner and Smith that issues of multicultural education (in which we would include LGBT issues) should move beyond "curriculum reform" and begin to work on teachers' understandings of the issues.

Our Classrooms: A Commitment to a Safe-Open Classroom for All Students

Starting the semester with ice-breaker activities may sound juvenile and a waste of time to many, but we as teacher educators find these "games" invaluable to building community within their classrooms. We know that learning is "risky." Our classrooms require *trust* to assist kids with taking the risks necessary to learn, e.g., venturing an answer, asking a question, etc. Complicate that with the fact that some kids don't feel accepted or valued, and they will never get to the point where they trust the learning environment. It is important for us to *model* this safe place classroom within the university setting, hoping that our modeling will lead our students to continue this practice in their own middle and high school classrooms.

Our classes are a place where questions are encouraged. If you don't know something, *ask*! What we are asking students to do in every class is to challenge each other during the discussions, as well as themselves. What do you think? Why do you think it? How will this belief affect your future classroom and your future students?

Who We Teach

The students we teach in our literature classes are ninety percent preservice teachers who are required to take a course in either Young Adult Literature or Cultural Pluralism for

Children and Young Adults in order to gain certification in either secondary or elementary fields of instruction. These students fit the typical pre-service teacher stereotype: new middle-class white females (Sleeter; Metcalf-Turner & Smith), and we would add mostly heterosexual. In the past three years, we have had only a small percent of male students, even fewer African American students, and several self-identified homosexual students. Overall, most students reported having positive high school experiences. Those who did not enjoy high school express a desire to help students like themselves find their own place in high school. Most are from relatively rural or small town environments (matching the demographics of our state and our university) and have had little exposure to anyone different from themselves (racially, ethnically, economically, religiously, and/or sexuality. Our students express moderate to conservative views on most social issues including LGBT issues.

Goals for our literature classrooms

Our literature classrooms work to inform our students of current Young Adult literature trends and current authors and possible methods for using these texts in their future classrooms. There are several specific goals that we both strive for in using LGBT texts in our pre-service classrooms:

1. Exposing our students to YA that include LGBT characters and issues—there are many fantastic texts and young adult authors in the market that our students are not aware of.
2. Creating an environment where they can ask questions and challenge their own assumptions—we have been amazed at what our students don't know and a place for students to ask questions is so important. This is also a space for us as teachers to admit that we don't have all of the answers, creating room for research and discussion.
3. Preparing our students to be responsible for ALL the students in their classroom—our students have stated that this is not something they have to worry about. Unlike race, sexuality can be and usually is hidden, so our students really think they will not encounter LGBT students, parents, or colleagues.
4. Promoting way to build a safe inviting environment in their classrooms—this starts from the first day of class and depends so much on what a teacher includes and doesn't include and what they allow to be said and what they don't allow to be said.
5. Providing opportunities for our students to talk about the "gray" areas in teaching – inclusion. How can we help our students think about how to implement these texts and conversations into the classroom? What support do they need, and how can we help them find it?
6. Assisting our students as they prepare rationales for the texts they want to use in their classrooms—Finally, we work on helping our students create the rationales for using these texts in the classroom (NCTE rationale guidelines), and we discuss who to talk to and where to go to get help.

Texts and Purpose

We are both deliberate in choosing our young adult book lists. It is imperative that we include *edgy* topics and the full representation of differing groups—pushing the envelope and challenging those representations. Students are exposed to texts with varying racial, gender, social class, and sexual orientation perspectives. We are vigilant about encouraging students to not back away from these issues during discussion. For most of our students, this is the time they have read a text that has explicit LGBT themes or characters.

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In addition to texts that have LGBT characters and

themes, we also teach those which have characters who lie outside of societal norms, raising and challenging the idea of "normal." There is always at least one character who challenges the norm, such as Alaska, Violet, or Jerry in John Green's *Looking for Alaska*, MT Anderson's *FEED*, and Robert Cormier's *Chocolate War*, respectively. These characters epitomize the individual who pushes about the societal norms throughout the text. They endure ridicule, physical torture, and ostracism to continue living a life that is true to their own sense of values.

