




An Analysis of the Impact  
Literature Choices in K-12 ELA Curriculum have on the  
LGBTQ+ Student Population

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### Abstract

As a high school ELA teacher, I have seen first-hand, the negative impact some literature choices have on students identifying outside of the binary definitions most often encouraged in society. This paper addresses the challenges and concerns with the current literature used in high school ELA classrooms and breaks down the negative impact on the ever-growing population identifying outside of cisgender and heteronormative groups. While identities that do not fit within these two categories are becoming more accepted, school curricula are not keeping up with these changes. The subconscious identification of characters portraying traditional gender roles reinforces the stigma associated with alternate identities. In order to address the growing awareness of the fluidity of identity found in modern society, the current selection of literature used in the high school English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum which reinforces cisgender and heteronormative characters needs to be reviewed and revised.

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## Preface

When composing this paper in support of a topic that I am passionate about, I realized that proper understanding of the various terminology discussed is critical to recognizing the importance of my argument. Therefore, I want to preface this paper with a very brief explanation of some of the recurring terminology<sup>1</sup>. To understand the contrasting viewpoints, I want to begin by defining the following terms: binary, heteronormative, and cisgender. The term binary is the definition of two opposites, in this case male and female. Heteronormative is a concept that reiterates how society views the heterosexual (two opposite genders) relationship as normal behavior. Lastly, the term cisgender defines people who identify as the gender they were born with, for example, someone who was born with male sexual organs and identifies as male. This paper also discusses various identities within the LGBTQ+ population. LGBTQ+ itself is a term that has changed over time, but for this paper, it encompasses those individuals who identify outside of the heteronormative and cisgender spectrum. That includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and non-gender identities. For a complete list of definitions and preferred terminology, refer to Knutson, D., et. al, "Recommended Terminology, Pronouns, and Documentation for Work with Transgender and Non-Binary Populations." With exposure to some of the basic terminology before proceeding, a clearer understanding of the topic is possible.

## **LGBTQ+: A Historical Summary in Education**

Christened the ‘melting pot,’ America was once a country proud of its diversity and acceptance, reflective of a society where many different types of people come together as one, yet the melting pot of America today is struggling to keep up with the diversity within its boundaries. In 2019, one of the top marginalized groups in America was identified as the LGBTQ+ community, surpassing senior citizens, and racial minorities (Garrett). To truly embrace the concept of America as a melting pot, there is a need to recognize the importance of understanding and acceptance of those that differ from the majority, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender-nonconforming individuals. Diversity in the classroom is becoming more prevalent, matching the *mélange* within America’s boundaries. Sadly, however, the resources for teachers do not often include information on how to support those identifying outside of heteronormative or cisgender identities. Teachers are constantly reminded that students are individuals, a fact that should be considered in curriculum planning. In credentialing programs, techniques are taught to create inclusive classrooms, but there is only so much that one can do as a teacher, while still following guiding curricula and district scope and sequence plans.

### *Defining a Culture*

During my teaching career, I have seen curricula that focus on cultural awareness, adding multicultural literature into the classroom, allowing for exposure to various ethnicities and cultural beliefs around the world. If one is creating opportunities to learn about various cultures, then looking at how identity within the LGBTQ+ community creates a culture should also be addressed. The definition of what makes up a culture, in its simplest terms, is the way of life of groups of people. Looking deeper into the concept of culture, it also includes the customs,

traditions, literature, arts, behaviors, and characteristics of a particular social group (Zimmermann). Analyzing the LGBTQ community alongside the definition of culture, one can see that identifying as LGBTQ+, is connecting as part of a unique culture.

To understand more about this unique community and the people who identify within it, a brief overview of some common, and not so common terminology should be discussed. First, and foremost, LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, and Queer. It is an acronym that is an umbrella term to represent any that identify outside of the heteronormative and binary constructs. Because this does not cover all the identities that transcend the heteronormative definitions, there may also be a plus sign included at the end of this acronym, to represent the inclusivity of all. While the acronym represents various identities underneath the umbrella group, it is not the labels that are significant here. What is significant is that there is a distinction between gender, gender identity, and sexuality within this inclusive community.

Looking back at the roles of teachers in the classroom, one thing to remember is that it is not just the students who are there to learn. Life is a journey, a learning process that never ends. As a person identifying within the LGBTQ+ community, a mother of a transgender son, and a high school teacher, I have had many opportunities to not only teach but to learn. One of those learning moments comes when looking at the literature used in high school curriculums. The current literature selections in many school districts portray traditionally recognized binary gender roles, focusing on cisgender and heteronormative characters. A challenge for many children coming to terms with their own identities is wondering whether they will be supported in their choices, especially if they differ from the culturally defined norm. Recognizing that “in the last decade, the Western world has seen an increase in the visibility of gender-variant identities, [and] more recently the *non-binary gender identity* has emerged within our gender

landscape” is something that all people should be aware of (Losty and O’Connor 40). While identities that do not fit within the cisgender and heteronormative categories are becoming more accepted, school curricula are not keeping up with these changes. The subconscious identification of characters portraying traditional gender roles reinforces the stigma associated with alternate identities. Many educators have been advocating for changes to the curriculum to create more inclusive classrooms, but it is a slow process (e.g. Helmer 902; Batchelor, Ramos & Neiswander 29). In order to address the growing awareness of the fluidity of identity found in modern society, the current selection of literature used in the high school English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum which reinforces cisgender and heteronormative characters needs to be reviewed and revised.

#### *A Personal Investment*

Due to the personal nature of the subject matter, and my own experiences with high school ELA curriculum, it seems only logical to approach this from an autoethnographic focus. Combining personal experience with qualitative and quantitative data, I will present information addressing the impact that much of the current literature in the high school ELA classrooms has on the student population, focusing on the cisgender and heteronormative focus of the characters within the accessed literature. By taking an autoethnographic approach, I plan to address the limitations of heteronormative literature on the ever-growing population of students acknowledging a lifestyle outside of the binary world view.

One of the things about teaching is finding ways to connect with the students. Sharing my graduate journey with the students in my classrooms has done that and has been extremely rewarding. My students have become invested in my success, and I am showing them the value of education, at any age. Since embarking on this project, my students are regularly checking in

with me to see how the research is going. After announcing my topic, numerous students approached me and opened up about their gender identity, creating wonderful opportunities for communication and support in a safe space. Several of these students have expressed their gratitude for addressing this topic, sharing stories of times in class where literature or conversations have made them feel uncomfortable, unsupported, and even unaccepted by society. If this project can elicit some interest in the impact the current literature referenced in high school ELA classes has on the growing LGBTQ+ student population, then I will have accomplished something to be proud of. My purpose as a teacher is to create safe and inclusive classroom environments where there is freedom for students to be and/or discover who they are. Literature that is relatable is one more way to develop this for students.

At a staff meeting recently, there was a panel from the LGBTQ+ community discussing how educators can better serve the growing population identifying on the gender and sexuality spectrum. One of the people on the panel mentioned how teachers tend to use “ladies and gentlemen,” to get students’ attention. However, some students may not identify as either of those, causing them to feel disrespected or uncomfortable. During my time teaching, I often refer to my students as ladies and gentlemen, believing that showing respect for students will get me farther than trying to force my control on them, especially when dealing with teenagers. Because of that, I thought I understood what the word respect meant. As someone who identifies as gender-fluid and pansexual<sup>2</sup>, I always felt I was being inclusive and respectful simply by accepting my students, supporting their preferred name and pronoun use, and being open about my personal experiences, but now I realize that I have been missing something.

