

Chapter 18

Addressing Sexual and Gender Diversity in an English Education Teacher Preparation Program

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education programs as a whole do little to prepare graduates to create and maintain classroom and school cultures that recognize and affirm lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer + (LGBTQ+) identities. This chapter describes how an English education program chair at a Midwestern university has integrated the study of sexual and gender diversity alongside English language arts pedagogy in three different courses, including specific texts and learning activities, as well as student responses to the in-class experiences. Recommendations for future study and curriculum design are addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2007, my second year of preparing future English teachers, I purposefully integrated readings and in-class learning activities that helped my teacher candidates explore sexual and gender diversity in literature and in educational contexts. The readings were comprised of articles with both rationales and strategies for inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer+ (LGBTQ+) content in middle/secondary curricula as well as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) 2007 Resolution on Strengthening Teacher Knowledge of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues. The learning activities featured read-alouds of selected excerpts of young adult literature (YAL) with LGBTQ+ content; writing, self-reflection, and discussion about heteronormativity; and performance tasks in which candidates planned and practiced their responses to anti-LGBTQ+ language and bullying during in-class simulations.

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For the most part this curriculum design was well received; however, in those early years, some teacher candidates resisted learning about sexual and gender diversity and rationalized their perspectives by arguing that ...

- English methods courses should not devote time or attention to discussions of sexual and gender diversity because as adults, teacher candidates can make up their own minds about such issues, and
- They do not intend to create inclusive curricula because their religious beliefs are in conflict with such planning, but
- They will “love the person, hate the sin” (Mason & Harrell, 2012)

In response to this resistance, I began inviting mentors and peers to review my teaching of this content to determine if I was being too heavy-handed in my approach. My first peer reviewer wrote the following at the end of his evaluative review of my teaching:

Throughout the ensuing discussions that sprang from the read-alouds—and really during the entire session—I thought you were very careful about encouraging and recognizing a variety of viewpoints. You made it a point to thank students for their contributions, to comment on the relevance of ideas, to invite elaboration and response, and otherwise generally serve not as an agenda-wielding ax-grinder but as a non-judgmental facilitator of discussion. I certainly saw no sign that you were communicating (directly or indirectly) any disrespect or disdain for particular points of view. The atmosphere was relaxed yet focused and professional; most students seemed comfortable making contributions. - D. Crovitz (personal communication, April 21, 2009)

I also reflected alongside another colleague to determine my role in shaping the professional dispositions of future English teachers (Mason & Harrell, 2012), particularly in light of the NCTE’s position statement that calls on teacher preparation programs to “help teachers understand and meet their professional responsibilities, even when their personal beliefs seem in conflict with concepts of social justice” (NCTE). My continued inquiry led me to determine that discussions and readings about sexual and gender diversity most certainly have a place in my English methods courses, and in recent years I have expanded my curricular inclusion to three different courses. In addition, my students have met me with much less resistance (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2010), and instead many have taken up ally positions in which they not only identify their privilege but also articulate “a need to respond to systems of oppression and to make their students aware of these systems” (Clark, 2010, p. 47).

This chapter will describe the ways in which I have integrated the study of sexual and gender diversity into my English Education Program coursework, including specific texts, learning activities, and student responses to those experiences. Featured courses include CI 616 Literature for Adolescents, CI 435E English Methods II, and CI 436E English Methods III.

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