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| LGBTQ Literature in the English Classroom |
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One of the most enticing features of an English classroom remains to be its capability to interact with other disciplines and its ability to communicate to the thoughts and ideas of a society at a specific time. It extends what is important and what is talked about at a particular point in time by a large group of people. It is becoming increasingly vital for educators to first, carter to the ideas and doctrines of the 21st-century classroom, and second, to link classroom curriculum to a life lived outside the walls of the school. Educators, parents, and students alike are becoming more vigilant about the importance of teaching personal and social responsibility, and life skills through the subject material discussed in class. Educators, specifically English teachers, have a responsibility to extend on to their students' literature that is relevant to current events. and literature that opens the door to diversity and inclusion. Allowing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBT) literature into the classroom is only the responsible course of action, especially in a societal age where tolerance is a constantly preached word, and where schools are a home to students and staff members who are openly members of the LGBTQ community. Allowing LGBTQ literature into the classroom is a great way to teach inclusion, tolerance and acceptance, and diversity amongst students and staff members for identifying as LGBTQ.

In her essay, "A critical discourse analysis of teacher' view on LGBT literature", Melissa Schieble discusses some of the benefits of allowing LGBTQ literature into the classroom. Schieble starts by questioning what inclusion is, and how such a route may be difficult to take if the teacher of the classroom chooses to identify LGBTQ literature in such a manner other than normal. She refers back to Britzman (1995/1998), who notes, "'the lived effects of inclusion are a more obdurate version of sameness and a more polite version of otherness'" (p. 207). She urges teachers to understand that to be inclusive, one must simply add books, stories, and poems that include LGBTQ characters to the original classroom literary set. Schieble also claims that, "adding lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) literature to the curriculum as a tool to combat homophobia, without addressing the ways that heterosexuality is constructed as normal, does little to redress unequal power relations and privileges associated with sexual orientation and gender identity" (p. 207). Since literature is a mark on society that comments on socially constructed thoughts and norms, social expectations and issues, and, most importantly, an individual's experience within society, educators ought to teach LGBTQ literature and do so without the underlying notion of Schieble's "polite version of otherness" (p. 207). If one were to ignore the ideas of sameness or otherness for just a moment, and argue the fact that educators should teach material that relates to the classroom audience, educators must then teach LGBTQ topics and literature by writers from the LGBTQ community to an audience who may have students who are a part of the LGBTQ community. Because after all, educators need to teach subject material that is relevant and important to the students and to the contemporary society outside of the classroom environment.

As an example, teaching poetry is already difficult without having to bring in Shakespearean sonnets into the mix, yet poetry is a form of literature that is prevalent in all English classrooms. Even though students continue to turn sour in the face of a poetry unit, it is unlikely that teachers cut it out of the curriculum. To combat students' dislike for poetry, many teachers are now putting a spin on the poetry unit by teaching SLAM. SLAM is the word of the people for the people. It is a passionate form of communicating advocacy for or communicating an opposition for a certain social thought. Since SLAM poetry is readily available to anyone who is interested, one must encourage teachers to click on the videos of those spoken word poets who identify as LGBTQ instead of opting out for the safe heterosexual romance poems. Because after all, does it really matter who is speaking and about whom so long as a person is speaking about love?

Moreover, in such a globalized and diverse community, ensuring inclusion is vital; and it is easy to do that in an English classroom through literature. Educators ought to create a teaching environment that is as diverse and inclusive as the students they are teaching because the alternative leads to discrimination. Schieble continues her argument by highlighting to her audience what the alternative of teaching inclusive literature in the classroom leads to. She writes a series of documentations that prove that political agendas of LGBTQ issues in the past have made the subject inappropriate to discuss. She writes, "Factors such as harassment toward teachers and students as a result of perceived or actual sexual orientation, and censorship of school literature with LGBTQ characters as contributing to a 'climate of sanctioned exclusion in schools' (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007, p.348)" (p. 208). Since ignorance is the lack of understanding in a particular area, education, then, must preach acceptance and tolerance. Providing students and school staff members an opportunity to explore LGBTQ topics in schools, will open doors of opportunity for a civil discussion in judgment-free classrooms. One can only concur with Hermann-Wilmarth and Schieble that having an open dialogue about LGBTQ struggles and issues in the classroom through literature will create inclusion and tolerance.

Schieble urges teachers to tread carefully in the way of introducing LGBTQ literature in the classroom because if not addressed with equality, teachers would be silently preaching for the normalcy of heteronormativity. Mollie Blackburn and Jill Smith (2010) focus on exactly this idea of heteronormativity that English classics focus on in the classroom. Most teachers choose books and plays that center on a heterosexual couple without every including a literary piece with characters who identify as gay or lesbian. The writers concur that when a school's option continues to be to teach Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet versus Brokeback Mountain, "school curricula typically not only deny adolescents access to texts that feature LGBTQ characters but also “presume (or encourage) students to identify with Shakespeare’s young couple" (p. 627). This, of course, may not be entirely accurate, which puts an exclusive divider amongst the classroom material and the students in the class who identify as LGBTQ.

In their article, "Reading LGBT-Themes Literature with Young People: What's Possible?", Caroline Clark and Mollie Blackburn (2009) understand the difficulty in trying to engage students in a classroom that does not relate to them. Simply, educators have a responsibility to educate students rather than speak information at a group of students. They also outline some of the observations they recorded about students in classes were LGBTQ literature was nonexistent. They state, "Across the classrooms these researchers studies, homophobia was normalized, and students were free and even empowered to maintain a homophobic position, at a time in ways that were self-degrading" (p. 27). The authors concur that by teaching and exposing students to LGBTQ literature, educators have the power to "disrupt the heteronormativity that is so typical in classrooms and challenge students to live up to the expectations of being supportive of LGBT rights and people" (p. 28).

Living in a diverse society allows students, parents, and school staff to interact with many diverse individuals in society, and it would be to no benefit at all to segregate classrooms from society. Ideas between the school curriculum and society must be in synchronization with one another for the benefit of the larger community. Having the opportunity to teach LGBTQ literature allows advocates for inclusion, tolerance and acceptance, and diversity.

References

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