After discussing the various teacher credentialing programs I and my colleagues have completed, it was found that while many provide courses highlighting literature geared toward



teaching diverse populations, a focus on LGBTQ and gender nonconforming literature was not deemed a necessity. In order to address these needs and ensure that all students are being recognized, supported, and included, one needs to look at how society at large is represented through classroom design. Understanding the complex purpose of the education system beyond that of reading, writing, and arithmetic comes into play here.

Schools, classrooms, and teachers have more than a singular purpose. When students come to school, they think they are there to learn the basic curricula taught, but what they learn deep down are the social skills required to be successful outside of the classroom. Part of that is an awareness of others and how to interact with those who may have different beliefs, values, identities, and cultures. What I have discovered in my time teaching is that students also learn to navigate life outside of the classroom through social behavior cues found inside the classroom walls. How students are taught and exposed to varying cultures predicts how they will respond to them.

### **LGBTQ+: A Deeper Understanding**

Unlike many cultures that believe gender is a binary concept composed of males and females, the LGBTQ+ culture accepts that gender is fluid and does not always conform to the rigidity of binary identity. In her article, "Teaching Queer Theory at a *Normal* School," Jen Bacon asserts, "Putting the spotlight on one gender, rather than gender itself, reinforces the idea that gender is binary" (266). The concept of binary is something viewed across cultures, throughout time - the debate between black and white, good and evil, male and female, and even public and private identities. When addressing the concept of gender and the LGBTQ+ community, the challenge is breaking through the limitations that the common understanding of

gender perpetuates, which defines gender as often linked to gender roles and sexuality, with a clear definition of the binary male and female.

For the purposes of this paper, the focus is going to be on the LGBTQ+ community, and the fluidity of gender identity. To further expand on the difference between binary and non-binary, one should understand how they are used in the gender and sexuality context. When one addresses the concept of binary, it is typically intended to mean strictly male and female identities, most often connected to a cisgender view. The term non-binary or gender fluid refers to those who identify outside of the traditional binary gender roles. In the article “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler takes an approach to defining gender identity and how it perpetuates the classifications within society. Addressing the history of terminology based on gender within society, she explains, “Gender identity is fabricated through identification with cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity that are repetitively performed into being” (955). Defaulting to the traditional and restrictive definitions of gender, based on sex is perpetuating the stigmatization of the LGBTQ+ community. The importance of this paper is to expose the negative impact this rigid and limited perception has on the emerging demographic identifying along the LGBTQ+ spectrum, and how these are reinforced through the currently chosen literature within the high school ELA curriculum.

While the concept of gender roles existing outside of the default setting of binary may seem to be a modern view on gender, it can be found in many ancient cultures. One most associated with North America is the Native people’s idea of “Two-Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> This concept refers to “a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit, and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.” (“Two-Spirit Community”). One way to view identity in a way that supports inclusion can be taken from the

Native people who have “languages [that] are verb-focused, and describe what people do rather than how they identify ” (Two-Spirit Community”). This concept that is embraced within the LGBTQ+ culture supports acceptance and inclusion of people, without the need to stigmatize or negatively label.

Due to the expansion of gender and gender identity, recognition that people may move between genders in a fluid way, “identify[ing] as ‘bigender’, ‘gender-fluid’ or sometimes ‘pangender’ influences identity (Richards et al. 96). When gender identity changes, how people are addressed is also important to consider. This is not only important in everyday interactions but “this move towards a more accepting and accommodating approach towards non-binary and genderqueer people is mirrored in generally more favourable media reporting within the global North and West, especially in online and youth-oriented media” (Richards, et al. 96). In other words, the way gender identity is approached in media and literature influences the way society views people who have alternate gender pronouns, or who do not follow the traditionally prescribed attitudes and actions based around gender. Combating this ongoing perception begins with education.

### **Change Through Legislation**

As of 2020, there is no nationally recognized legislation regarding the incorporation of LGBTQ History, literature by LGBTQ authors, or about LGBTQ characters into school curricula, leaving it up to individual states to determine any legal requirements and recognitions. Currently, there are only four states that require LGBTQ History to be taught in K-12 school curricula: California, Colorado, Illinois, and New Jersey. Being based in California my research will reflect the laws poignant to my experience, however, the argument is relevant regardless of the locale. The FAIR Education Act of California (also known as Senate Bill 48) was signed into

law in 2011. It requires that California public schools provide Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful representations of our diverse ethnic and cultural population in the K-12 grade history and social studies curriculum (Leonardi 694-696). This Act also specifically addresses the inclusion of LGBTQ history. Adopted in 2011 and enacted in 2012, Senate Bill 48 is being implemented in California school systems as new curricula are being designed and developed. The focus of the FAIR Education Act is “sharing accurate and inclusive information about LGBT people and history [and] is a vital step to setting a climate of respect and keeping schools safe” (Leonardi 695). This Act represents the fight for underrepresented and marginalized groups to have representation in History and Social Studies books, but it should not stop there. The ELA curriculum also needs to be reviewed and addressed for ways to create inclusive classrooms across the board. There is a trend toward inclusion of multi-ethnic representation through literature within the English curriculum, however, it is primarily focused on race and ethnicity as a defining factor. The lack of representation of those identifying outside of the cisgender and heteronormative classifications needs to be addressed as well.

Recently, an article in the Orlando Sentinel posted January 24, 2020, exposed “more than 80 schools [in Florida] with blatant discrimination policies that deny admission to gay children, expel or discipline students who reveal they’re gay and sometimes refuse to educate children of LGBT parents” (Maxwell). The school system in Orlando, Florida accepts vouchers allowing students to attend schools outside of their designated residential zone. Since this story broke, major contributors to the Florida voucher program such as Wyndham Destinations and Wells Fargo have pulled donations and funding for the Step Up for Students program in protest over the policy (Sopelsa and Ruggiero). While this protest shows support for anti-discrimination, it is not the answer to combatting these perceptions. Society has an inherent fear of the unknown or

unfamiliar. Through exposure and awareness, the barriers surrounding the culture within the LGBTQ+ community can begin to be removed, allowing for a higher rate of acceptance.

Educating teachers is the first step to educating the student population.

As one of the states to adopt laws similar to California's FAIR Education Act, New Jersey is instituting teacher training and inclusive curricula to select schools in advance of the mandated inclusion next school year (Bose). According to a 2017 national survey, it was found "that schools with inclusive curriculum had fewer students making anti-LGBTQ remarks, and LGBTQ students in those schools were more likely to come to school and felt safer" (Bose). To address xenophobia and bullying, one needs to create opportunities for exposure that supports inclusion and standardization of various types of literature within school curricula. With the History and Social Studies curricula creating changes to incorporate LGBTQ history, steps are being taken, however, it should not stop there. At a workshop with curriculum developers from Monterey County, California who came together to create lessons, I learned that some school districts do not offer History or Social Studies classes for middle school, meaning there is a gap from 6th - 9th grade, picking up again when students are 15 and 16 years old. The more obvious answer is to provide opportunities in ELA classes that students are exposed to every year. Covering multi-ethnic literature is being incorporated at various grade levels and could easily be adapted to include LGBTQ authors and literature.