We use specific Young Adult texts that include LGBT characters and themes. These texts include Wittlinger's *Hard Love*, Peters' *Luna*, and Block's *Weetzie Bat,* as examples and share various additional titles by Levithan, Woodson, and others with our students. As required reading, these books force the discussion. They don't permit our students to shy away from LGBT issues, as these themes are central to these texts. Though sometimes awkward at the beginning for some, by the end of the semester, most students are much more open and aware of the issues.

Format of Classes

We begin our classes every semester by attempting to form a level of trust, circle of learning, by framing the class in a professional manner. Immediately, our students are directed to think of themselves as professionals, treating each other as teachers and colleagues rather than maintaining the teacher/student distinction. We continually work to build a safe environment through discussion practices and open-response format. Relying on our students to speak up when they agree or disagree, we only step in when discussion reaches an impasse.

Both courses that we teach are listed at the 500 level, which for our institution serve as both undergraduate and graduate level courses. These courses rely heavily on discussion, participation, and for our classes specifically, written responses. Students in these courses are required to read numerous books together as a class, but also a large number of texts outside of class as individual choices. We also give book talks exposing students to new Young Adult texts and authors, and students are also required to give a five-minute book talk.

It is in their written responses that our students are most open about homosexuality and their beliefs. Students feel comfortable writing about friends or family members being homosexual. Or in the case of one student, "I dated a guy in high school who later told me that he wanted to be a girl" (Anonymous). These reading logs serve as safe places where our students are comfortable being open and honest about their beliefs and lives. However, getting them to open up in class discussion about their beliefs or feelings is the difficult part.

Environment and Attitude Survey Results

Interested to see how our students' answers compared to those in the GLSEN climate survey, we distributed a similar survey to determine their comfort level relating to LGBT literature and issues (see Appendix). Students were asked to complete the survey anonymously. As teacher educators, it is easy to believe that our students are different; that they would not disregard homophobic comments in their classrooms. It is easy to believe that they would stand up and defend every student in their classrooms. Of course "my students" would protect; of course it wouldn't be "my students" who would allow a student to be harassed. We would suggest every teacher educator to conduct a survey of their own in their classroom. The results could be very enlightening.

Our Findings

The first section of our survey asked about homophobic slurs—where, when, and how often our students heard them. The majority of our students (68 %) said that they heard some form of homophobic slur anywhere from one to five times a week. More disturbing was the remaining twenty-eight percent of the students who reported hearing them "often." Only one percent reported never hearing homophobic slurs.

Predictably, students reported hearing slurs primarily on campus (75%) and at home (43%) and at work (33%). We were shocked to find out that twenty-seven percent of our students reported hearing these homophobic slurs in class. Although these slurs were made by other students, we can only hope that the instructors were unaware of them because less than thirty percent of

the students confessed to responding directly to them.

The second part of our survey asked students about their own use of homophobic slurs and their attitude toward dealing with GLBT issues in a variety of ways. Though fifty-six percent claimed to never use slurs, another forty-two percent admitted to using them "once in a while." While the majority of students were comfortable reading about homosexuality and talking directly to homosexuals, they started to get more uncomfortable when that discussion took place in a classroom, with family, or with strangers. Almost forty percent of these preservice teachers indicated that they would be uncomfortable discussing GLBT issues in their future classes. Cited as reasons impacting their decision were the ages of their students, the community in which they taught, fear of parents' reactions, and their own lack of knowledge about these issues.

