

# Challenging Heteronormativity: Raising LGBTQ Awareness in a High School English Language Arts Classroom

*This article details a unit designed for a high school English classroom to address social injustice and the silencing of LGBTQ individuals.*

Postsecondary education regularly includes LGBTQ literature and issues in its curriculum; many universities now strive to make their campuses safe environments for LGBTQ persons and to initiate conversations about the sexual identity spectrum with all students. While we have a long way to go to achieve full acceptance, when compared to high schools, universities are far more proactive and tolerant. Mollie V. Blackburn and J. F. Buckley show how few high schools address sexual identity in their curricula, citing lack of resources, initiative, or *fear* as barriers to initiating these conversations. What this means for students across the nation—regardless of sexual orientation—is that they absorb heteronormative values, and for LGBTQ students, that they seldom see themselves or their struggles reflected within their high school curricula. In turn, these students learn it is best to stay silent, that “it gets better”<sup>1</sup> after they graduate.

We believe teachers have a civic duty to help their students become critically aware and informed citizens. Creating active citizens means fostering critical thinking skills relevant to the political issues of our students’ time. We agree, as bell hooks argues in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, that all pedagogy is politically shaped and that “a lack of meaningful access to truth” fosters complacency, leaving inequality and social injustice unchallenged (29). If we are to remedy the problems discrimination has and continues to cause, we must initiate conversations about these problems with students earlier, before they inherit them and are asked to act on them as adults.<sup>2</sup>

In 2007, the National Council of Teachers of English published a resolution urging teachers to strengthen their knowledge of LGBTQ issues, citing a survey that found that “64% of the LGBT students surveyed report feeling unsafe in their schools” (NCTE). This cannot be allowed to continue, but we recognize that the demands on language arts teachers often prevent them from creating new pedagogy and that they must also negotiate their schools’ political hierarchies to do so. Caroline T. Clark and Mollie V. Blackburn note in “Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People: What’s Possible?” that while many articles discuss the value of texts with LGBTQ characters, there is little documentation on how these texts are actually taught (26). To address the silencing of LGBTQ students directly, in our high school classrooms, we propose the following unit plan using children’s picture books frequently banned for their LGBTQ themes. In addition, we offer guidance and suggest best practices for discussing the inclusion of LGBTQ issues and themes with principals, parents, and with the students themselves.

Because teaching LGBTQ themed texts can be controversial, we recommend several proactive steps before the first implementation of this unit. As Emily Meixner notes, educators quickly learn that if they want to “combat heterosexism and homophobia in their individual classrooms . . . they would need institutional support” (16). First, teachers need to consult with their principals. They should email parents an outline of the lesson, a justification for its inclusion, and list the state and national standards the lesson fulfills. It is also wise

to invite the principal to observe class and to read the selected texts beforehand. In turn, the principal should confer with the superintendent and possibly consult the district's lawyer to anticipate any problems that may arise. Such measures might be considered extreme, but they ensure this unit's viability and success. Most importantly, there should be an alternate activity for students who do not feel comfortable participating.

This last element—allowing students to “opt-out” of the lesson plan—is controversial. Clark and Blackburn assert that allowing students the option not to participate allows them to “maintain a homophobic position” (27). We disagree, first because we have to make students accountable for their education, and this means giving them choices and asking them to make decisions, but also because Clark and Blackburn do not consider that students may “opt-out” for a variety of reasons. True, it may be due to homophobia, and that is troubling, but they might also do so because they are transgender or queer, or have gay or lesbian relatives, and are not ready to talk about these realities with their peers. We recognize that discussing sexual identity can be threatening; by giving students the choice of whether or not to participate, we allow them to measure their own emotional maturity. Before we discuss the lesson, however, we want to provide more information for how to include these texts within a preexisting curriculum.