### **Stigmatizing Youth in The Classroom**

#### *From Comics to Film and Beyond*

When one looks at much of the literature students are exposed to in the high school curricula, traditional male and female gender roles are reinforced through characters, storylines, and supported by the guided analysis of these works. With the focus of this paper residing on the

importance of inclusive literature in ELA classrooms, one should address the stigma behind expanding the ideals which define literary characters. Setting aside classroom literature for a moment and looking at the comic book genre, there resides a strong example of why there is such a low portrayal of genuine characters identifying outside of heteronormative and cisgender identities. In his article “How the ‘Code Authority’ Kept LGBT Characters Out of Comics,” Alan Kistler explains the history of the comic book publishing agency. A surprising fact is that “from 1954 to 1989, mainstream U.S. comic books had rules against portraying LGBT characters, enforced by the organization known as the Comics Code Authority... it wasn’t until 1989 that a gay, bi, queer or transgender superhero was allowed to openly appear in mainstream American comic books...” A large part of the hysteria surrounding the supposed moral corruption created from comic books comes from psychiatrist Dr. Frederic Wertham who claimed that comic books corrupted young children’s minds and encouraged violence, sexuality, homosexuality and even gender role confusion (Kistler). This relates to literature in the classroom as an example of the bias in society controlling the literature that is available, and how it inaccurately represents society at large.

Wertham’s analysis of how society’s perceptions influence and control literature is still reflected through education systems’ current classroom literary choices. But when should the controversial literature be brought into the classroom to counter this growing prejudice? According to David Foresman, “...some believe that allowing concepts of transgender and gender nonconformity during elementary school is important because elementary age children are at an age where their views and attitudes are constantly shifting” (2). Foresman further supports this argument, explaining how “[literature] has the capacity to both improve attitudes towards the outgroups, but also the self-image of the individuals reading about them” (2). Providing literature

within the classroom setting which allows students to recognize themselves or those they may know is vital to successful inclusion. Students have a stronger connection and investment in success when they can relate to the material being taught in the classrooms.

While it is my argument that inclusion of LGBTQ novels should be considered in the development of the ELA curriculum, there is a right way to bring accurate exposure to this diverse and marginalized culture, and a wrong way which reinforces the stigma surrounding alternative lifestyles and identities. The novel turned Indie film, *Adam*<sup>4</sup> is a controversial film by director Rhys Ernst, which has the LGBTQ community in an uproar. Petitions abound calling for the movie to be pulled before it has even debuted (Keating). The movie is based on a novel by the same name, following very closely the storyline within the novel. The controversy over the film has raised awareness of the novel itself and is an example of why exposure to positive literature is so critical. The novel's storyline is centered around a cisgender boy who gets dumped by his girlfriend. In his anguish, he decides that the way to get back into the dating game is to portray himself as a transgender male. This decision comes after spending time with his sister who identifies as a lesbian and meeting a lesbian, he finds himself attracted to. He, therefore, begins to cross-dress and assume a transgender identity to get close to her. The controversy behind the film continues: "Adam has accrued an abysmal 1.7/10 rating on IMDB, multiple Change.org petitions are calling for its release to be canceled, and hundreds of posts across Instagram and Twitter have demanded that we #BoycottAdam" (Keating). The author has openly identified as part of the LGBTQ community, and the director of the film, Ernst, a trans person, was quoted as acknowledging the controversy of the storyline but accepted the challenge anyway (Keating). This movie was something that my son, a trans man, brought up to me when

my research first began, leading me to research the novel. He shared with me a quote on social media that explains the stigma behind the plot:

To imply that our identities are just costumes for other people to put on erases who we are as people. More than that, to imply it is done to trick people into sex is a dangerous lie that literally gets us killed... in this case the cis boy is pretending to be a trans man, it can't be ignored that [the plotline] so directly mirrors transmisogynistic ideas of cis men pretending to be trans women in order to assault lesbians. (genderpunksap)

When creating an argument for the inclusion of literature and resources representing the LGBTQ+ community and culture, one must analyze the credibility and accuracy of the portrayals. To be successful and generate positive progress toward safe spaces for all, the chosen resources representing alternative cultures should be through positive portrayals or the risk of reverting back to prejudicial reinforcement occurs.

### **Exposure begets Understanding**

Positive exposure and education begin with awareness. Teachers in New Jersey going through inclusive curriculum training have a lot to say about the importance of the move toward a truly safe and educated school environment. Arts High School teacher Melissa Silva explains that even though she already includes some LGBTQ topics in a women's studies course, "[she is] learning that this isn't a new addition but an infusion into what we're already doing" (Bose). Another teacher interviewed, Doretta Sockwell talks about empowerment as she expresses how "Representation is key. To see yourself reflected in curriculum, it does something psychologically" (Bose). Students who identify outside of the heteronormative binary life are repeatedly bombarded with the reminder that their lifestyle choices and identities are not represented. Not only are they not represented, but they are considered 'wrong' and different,



creating a psychological trauma. To support the development of fully inclusive and universal classrooms and campuses, and to end the cycle of trauma, the literature choices used in the classrooms, and the messages they portray need to be expanded.

Additional challenges of struggling against preconceived prejudices come from homophobia and xenophobia. Karen Lovaas, Lina Baroudi, and S.M. Collins address specifically the challenges for the transgender individual and an attempt to find their identity represented through literature and in the classroom in a positive way. In “*Transcending Heteronormativity in the Classroom: Using Queer and Critical Pedagogies to Alleviate Trans-Anxieties*” they explain, “[l]ike race, ethnicity, and class, issues dealing with gender and sexuality present special challenges for teachers and students, both when these subjects are the clearly marked focus of a course and when they arise in the midst of seemingly unrelated classroom discussions” (178). While the focus of their paper is on the transgender community, the impact is the same for much of the LGBTQ+ culture. Students turn to what they are exposed to in order to form definitions and understanding. When exposure through literature proscribes a group of people, it is challenging for those involved to feel accepted and able to express themselves.

A compilation of data stemming from questions geared toward LGBTQ identifying youth exposes alarming statistics:

- “64% of LGBT students surveyed report feeling unsafe in their schools” (NCTE qtd. in Burke & Greenfield 46).
- “22% of LGBTQ middle schoolers were already skipping school and feeling a lack of belonging in school” (Robinson & Espelage qtd. in Page 677)
- “Among youths aged 15-24 years, suicide is the second leading cause of death and LGBTQ youth are even more at risk” (Hatchel et al. 134)

- “65% of transgender youth seriously considered suicide in the past year” according to a study done in 2017 (Veale, et. al qtd. in Hatchel et al. 135)

These statistics acknowledge that “a hostile school environment affects a student’s performance in school and their mental health. LGBT students who experience victimization and discrimination typically have worse grades and don’t perform as well academically” (Kerr).

Exposure breeds awareness, which can lead to more understanding and acceptance by those in the heteronormative and cisgender groups. It also supports those who identify outside of these, creating an opportunity to feel included and accepted for who they are, without fear of needing to hide behind falsehoods.