Discussion and Trends

The attitudes and beliefs expressed in this survey emerge when we discuss the texts assigned for the class (see Appendix). There are students who refuse to engage in the conversation at all, accepting a potential grade reduction. Their confusion and need for simple answers to explain their reluctance to engage are apparent. In one class period while discussing Julie Ann Peter's *Luna*, several students who had done some research on transsexual issues were presenting to class. When they came to a few theoretical possibilities and research avenues, one male student grabbed onto the theory about chemical imbalances in the brain that triggered gender issues and blurted out, "So if transsexuals have a 'chemical imbalance' it's like alcoholism right? Well, we can cure alcoholism, right? So why not this?" This statement was like a light bulb going on for us. Our students don't know the information that could help them to understand and accept those unlike themselves. They have not been exposed to this information, and they have either not asked the pertinent questions they need to or have been too uncomfortable to ask. Unfortunately, our students are not unlike other college students across the country.

The first and most prevalent reason that our students gave for feeling uncomfortable discussing these issues in a classroom was because of their religious values.

The first and most prevalent reason that our students gave for feeling uncomfortable discussing these issues in a classroom was because of their religious values. Many are taught from a young age that sexuality is a moral issue—a right or wrong—a normal or abnormal condition. They also believe mistakenly that due to the separation of church and state, they are "forbidden" from discussing these "religious" issues with their students. What they don't understand is by not discussing or opening this conversation they are silencing students in their own classrooms.

They incorrectly believe that they must be unbiased (presenting everything impartially), or that they can be totally unbiased in the classroom. What they don't understand is by not talking about these issues or by choosing not to include these texts they have already made a decision. They have already chosen to be biased.

A second reason our students cited is that they are afraid of controversy, from both the students and their parents. Their fear *is* real and so are the consequences. However, we must somehow get them to see that this "go along to get along" mentality is leaving them and their students vulnerable to whoever else wants to push a differing agenda. Students think that teaching is an impartial activity—never having been challenged in the classroom themselves. It is often this systemic flaw—this transmissive model of education—that doesn't allow for critical thinking or for challenging the status quo. In considering the literature that we teach in schools, we find that there is little multicultural literature, representation of opposing viewpoints, or even challenging the narrative of the bulk of what we read and teach. Chris Crutcher, a prolific and well-known young adult author, made the point in a recent conference talk (November 2007) that if a student does not see himself or herself in the literature they read, we are telling them that they don't exist. We need to help our students see all of their students reflected in the literature they choose.

The third most prevalent reason given for being uncomfortable is a simple lack of education on the topic. Though our students cite required diversity classes and

many other class conversations like those that take place in our classes as a beginning, many are concerned that they will misrepresent the information or present stereotypes in the classroom that would further promote anti-homosexual ridicule and harassment. And so continuing these discussions after our classes end is essential to helping our students gain confidence in approaching these issues and texts in their future classrooms.

This process sometimes requires more than patience on our part. Sometimes it requires that we show our agenda and bring in outside materials such as research, facts, cartoons, movies, or video from Oprah shows or YouTube that illustrate and forward the discussion. It is this information that students need the opportunity to challenge and discuss. They need to hear what their fellow students think about these issues as well, not just to challenge themselves, but also to break the belief that everyone thinks like they do.

Some students claimed during class discussion, "I'm ok talking about it in my classroom from a non-judgmental perspective," or "discussing it is fine as long as no one tries to push homosexuality on someone else." One student went so far as to say, "I prefer not to acknowledge homosexuality." What students need to think about is what happens if they mention their husband/wife in class? Does that promote heterosexuality? We would argue that yes, you are supporting the heteronormative conversation in the classroom if you won't also talk about another person and their partner or if you do not allow space for alternate interpretations of classic literature (Blackburn & Buckley).

Implications and Conclusion

This is going to be an uphill battle, but it is a battle worth fighting. Because schools should be a safe place for all students and teachers, we need to help our students become aware of others' lifestyles and learn to accept those differences. We bristle at the term "tolerance" because of its connotations. Who wants to be "tolerated"?