### Fostering Critical Thinking

In any course focused on social justice, students explore the impact of race, gender, spiritual beliefs, socioeconomic status, disability, and sexual identity on an individual's rights. Within these topics, students often begin to inquire how they can help overcome the disparities revealed by the texts. At this point, it is important to introduce what it means to be an “ally” and open a larger (and ongoing) conversation about how working to create positive social change is difficult, but one of the duties of being a citizen in a democracy. Then the teacher can start a discussion on how some books are banned and censorship affects free speech: Are books banned to protect the innocence of childhood, or does banning certain books silence segments of society? (Or can it do *both*?)

Currently, some of the most frequently banned books are children's picture books that include LGBTQ characters. According to the Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association, one particular book—*And Tango Makes Three*—is banned with astonishing frequency. Written by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson, *And Tango Makes Three* is based on the real occurrence of two male penguins who raised a penguin chick together in the New York City Zoo. In the year of its release, *And Tango Makes Three* earned the American Library Association Notable Children's Book award, the Nick Jr. Family Magazine Best Book of the Year, and was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award. It also reached first place on the ALA's “Top 10 Challenged Books List” for 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2010 (it slipped to second in 2009). The controversy surrounding the book continues—it appears on the ALA's list in 2012 (fifth) and 2014 (third) as well. The complaints, according to the ALA, are that the text is “anti-ethnic,” “anti-family,” “promotes the homosexual agenda,” disrespects religious views, and that it is unsuited for its intended audience (grades K to 2).

While *And Tango Makes Three* has elicited the fiercest debate, several other picture books with LGBTQ characters are also frequently challenged and/or banned. Reading and analyzing these particular books is an excellent opportunity for students to discover the overt and covert methods of silencing “othered” perspectives. Picture books also provide a nonthreatening starting point for exploring the controversial issue of banning LGBTQ-themed literature and creating tolerance for individuals with varying sexual identities.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the books included in this lesson—*And Tango Makes Three*, *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, *King and King*, *King and King and Family*, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *In Our Mothers' House*, *Daddy's Roommate*, and *My Princess Boy*—open a space for the critical examination of social anxieties and thus challenge our nationally declared belief in the freedom of speech. Each student's role in this conversation is to be a decision

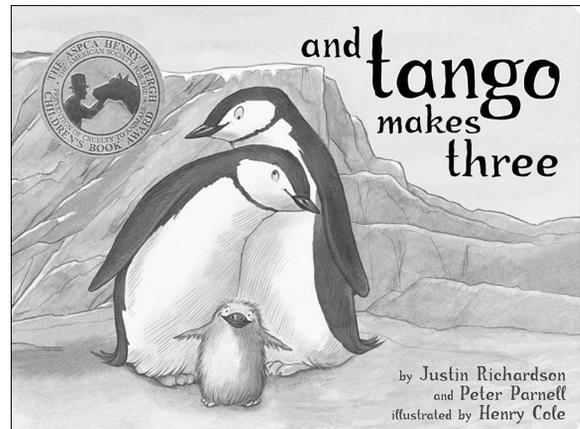
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maker: Should these books be included in childhood education? As empowered decision-makers, students are much more receptive, often eager, to delve into the complexities of the lesson.

Before beginning, the teacher should frame the purpose for reading LGBTQ picture books and explain the issues students will explore by establishing three critical ground rules: First, the discussion will focus on the impact of banning books and how sexual identity might influence the definition and realization of rights. Clearly establish that students *will not* discuss the *morality* of various sexual identities. Second, the goal of the discussion is to *explore* sexual identity as it collides with social issues. Participants (including the teacher) *will not* pressure students to change their beliefs about homosexuality or to voice their own sexual-identity locations. Third, students can opt out of the lesson and complete an alternate activity, and they can change their minds at any time.

While reading *And Tango Makes Three* aloud, students record their observations, reactions, and thoughts, and also pay attention to word choice, visual representation, and literary techniques. Afterwards, students discuss their answers and add ideas for further analysis. To guide inquiry, the following are a sample series of questions:

- How is family defined and portrayed?
- What is the main conflict? Is sexual orientation an essential theme? Why or why not?
- Identify words, phrases, sentences, or images that may have strong connotations for an adult. What are the connotations? Would a child understand these?
- How is sexual orientation represented? How does it *reinforce* or *challenge* the stereotypical constructions of gender? What stereotypes are challenged? How might this portrayal help a child understand what lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender *means*?
- Is sexual orientation explicit or implicit? Is it essential to the story? Some critics claim this text encourages a “homosexual agenda”; do you agree?
- Would you read this to your sibling/niece/nephew/child? Should this book be available in a school library? A public library? Should teachers read this to students in an elementary classroom? Explain your reasoning.