A question as to whether exposure has positive or negative consequences in the classrooms can be answered by looking at how breaking away from the heteronormative and cisgender expectations impacts students at primary grade levels. Blanca Caldas wrote for a TESOL journal on the use of drama in the second-grade dual-language setting. Her research proclaims how, through the incorporation of specific literature, preconceived stereotypes on gender roles are questioned<sup>5</sup>. Allowing for examination and conversation of traditional gender roles creates a base supporting an understanding of the impact of stereotypes. The premise of using literature that has gender-nonconforming characters in them is studied and analyzed for the benefits and challenges. Gender stereotypes and expectations are learned beliefs at such a young age. The importance of exposure to literature and protagonists who do not conform to the heteronormative definition of gender is highlighted through the actions of children observed for this study. The relevance of Caldas’s study is that while these pre-defined gender roles begin developing at an early age, they are flexible and malleable. Caldas discovered that through discussion of these stereotyped beliefs, students became more conscious of the impact their

thoughts and reactions had on others, culminating in broader acceptance of characters pushing the boundaries of preconceived gender expectations. Exposure to characters who identify across the identity spectrum broadens acceptance while minimizing opportunities for bullying and exclusion.

## **Literature in The Classroom**

### *A Need for Change*

To address the growing changes in student bodies, an evaluation of the current curricula needs to be addressed. One of the significant issues to consider is how the literature used in many of the high school ELA classrooms has changed very little over the last few decades, even though society has gone through great changes. Literature that students are exposed to should keep up with the interests, needs, and values of their audience. One of the primary purposes of selecting literature to teach in various classes is to identify themes and values within societies. While themes tend to transcend time, values within society change along with the demographics and identities found within them. There has been a movement to include multi-ethnic literature more and more, but there is still a section of the population within American society that is under-represented. With the growing number of young people today identifying outside of the cisgender or heteronormative groups, curricula should also adapt the literature that is used in the classrooms to create more inclusive environments.

While there has been a trend toward the inclusion of multi-ethnic literature into ELA curriculum over the past 20 years, the core books that are still being taught have not changed. A survey of teachers and staff within the Salinas Union High School District identified the most common novels used in their high school ELA classes over the last fifty years. When asked to recall the books read in their English classes at the high school level, 52 people replied with

surprising results (see fig. 1). Out of those surveyed, 35 attended high school in California, with the remainder graduating from other states. The majority of people questioned (53.8%) graduated more than 20 years ago, however, the results of the survey show that many of the same book titles identified by this demographic are also identified by people who graduated between three and ten years ago<sup>6</sup>. These novels represent the American default setting of binary and heteronormative protagonists. The inclusion of cultural stories focusing on ethnicity or heritage has become more prominent in the classroom curriculums since I have been teaching, and as evidenced through this survey, however, not one piece of literature listed addresses the LGBTQ+ culture and lifestyle or portrays a protagonist who identifies within this marginalized group.

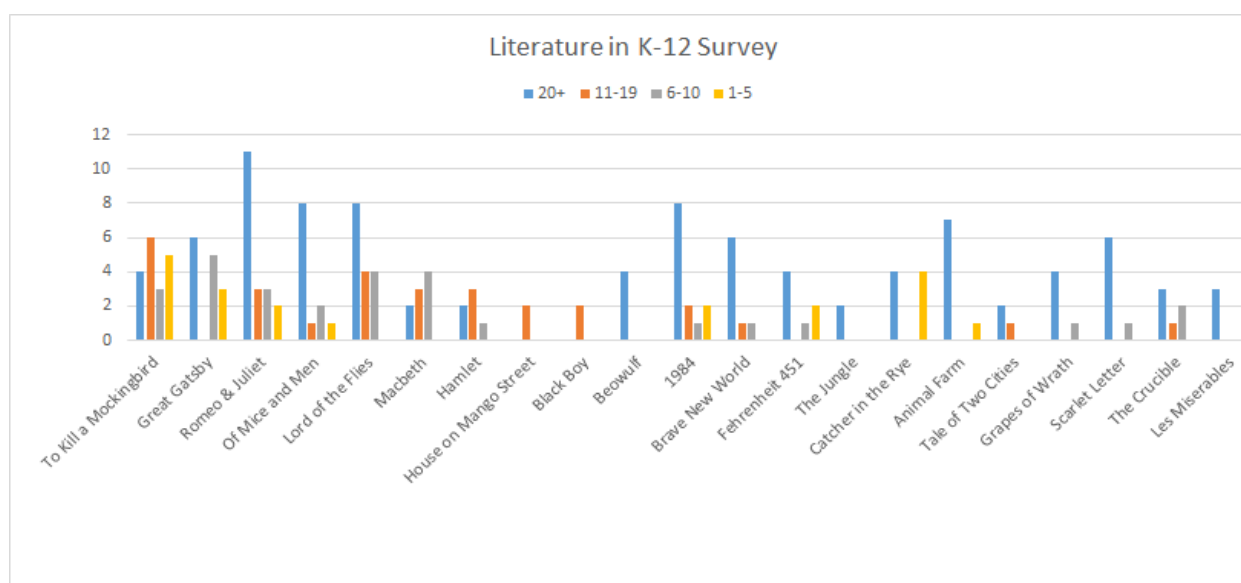


Fig. 1: “Literature in K-12 Survey”

Research into this topic has provided me unique opportunities to closely analyze my own classroom dynamics for inclusivity and challenges as well. As an ELA teacher, I follow the approved curriculum for my school district which dictates the literature used for each grade level. At the freshman level, the students read Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and William Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet.” At the sophomore level, the required literature is Chinua

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and "Antigone" by Sophocles. The required reading at the junior level is Arthur Miller's "The Crucible," Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Reviewing the results of my recent survey, many of these pieces were named as being taught across all groups, showing that while more multi-ethnic literature has been added recently, much of the same core literature is still being used.

*Literature: A Focused Analysis*

To address the reinforcement of the heteronormative and cisgender roles in literature used in today's K-12 ELA curricula, I will analyze William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, two of the titles consistently appearing within the results of the survey conducted, and which are part of the currently approved ELA curriculum in the Salinas Union High School District. I will also provide examples that support this concept through the analysis of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* which is one of the required pieces at the sophomore level. While there is other literature used in high school ELA classrooms, these three novels portray commonly held cisgender and heteronormative characters, while also representing novels that have withstood adaptations to curricula development.

William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," written around 1590, is considered one of his most famous tragedies, with primary characters Romeo and Juliet, portraying slightly diverging gender characteristics. However, the underlying structure of the play reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations. Juliet, the primary female character is escaping an oppressive family dynamic where her father is setting her up in an arranged marriage to benefit their family in the eyes of society. This concept of life choices being controlled by the male hierarchy in a patriarchal society is a concept that can be found in many of the novels still used as core

literature in the classrooms. If one looks at the male protagonist, Romeo, one may initially consider that perhaps he is a romantic at heart, carrying some traits that are typically associated with a female character, namely the ease with which he falls in love with Juliet. However, if one looks beyond this, it becomes clear that he is a very manipulative male character, convincing Juliet to marry him after only just meeting. He uses the stifling and oppressive situation she is in to control her actions as a way to escape an arranged marriage. The parents of Juliet both portray typical gender-specific characteristics reinforcing the heteronormative views. Lady Capulet pushes her daughter into an arranged marriage at a young age, supporting the concept that a woman's role is as a wife and mother. Lord Capulet is a domineering father and husband using his masculinity as a means of controlling not only the family but the entire household. His insistence on arranging the marriage of his daughter to Lord Paris as a means to strengthen his standing is a societal belief that part of masculinity is defined by power. The use of this play as a standard resource reinforces the heteronormative roles in societies, as well as the clear representation of binary gender roles within cultures. While this is an accurate portrayal of Elizabethan socially defined roles, it creates a limited view for modern students who may identify outside of the cisgender, binary classification.