So, what does this mean for secondary teachers and school policy? What does it mean for university teacher education programs? Although there is considerably more literature that deals specifically with GLBT characters and issues, our findings show that in terms of practice, not much has changes since 1994 when Vicky Greenbaum argued in *English Journal* for including a discussion of gay and lesbian texts and subtexts in the high school classroom. Fifteen years later, we are still arguing that all of our students need to see themselves in the literature that we read in the classroom. Area high schools can do much to set policy and affect social change: they can offer education to both students and teachers. Regardless of personal beliefs, students and all school-related adults need to be aware of the issues and enforce behavior that is not intolerant of others' lifestyles. "Easy to say, hard to do," as the saying goes. Because adults (teachers and administrators) are setting the example, there needs to be a special focus on educating ourselves so that the misunderstandings and prejudices are not passed on to our students.

We would argue for the following suggestions:

1. We need to continue to challenge our preservice teachers to think about how their actions and words denote a particular bias or heteronormative value in their classrooms.
2. We need to support our preservice teachers as they move into their own classrooms with professional development opportunities and channels of communications to help them introduce LGBT texts and issues into their curriculum.
3. As teaching professionals, we need to create communities that support and encourage these discussions in all areas of our work—teaching, community, departments, etc. We need to encourage our colleagues to include these topics and conversations in their own classes.
4. We need to build bridges between our classrooms and the public schools where our preservice teachers will be teaching. We need to provide modeling and support for our current and former students as they move into their classroom.
5. We need more research in how best to help preservice teachers talk about and implement changes in the classes in which they will teach.

Obviously, we have a ways to go here. We learn along with our students, and our efforts are modified as

we continue. With Greenbaum, we also challenge our colleagues "to broaden their vision beyond themselves" (74). What is imperative is that we continue to open the avenues for change. Exposure, discussion, research, and learning—the struggle continues. We must be activists for our students—all of them—modeling activism and promoting social justice both in and out of the classroom.

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Appendix: Survey Results

1. How often do you hear homophobic slurs in a week?

Never 1% Maybe Once 29% 3-5 times 39% Often 28%

2. Where do you hear these remarks (note the percentage will be over 100% as students listed all places they hear these remarks)?

Campus 75% Home 43% In Class 27% Work 33% 1% listed movies/TV

3. Do you ever respond back? (Answers only counted as a yes if not qualified with a situation such as, "I would if it was a friend" or "if it really offended me.")

YES 30% NO 70%

4. How often do you use homophobic slurs?

Never 56% Once in a while 42% Often 1% Very Often 0%

5. How comfortable are you in the following situations (very comfortable, comfortable, uncomfortable, very uncomfortable)? (Note: numbers represent all 105 student responses, not percentages.)

	VC	C	UC	VUC
Reading about homosexuality	54	42	7	2
Talking to Homosexuals	70	32	3	0
Discussing Homosexual issues in class	52	41	10	2
Discussing homosexual issues among friends	60	38	6	1
Discussing homosexual issues with family	44	37	22	2
Discussing transgender issues with anyone	25	51	27	2

How comfortable would you be discussing this issue with future classes?

Comfortable 63% Uncomfortable 36%

Issues that students raised that would affect their comfort level in the classroom:

- the age of students they would be teaching
- where they are teaching/community values
- their own knowledge base
- fear of parents complaining
- worry that students would not be open-minded and mature
- concern about offending those students who think it is wrong

Students were also allowed to add any information they felt was relevant to the conversation. Here are a few representative responses:

- *"I have a lot of gay friends."*
- *"I don't think saying 'that's gay' is really a homophobic slur."*
- *"It makes me uncomfortable because I am not sure where I stand in my religious beliefs."*
- *"It's a hard issue because I do believe homosexuality is wrong, but it is not like I would shun homosexuals."*
- *"I am okay talking about it, about choice. I just want to make sure I don't come off as having a biased opinion. I want to give children accurate information."*
- *"I think you need to talk about why one might be uncomfortable. I would be because I don't know much about the situation, not because I dislike or get the creeps from gay people."*
- *"My father-in-law is gay, for what it's worth."*
- *"I have LGBT friends who are open with their sexuality. While I have no problems with that, when I see them interacting with their partners I feel very uncomfortable."*