In the next class period, students choose a different picture book. In small groups, they follow the same process that the large group followed when reading *And Tango Makes Three*. Although it is important for a teacher to circulate and listen to their dialogue, students lead their own discussions. The following day, students present their picture book to the rest of the class, including their responses to the questions and any other observations they have. The lesson continues with a formal discussion where students apply their exploration to the broader themes of the course, such as how banning books might “protect the innocence of children” but also might silence specific perspectives within society. In a culminating project, students apply their knowledge of challenged and banned books to a real-world situation. For example, a student might voice her opinion in a letter regarding a hypothetical controversy that involves a teacher reading an LGBTQ-themed picture book to an elementary classroom. If students prefer expressing their arguments in a visual composition, they could choose to create a video for the ALA’s Virtual Read Out program. This type of project encourages students to take responsibility for their education by using their talents, interests, and learning styles in the best ways they can. In addition, each option requires students to join an existing conversation beyond the classroom.

To conclude, students reflect on what went well, whether the unit should be taught again, and what can be improved. If they chose not to participate, they write a short piece explaining why. Allowing students to voice their reasons and to construct arguments about assigned subjects for

inquiry empowers them to reflect on—and enact—what they learn.

## Thoughts

To ensure the success of this lesson, several assumptions should be addressed.

1. **Some students might feel uncomfortable because they mistakenly assume *sexual acts* are synonymous with *sexual identity*.** For those who voice discomfort, this confusion is often the primary source. For example, in *King and King* a student might become uncomfortable because it depicts two men kissing. Students often conflate displays of affection with the explicit sex acts they presumably imply. When discussing whether access to these books should be limited, student reactions might exemplify the perception that LGBTQ literature is talking explicitly about *sex* rather than *identity*. For successful implementation of this lesson, the difference between the two needs to be addressed directly.

2. **Students might assume childhood is a time of innocence; they may believe reading books portraying various sexual identities will tarnish such innocence.** When asked whether these books should be banned, an overwhelming majority of students may assert that they should be available in public and school libraries. However, frequently these books *aren't* available, as Meixner notes; this is one way our educational institutions participate in the political project of exclusion. For many students, reading an LGBTQ-themed picture book to a small child will be more controversial. Such responses confirm the common assumption that young children should not be exposed to discussions about sexual identity to preserve their “purity,” or worse, that children are incapable of understanding such concepts. Many who oppose these books do not consider, for example, that they were written precisely for children whose families do not adhere to the heteronormative stereotype. To ensure the efficacy of this lesson, a discussion of how young children are taught heteronormative values and an example of a picture book portraying heterosexual parents would help students understand how their discomfort stems from compulsory heterosexuality, or the idea that everyone is heterosexual and anything else is wrong (Parker 180). If

students understand that there are multiple sexualities and none are inherently “normal,” then the controversy of reading an LGBTQ picture book to an elementary classroom will diminish.

Most importantly: 3. **All students grapple with issues of sexual identity, whether on a societal, familial, or personal level.** For instance, students might indicate an interesting dichotomy: concern that a child might question his own sexual identity as a result of reading books with LGBTQ characters<sup>4</sup> (thus revealing students’ assumption that heterosexuality is “normal” and other sexual identities are not), while at the same time appreciating that these books foster inclusivity and tolerance. Invariably, students will make connections to their own families or friends. In fact, some students might opt out of the lesson because they have family members who are gay and they aren’t comfortable talking about LGBTQ issues in a large-group setting. Teachers who implement this lesson should be prepared (and ready to offer support services) for students who have a more personal reaction to this topic. All students grapple with the concepts of identity, sexuality, and LGBTQ rights because our nation is struggling with these same issues. This reality reaffirms the importance of including LGBTQ voices in our classrooms.