Analyzing the results of the study, the second most common novel to appear is Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Written through the eyes of a female protagonist, Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, as she reflects back on a period in her life in 1930's Southern America. Scout is one of the few characters in the novel who does not conform to the expected cisgender roles, being portrayed as a 'tomboy' frustrated at the insistence people have to change her to fit the societal views expected of the female gender. Even with her fight to break out of these roles, the highlight of the conflict is the pressure to conform. Aside from this, if one analyzes the overall

structure behind the novel itself, it is evident that the characters are symbolic of heteronormative and cisgender views. The concept of traditional masculine and feminine roles and behavior can be seen throughout the novel. For example, Atticus Finch, while one of my favorite literary characters of all time, is a symbol of masculinity, being portrayed as the savior and caregiver. This heteronormative male character also provides the moral compass throughout the novel, representing the belief that males are the logical and strong gender in society. While this is just a brief analysis, where one sees most of the traditional gender beliefs is through the portrayal of the female characters.

Looking at the feminine aspect in the novel, the characters of Aunt Alexandra, Calpurnia, and Mayella Ewell reinforce the expected identity and behavior surrounding the female gender in a heteronormative society. Aunt Alexandra is the epitome of a proper Southern woman, focused on how appearance represents who a person is, and spends her time attempting to teach Scout what it means to be a proper female. Calpurnia, the Finch's black<sup>7</sup> maid is another female character who symbolically reinforces the accepted gender norms in the South. While race is a theme addressed in the novel and supported through her role as the stereotypical black maid, she is also representative of the traditional female gender, taking the place of the mother figure, as well as taking care of the household. Lastly, the character Mayella Ewell supports again, the role of the female to stay home and be the caregiver. While she is only a child herself, her father expects her to be the primary caregiver for the rest of the children, in the absence of a mother. The challenge with Lee's novel comes through in many areas. Primarily, Scout is shamed for not conforming to the expected gender norms for a young girl, reinforcing in today's society, the stigma surrounding those who may identify outside of this. Additionally, the characters throughout the novel fit within the binary definitions of male and female, creating the risk of

modern students to feel ostracized for non-conformity. The use of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is vital to addressing cultural stigmas in America's South during the 1930s, but exposure through literature should not stop there.

For the past three years, I have been teaching at the sophomore level, and while we do cover excerpts from *Persepolis* and "Antigone," our primary literature is Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (TFA). One of the focuses of the novel is how Achebe portrays gender roles in the Ibo culture. Much like my "ladies and gentlemen" moment of enlightenment, the impact of the limitations within the discussions surrounding the novel becomes apparent. While historically, this is an appropriate binary category for the culture, my concern turned to the students in my classes, and whether they were feeling included or set aside.

The novel itself is set in what is now Nigeria, amidst the challenging period immediately prior to colonialism by the European missionaries. TFA follows the protagonist Okonkwo, his family, and the village of Umuofia. Set up in two main parts, the first part of the novel takes the reader on a journey through the rich culture of the Ibo people, and the second explores how colonialism challenges their cultural identity. Like the other novels addressed here, the structure behind the novel itself shows the reinforcement of traditionally heteronormative gender roles guiding the male and female characters. The main character Okonkwo, is described as a strong masculine character, defined by how many wives and titles he has. He is often contrasted by and driven through the juxtaposition of his father Unoka, who is described as feminine and weak. The Ibo word for a female is *agbala*, which is also used to describe men who do not fit the masculine gender traits expected of the Ibo people. That there is no ideal for males who may not identify as strong, violent and masculine, except to be grouped within the female category *agbala*, is a prime example of how strict gender categories isolate and exclude those who may



identify outside of the cisgender. The women in the novel, primarily Okonkwo's three wives, are subjected to brutality, verbal and physical abuse, and are relegated to child-rearing and maintaining the home. As previously mentioned, while these characteristics are historically accurate and portray the gender norms of the Ibo people at the time, the exposure to cultures should not stop there. It is just as important to recognize current cultures as it is to recognize past cultures.

### **Curriculum Development Reflective of an Ever-Changing Society**

Societal views and fears are often portrayed in literature. The messages present along with the attitudes identified supports an extremely limited view. This perspective is reflected in the experience's students have on campus. In Dan Woog's book *School's Out: The Impact of Gay and Lesbian Issues on America's Schools*, he interviews various leaders in schools regarding the inclusion of gay and lesbian support groups on campus. Woog interviewed the principal at Brookline High on the development of a GSA club (Gay-Straight Alliance), who said "the principal has made it very clear that gay and lesbian youth must be supported. He's said that homophobia is right up there with racism and sexism" (271). It is this recognition that reinforces the importance of exposure to destigmatize those outside of traditionally accepted identities that are emerging in society.

While identities that do not fit within the cisgender and heteronormative categories are becoming more accepted, school curricula are not keeping up with these changes. The subconscious identification of characters portraying traditional gender roles reinforces the stigma associated with alternative identities. As previously stated, "keeping the personal voice out frequently means that our work is underread, dry, inaccessible-and boring" (Vickers 613). When it comes to the literature used in classrooms today, the subject matter should be relevant to the

student population. As a teacher, I have seen first-hand, in the classroom, a lack of interest in the pre-selected and required novels at the high school grade levels. The student population is changing, and if the goal is to engage readers in the learning process, the literature needs to be reviewed and modified to keep up with these changes.

When analyzing the import for the student population to bring inclusion through literature, a view from a gender-fluid educator's experience of attempting to fit within societal expectations should also be addressed. David Lee Carlson, a professor at Arizona State University addresses this in his article titled "The Last Man." Carlson begins by explaining that he struggled growing up in a male-dominated household. The home was a traditional home with an alpha father and a mother who stayed home to cook and clean. Carlson, however, did not feel comfortable, explaining, "I rarely see myself as either masculine or feminine, but I see my gender as fractured, as displaced, and an amalgamation of sensual elements" (82). Recognizing that gender is not limited to the binary, Carlson creates a classroom environment that acknowledges the challenges he grew up with and creates inclusivity through the literature choices he uses. After teaching for ten years, he finally concluded that it was necessary, regardless of the challenges from outside the classroom.

I felt the urgency to stress the importance of learning about LGBTQ issues in secondary English classrooms because of the increase in hate crimes and bullying against our community. Teaching LGBTQ literature is vital because it offers blank spaces to reimagine and experiment with new mixtures of fractured genders. It is within these moments of pause that shifts in perceptions and new ways of being can emerge. (83)

Without exposure, perceptions remain stagnant. What results is the perpetuation of stereotypes encouraging feelings of isolation from those who may already be struggling with concepts of

identity. Being a teacher that is willing to open up about themselves, presents exposure to positive role models that are missing from the limited literature selections found in many current curricula.

### *Changes to Teaching*

Awareness is growing when it comes to the challenges of teaching all students in the classrooms. Anthony Costa, a college instructor of teacher education had an awakening that impacted him greatly. He explains:

It struck me... Here I am in the field of teacher education, teaching young men and women how to be good, effective teachers, sending them into classrooms filled with youngsters trying to find out who they themselves are. And in those classrooms are a certain number of kids who feel that they're not 'normal'; they go to school in an atmosphere of prejudice and hostility, and nothing's done about it. (Woog 292)

A change to the approaches within curriculum development, training for educators, and awareness of the need for recognition of multi-cultural dimensions, including the LGBTQ culture are crucial for positive and productive school environments.

Rawia Hayik, a pedagogical advisor in India brought up a unique perspective that even as I have been researching and writing, had not considered. Her article titled "What Does This Story Say About Females?: Challenging Gender-Biased Texts in the English Language Classroom" addresses how traditional gender roles in literature, specifically fairy tales, impacts societal expectations and perpetuates the stereotypical roles of males and females. During a course aimed at 9th grade English Language students, she used traditional fairy tales to open up dialogue on gender roles and expectations, concluding that many students fall back on influences from social norms and values until they are provided opportunities to push their beliefs and

understandings. She exposes how “the messages embedded in books and other media to which children are exposed contribute to constructing their identities” (409). Children learn through exposure, and in order to expand perspectives, exposure needs to be expanded. Hayik’s approach addresses the philosophy behind pedagogy as “a moral, political, and cultural decision about the kind of literate practices needed to enhance... peoples’ agency over their life trajectories” (Luke & Freebody qtd by Hayik 410). Students, especially at the high school level should be challenging their preconceived definitions while encouraging them to create their own ideas. Students learn from exposure, and without broadening minds and encouraging the development of individual ideals and beliefs, mindsets remain. This is not to say that the only mindset taught to children is closed; what is needed is a recognition that students use what they are exposed to when creating beliefs. Exposure is education, and “...the process of learning something that tells us that the very ways in which we think and do things is not only wrong but also harmful” allows students to develop their own understanding of the impact of cause and effect, action and inaction, and prejudice and understanding (Meixner 14).

### **Nobody Should Feel Alone**

One thing to remember is that whether in the classroom or not, advocacy and intervention significantly make a difference for LGBTQ+ individuals. At Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, Mairead Losty and John O’Connor explore the challenges of non-binary identities and literature in the classroom. In the journal article “‘Falling outside of the ‘nice little binary box’: a psychoanalytic exploration of the non-binary gender identity,” they identify the three most salient themes in areas of concern for the participants in their study; “(1) A developing gender identity, (2) Correct and Incorrect language and (3) Being seen and unseen” (46). Each of these

concerns can be assuaged through the simple act of broadening the scope of literature selected for ELA curricula.

When exposure to literature written by and/or portraying characters within the LGBTQ culture, the classroom environment changes, promoting and shaping opportunities for support, learning, and safety for all. As students begin identifying outside of the heteronormative and cisgender identities at younger and younger ages, the need for this exposure becomes more critical. A study into how LGBTQ literature affects middle school classrooms shows that the inclusion of LGBTQ texts allows for “an exploration of the world and self... [and] the opportunity to explore the intersectionality of identities, cultures and experiences by connecting the complexities of diverse characters to students’ lives” (Ghiso, et. al qtd. in Dinkins and Englert 393). Building connections for those students struggling with their identity encourages recognition of self within the work. For those who do not identify as LGBTQ, exposure allows for an awareness that regardless of gender or sexual identity, the challenges and experiences in life are analogous.

As previously mentioned, one of the catalysts in determining the focus of my thesis came from a panel of speakers representing the local LGBTQ community. The moment of clarity came when I realized that my attempt at respect by using “ladies and gentlemen” was not inclusive for those outside the binary world. Even though I am aware of this, I still catch myself saying this catchphrase to gather attention; it is after all hard to break a habit overnight. As the words are leaving my mouth, I recognize what is happening, and often will supplement the “ladies and gentlemen” with “and everybody in-between or outside.” This is by no means acceptable, and I am trying to find a solution, but years of habit is going to take time to change.

Literature holds many powers; one is the power to elicit empathy for others. By exposing readers to LGBTQ characters, it creates a chance for these individuals to be seen, and for their “feelings, their struggles and successes, and the experiences through which they were and were not marginalized” to be brought to the forefront of the readers (Meixner 13). Part of the issue with including literature representing LGBTQ characters, or written by LGBTQ authors is the fine line between exposure and spotlight. Curriculum developers have suggested the development of reading lists which allows for either explicit identification and inclusion of the selected texts or implicitly revealing the literature available for students to choose based on their comfort level (Page 680). This allows for the literature to be absorbed for the value of the story as a whole, without explicitly identifying it as an LGBTQ novel, thereby creating exposure and connections for various readers.

### **The Right Exposure at the Right Time**

The first step to resolving any problem is first to admit that there is one, and there is most definitely a problem with the outdated literature most often analyzed in current high school ELA classes. If the goal is to create classrooms of inclusion, one of the first steps is to acknowledge that multicultural literature must move beyond ethnicity and race. Gender identity, sexual identity, and inclusivity within the LGBTQ+ culture should also be recognized. Finding literature that works in the classroom to begin developing exposure to the lives and culture of those identifying outside the heteronormative and cisgender views should become a priority. The push for inclusivity in schools and classrooms has been focusing on ethnicity, race, and students with disabilities. With the growth in student identity and acceptance, curriculum and literature should surely follow. This is not strictly an American need but is also a global one. Referencing Losty and O’Connor’s research, they describe how “a lack of support from society,

as well as groups associated with embracing gender minorities within that society [create] greater risk of poor mental health outcomes... as a result of the higher levels of discrimination, they can experience” (42). The environment has become more inclusive in society, leading to more acceptance on school campuses, with clubs such as Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) chapters being located at many school campuses. While these actions help, inside the classrooms, the literature selections being taught turn back the clocks, reverting to heteronormative binary identities being portrayed and taught.

During my research, I found an interesting statistic that examines the struggle as a teacher in the classroom, expecting to teach the district approved curriculum. The obstacle is not a lack of novels by LGBTQ authors, or that portray the lifestyles of non-heteronormative characters, but the lack of support for bringing these critical resources into the ELA classrooms as part of the curriculum. A source shows that there is literature out there, but that it is just not being adopted into the classrooms:

The American Library Association, a 118-year old, 58,000 member group which in 1970, became the first professional organization to form its own Gay and Lesbian Task Force, has adopted a Library Bill of Rights that unequivocally affirms the importance of materials that include lesbian and gay lifestyles, the works of homosexual authors, and the products of gay presses. (Woog 314)

The American Library Association recognized this need fifty years ago. Some states have recognized the need to acknowledge the historical aspect of LGBTG culture, but this is not enough. The next step is to create true inclusive curricula.

When looking at literature portraying characters outside of the heteronormative and cisgender descriptions, there is a tendency to represent these groups stereotypically, instead of

accurately. The storylines also lean toward a focus on their gender or sexual identity. Literature can provide opportunities for safety, acceptance, and reassurance for those who may identify outside of the socially defined and approved sexual orientation, or they can promote feelings of insecurity, prejudice, and unacceptance. There needs to be more LGBTQ+ representation in literature today, which is adopted and approved for inclusion into school curricula, especially at the high school level. Adolescence is a time when young adults are attempting to make sense of their sexuality and not addressing the variations within this discovery is to continue to marginalize its existence. As teenagers or people of any age, struggling with their own insecurities and identities, reading about characters who share their same challenges, creates a sense of recognition, validating their own feelings, which is something that cannot be given a price-tag.