## In the Future

In lessons regarding LGBTQ-themed literature, we need to address heteronormativity itself, because we don’t want to participate in the political project that continually “others” LGBTQ persons or portrays them as objects of pity (Clark and Blackburn 28). Blackburn and Buckley warn against this: “teachers need to construct ELA [English language arts] curricula that reveals the LGBTQ presence in all of our lives, and be aware that heterosexuality is assumed” (204). However, we do want students to exhibit empathy and compassion, and this lesson plan encourages the cultivation of those values. One of the primary reasons we think this teaching is important is that it promotes equality and encourages practicing compassion. As social scientists have shown, “young adults today compose one of the most self-concerned, competitive, confident and individualistic cohorts in recent history” (Konrath, O’Brien, and Hsing 187). Understanding the values and beliefs of the young people we teach today

makes it abundantly clear why teaching for social justice is so important. Fortunately, there is also evidence that empathy can be taught, and both of us consider that part of a teacher's job. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, psychologists Paul Anderson and Sara Konrath write, "Studies have shown that empathy can increase when students are trained to improve their interpersonal skills or ability to recognize others' emotions." Isn't this exactly what reading literature—or imagining yourself in a different body, place, and life—asks students to do?

We must admit, however, that even if studies show our students' generation to be one of the most self-involved since the 1960s, we strongly believe that they are more mature, compassionate, and fully honest than we give them credit for being. In working with students on social justice issues, they continually astound us with their humanity. They are much more ready to take on the controversial issues that will dominate their lives than we think. In many ways, this unit plan will be more contro-

versial for the students' parents and a teacher's colleagues than it will be for the students themselves. Lastly, we need to not only call attention to the issue itself but also give students avenues to seek change. As Beverly Daniel Tatum suggests, "Heightening students' awareness . . . without also developing an awareness of the possibility of change is a prescription for despair. I consider it unethical to do one without the other" (20–21). We agree. We not only need to make LGBTQ literature available in high school classrooms, we must also identify ways to move students from empathy to empowerment, and this includes a conversation about what it means to be an ally and constructive ways to confront hatred and discrimination when we see them, in *any* form.

high school classroom, but the need for social justice education together with the fact that these topics are rarely broached in high school curricula has continued to challenge us. Neither of us are experts or scholars of LGBTQ literature. We recognize that there are limits to this unit, but we both feel strongly that this is important work. Open discussion and exploration of how LGBTQ individuals are silenced have implications for the larger school community as well. Students carry their impressions, thoughts, and dialogue with them beyond the classroom. What they learn finds its way into other discussions, often with their peers. This unintended ripple effect works to create an inclusive, respectful environment for students, promotes tolerance, and fosters the active citizenship required in a democratic society that values freedom of speech and debate.

We also feel that reading LGBTQ literature and discussing sexual identity with students is not nearly as frightening (or uncomfortable) as we originally thought, and this lesson has, in fact, inspired us to continue this work. Next on the reading list? Maybe *Luna* by Julie Ann Peters or *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. Students are capable of the challenge if given the chance. Now, it is up to us to create space for open and honest dialogue. 

## Notes

1. The It Gets Better Project sends the message to LGBTQ youth that life "gets better" after high school. While we don't want to denigrate this effort, LGBTQ youth should not have to wait until college for life to "get better." We should be sowing the seeds of social justice now. <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>

2. Brianna Burke has written about this in "Teaching Environmental Justice through *The Hunger Games*" in the *ALAN Review*.

3. Quite a bit has been written about using picture books in middle school and high school classrooms. Lettie K. Albright researched the use of picture books in a secondary classroom and found that students who read picture books perceived that they learned more and were more actively engaged in content (427).

4. Some will feel that teaching these books might encourage students to engage in homosexual activity. The belief that reading these books encourages sexual experimentation exhibits the mistaken belief that being gay is a choice, not an identity.

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## Conclusion

We once thought teaching literature with LGBTQ characters and themes would be impossible in a

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