### **LGBTQ+ Authors,<sup>8</sup> Literature, and their Impact**

One of the goals of inclusion is to create exposure without stigmatizing. The argument is not about removing the literature that is currently being used in the classroom; each piece provides a valuable lesson for students historically, thematically, and culturally. The way to approach this is to expand the selections to be more inclusive of not only cultural and heritage differences, but gender and identity differences as well. I am not a curriculum developer, nor do I assert expertise in textbook adoption, but my experience within the classroom teaching the standard novels, and reinforced through my research has led me to identify possible literature pairing suggestions to broaden exposure in the classroom. My selections take into consideration the time period of the writing, thematic foci, and cultural/historical settings.



### *Supported Literature*

Written around 1601, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is considered a comedy that would pair nicely with the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. While this play addresses the same concepts of arranged marriages, gender role expectations, and family obligations, the novel also approaches these with a twist. The play tells the story of a brother and sister - twins - shipwrecked off the coast of Illyria and separated. Viola disguises herself as a man in order to earn money while she searches for her lost brother Sebastian. The humor behind misguided loves, disguised royalty, and chaotic love triangles allows the reader to be exposed to a variety of scenarios and gender roles. Viola, breaks away from not only the gender expectations of a woman during this time period but also the inherent caste system as she is actually a noblewoman playing the part of a squire. Within the plot twist are various romantic and love interests based on mistaken gender identities. Students can find humor in the storyline, but also become exposed to the concept of pansexuality, albeit hidden. Recognition of characters with attractions to people not solely tied to gender or sexual identity provides a well-rounded Shakespearean tale that may provide students identifying as such, with reassurances that they are not alone.

When looking at the theme and concepts in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a strong pairing would be the 1983 novel *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker. The novel follows the journey from trauma to triumph of Celie, an African American young girl in Georgia. Written as a narrative, Celie narrates her life story using letters. Celie is a character who actually "resists both gender and racial expectations for young, African-American women in the early twentieth-century South..." (Proehl 20). She tells stories of the abuse she experienced by not only her father but the man her father marries her off to. Through her story, she also tells of the relationships she builds with other black women. One of the under-focused relationships is Celie's connection to

Shug Avery, a female singer. Their relationship develops throughout the novel, where they eventually become lovers (Proehl). While the novel itself is not about the gender or sexual identity of Celie, the positive portrayal of the relationship would add exposure within the classroom environment, without labeling the dynamic. Another benefit is the positive support for students who may identify outside of heteronormativity, showing that alternative relationships are not always stigmatized.

Written in 2012, *Bad Indians* by Deborah Miranda would be a strong novel to pair with Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. is a novel portraying the challenge of identity within indigenous tribes against the backdrop of the California/Spanish Mission history. While the novel is not explicitly an LGBTQ novel, it does address the concept of two-spirit and is written by an author who identifies as such. The author expresses through the novel how "two-spirit women's intersecting identities and memberships in multiple groups require skilled navigation" (Elm, et al. 354). Part tribal history and part autobiographical, Miranda, an Ohlone Indian, tells the story of the impact settler-colonialism has on identity. The novel combines actual newspaper clippings, poetry, oral histories, and personal stories to support historical challenges. One issue comes from the attempted assimilation of Native people, better recognized from the slogan of "kill the Indian and save the man" (353). Ranging in time from 1770 to current, the journey of the native Indians and the struggle for identity amidst cultural collisions is addressed. This comes through the portrayal of not only of the Native people to conform to the White Man way of life but also to those two-spirit individuals forcing their identities into a binary way of life. As with the other novel pairing suggestions, *Bad Indians* allows for exposure to different identities in a safe environment for students who may be questioning whether they belong. It also provides opportunities for conversation pieces based on the various identity tangents.

While not directly correlating with any specific current curriculum literature, *All Out: The No-longer Secret Stories of Queer Teens Throughout the Ages* would be a good addition to the ELA classroom. Edited by Saundra Mitchell, this novel is actually a Young Adult (YA) anthology of queer historical stories from a diverse array of authors. Covering various time periods from the early 1600s to modern times, the stories tell of a wide range of queer-identifying people, and their experiences, allowing for connection to readers who might be struggling with identity and acceptance. These stories are all about young people discovering themselves and realizing they are not alone.

#### *Positive Impact in the Classroom*

The importance of including literature such as these is two-fold. First, as previously mentioned, the exposure to varying sexual and gender identities allows students to begin breaking down the stigma surrounding those identifying outside of the heteronormative or cisgender category. Second, and almost more importantly, is the concept of destigmatizing the LGBTQ identity. While it is important to discuss and identify protagonists who identify outside of the accepted norm, it is equally important to build access to a library of literature that is a presence alongside the current literature, not separate from it. The goal is to create a sense of inclusion through literature that is measured on the value of the storyline, challenges to conflicts, depth of character, and connection to societal struggles rather than a focus on the sexuality or gender of the characters.

There is a great lack of research on the need for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ literature written by and/or portraying accurate representations of alternative identifying characters in the classroom. As my son told me when I first mentioned my thesis focus, “More inclusion all around helps solidify a kind of acceptance of the idea. Maybe if it became a norm, then the

suicide rates for the LGBTQ+ youth wouldn't be as high as they are" (Thistle). In her article "Curriculum as Window & Mirror," Emily Style writes about the importance of teaching through both mirrors and windows to create awareness and connections to various perspectives. She explains "...it is essential that dialogue about differences not get lost" (Style 36). Style provides a thought-provoking quote by Sidney Jourard who said: "...if [we] cannot understand then we must remain suspicious strangers to one another " (Qtd by Style 36). Looking at oneself in the mirror creates self-awareness but looking through a window allows for an awareness of others. By consciously allowing oneself to look beyond the mirror, the fear of the unfamiliar begins to dissipate.

As previously referenced, Jen Bacon addresses the inclusion of Queer Theory and LGBTQ Literature in the education system. She discovered that there is a significant need to introduce LGBT studies and that the benefits far outweigh any resistance to the idea, providing for a more inclusive campus. Throughout the study conducted at West Chester University, the author approached the university's staff and policies, focusing on the openness to incorporate more LGBT content into the curriculum. Bacon reflects on the outcome of the study on whether to include LGBT content into Women's Studies courses or to declassify them. Her conclusion is:

If LGBT Studies is a progressive campaign to "de-other" lesbians and gays by creating safe spaces in the institution, the curriculum, and the classroom for lesbian and gay bodies, queer theory is a progressive campaign to "re-other" everything in the culture that has occupied a position of privilege, power, or normalcy, starting with heterosexuality. (259)

The realization is that while the campus employs a number of educators and staff who have publicly identified within the LGBTQ demographic, it creates a false sense of acceptance and

inclusion. The curriculum decisions are still being dictated by those who feel that including this type of exposure inside the classroom might be viewed as a “gayer” or “queerer” school.

When looking at the current arguments centered around LGBTQ+ topics and literature, the argument is how to approach the subject matter in the least restrictive way, while eliminating the reinforcement of the lifestyle as separate or as the Other. One definition of Other comes from Stanley William Rothstein, who describes it as “...related to discourses that relay cultural norms, heritages, and moral understandings from one generation to the next ” (6). If one is to take this approach, then the concept of Other as a part of society is as fluid as the cultures defining it. An interview by Dan Woog with a principal, and former teacher, at Chapel Hill High, explains how to create a smooth transition in the classroom environment while avoiding the Other stigma.

We started talking about the importance of multiculturalism, but we never *did* anything about it. I teach mostly American literature, so I finally said to myself, “What can I include?” He worked up a multicultural unit, based on collaborative learning. Small groups would explore what made various groups - Native Americans, Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, females - different from, and similar to white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males. His department chair and his assistant principal both okayed the inclusion of gays and lesbians as a multicultural group. (276)

It is this accepted norm that creates for a truly inclusive environment in the classroom and is a goal to strive towards. Jen Bacon explains this best:

We all want inclusion, and yet we sometimes find ourselves feeling exclusive. We all want to challenge heterosexist and homophobic ideas, structures, and discourses when we

find them, and yet we sometimes find ourselves wanting to be normal. Our students want to be normal too, because it is a measure of privilege to be able to shun the normal-to-queer the categories of our lives... (279)

To feel included and accepted is critical to a positive self-image. This is not solely a teenage need, however. Younger and younger children are coming out as identifying somewhere along the LGBTQ spectrum and more parents are raising their children as gender neutral. The importance of adopting literature that embraces all, regardless of identity becomes that much more critical.

### **Resistance to Change only Hinders Progression**

A qualitative and quantitative approach to this study has shown the negative impact current literature choices in the high school ELA curriculum has on the growing student population identifying within the LGBTQ+ culture. Without adapting to the changes in modern society, challenges will continue to arise. Being in the classroom, the negative impact some of the literature choices have on students identifying outside of the binary definitions most often encouraged in society, is something I have become aware of. Teaching the same novels, the same way, with the same focus, for decades does not allow for adaptation or consideration of the continuing changes to the demographics and gender/sexual orientations of modern students. The stigma surrounding literature solely portraying cisgender and heteronormative characters does not exude acceptance for those outside of these binary categories, and in fact, further isolates students. One purpose of selecting literature for use in ELA classrooms is the ability to connect with the students through the characters, themes, and experiences in the stories. Limiting these selections denies all students, regardless of identity or gender, to make valuable and meaningful connections not only through the literature, but in classroom settings. Exposure to authors and

characters who represent a wide range of people among different lifestyle categories allows for opportunities of education and weakens the boundaries between prejudicial stereotyping and conscious acceptance. Classroom teachers should take on some of the responsibility to create safe and inclusive settings for all students, but the need must move beyond the classroom. It is time for curriculum developers to review the approved literature selections and move toward a more inclusive miscellany. Everyone deserves to be represented and accepted for who they are. The time has come to create English Language Arts curriculum that is truly inclusive and multicultural.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a complete list of preferred terminology, refer to Knutson, D., et. al, “Recommended Terminology, Pronouns, and Documentation for Work with Transgender and Non-Binary Populations.”

<sup>2</sup> Gender-fluid refers to a person who does not identify with a single fixed gender but expresses a fluidity to gender identity. Pansexual is someone who has attraction to people regardless of gender. The attraction can be emotional, sexual, and/or romantic.

<sup>3</sup> Two-spirit people typically display roles or behavior that differs from their biological sex (Bonvillain 4). In Native cultures, there exists a “flexibility of gender roles and attitudes toward sex in Native cultures [and there] was the existence of a third category of gender” (Bonvillain 4). Research shows that in over 100 Native nations, “a person could become neither man nor woman but instead occupy a third status... the existence of such possibilities for males and females reflects beliefs in individual autonomy as well as underlying philosophical notions concerning the mutability of gender and of the self” (Bonvillain 4-5). The modernized heteronormative culture is so hung up on fitting into nice clean boxes with clearly defined roles that it becomes restricting. When explaining why people might become Two-Spirits, it is often attributed to a personal inclination or calling to take an interest in the demeanor and lifestyle of the other sex. As a spiritual culture, this is often validated through a vision from the spirits supporting their choice (Bonvillain 5).

<sup>4</sup> *Adam* is a novel originally written by Ariel Schrag and published in 2014. The novel portrays a cisgender male teen who spends time with his older sister who identifies as a lesbian. During his time with her he falls in love with a lesbian and decides to pretend to be a trans male in order to have sex with her. During their encounters, he uses a strap-on in place of his own

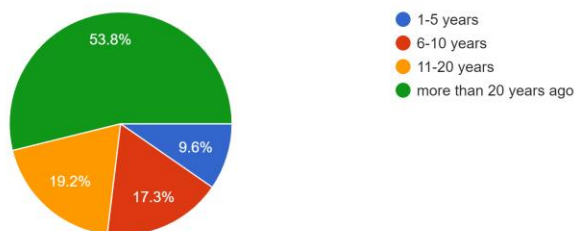


genitals which the girl is okay with. However, at one point he stops substituting and has intercourse with her using his own genitals, raping her without her consent. This is just one of the controversial issues with this novel and movie adaptation.

<sup>5</sup> Prior to performing *La Asombrosa Graciela*, the students engaged in a discussion about the children assigned specific roles. An observation most vocally expressed was that “most of the students agreed with Graciela’s right to play Peter Pan, although some male students were initially vocal in their disagreement about Graciela, a black girl because she did not match the racial and gender characteristics of the play’s protagonist” (5). Another play analyzed for this study was titled *William’s Doll*. What Caldas discovered was that the students were much more positive in accepting females who crossed the gender lines, portraying typically male characters, than the opposite. She observed, “The students were perplexed by the book character’s eagerness to display traits deemed feminine - thus subordinate...This is consistent with the literature on the negative views on males displaying behaviors considered inappropriate for their gender and how these gender nonconforming males suffer from the stigma and punishment for showing so-called feminine characteristics through harassment and bullying” (10). When approached with the idea of a male portraying more feminine characteristics, there was bullying, not only in the novel, but that carried over to the students during the acting out of the story.

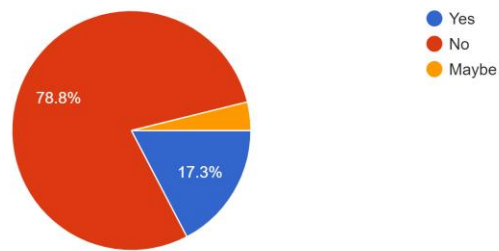
#### 6. [Literature in K-12 Survey](#)

How long ago did you graduate from high school?  
52 responses



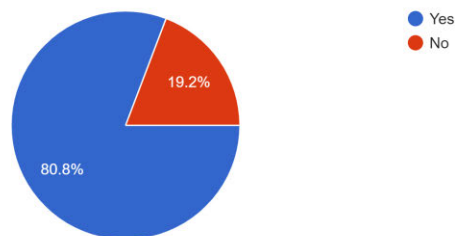
Are you aware of the F.A.I.R. Education Act in California?

52 responses



In your opinion, literature by LGBTQ authors and/or literature portraying protagonists within the LGBTQ identity spectrum should be incorporated in high school curriculums.

52 responses



<sup>7</sup> Calpurnia is described as a black woman, instead of African-American, to maintain authenticity of the time period of the novel. This was set amid the Jim Crow Laws where segregation was strong throughout the South. The term African-American was not acceptable or used until the Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>8</sup> Curriculum development is not a qualification I hold, however, as a high school English Language Arts instructor, I feel qualified to identify the challenges surrounding the current curriculum. Brianna R. Burke and Kristina Greenfield have developed a unit plan specifically geared toward the high school ELA classroom to incorporate LGBTQ literature. Please see their research and unit plan in the research found in “Challenging Heteronormativity: Raising LGBTQ Awareness in a High School English Language Arts Classroom.”

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