

Chapter 1

Increasing LGBTQ+ Competencies in Preservice Teacher Training Programs

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ABSTRACT

As the national conversation forces LGBTQ+ rhetoric into the mainstream, some feel that the landscape is safe for those desiring to be open about their identity as well as for conversations and topics involving LGBTQ+ issues. Those who identify as LGBTQ+ and those who are familiar with or close to them might suggest a differing perspective—one that points to a deficit of safe spaces for discussing and being open about LGBTQ+ issues. While at times controversial, the English language arts classroom has been a forum for addressing issues that are difficult to discuss in other contexts, whether with literature as a backdrop for conversations or by utilizing written expression to work through concerns and questions. Since many educators seem unaware of the need for LGBTQ+ awareness, preservice teacher education is a place to begin. This chapter illustrates the need for equipping preservice teachers with the tools for introducing and discussing LGBTQ+ issues and topics through the context of the English language arts classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The authors of this chapter have a vested interest in supporting preservice teachers and increasing their competencies surrounding LGBTQ+ students. Both authors have personal relationships with members of the LGBTQ+ community including friends and family. Additionally, both researchers have taught students who identify with or fall on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, and they have witnessed firsthand the importance of creating safe, inclusive spaces for these students where they are afforded the same opportunities as every other student to be successful.

As practitioners, the authors both teach at the University of South Alabama, in the Department of Leadership and Teacher Education. More specifically, the educators teach methods courses, preparing both undergraduate and graduate students to teach in secondary language arts classrooms. One of the components of these courses is to increase student awareness of diversity in the classroom setting and support the development of competencies and skills to allow educators to effectively support and teach students from a variety of backgrounds, especially in regard to the literature teachers choose to place in their classroom libraries, give to students, and read as classroom novel studies as a part of the overall course requirements for their individual classrooms.

In their methods courses, students are assigned a literature project that requires them to identify books addressing different underrepresented groups and provide the author, topics of the novel, appropriate grade level(s), and a brief synopsis of each book. Then, students submit their book lists; books are compiled and shared with the classes. Students then choose one book and present it using a list of book projects and activities they might provide students in their classroom that extend beyond a simplistic book report, often incorporating kinesthetic approaches or technology.

In a previous semester, the professors noticed that although LGBTQ+ books had been included in those recommended as potential subjects for the aforementioned project, none of the students chose to present on the LGBTQ+ books that had been offered as suggestions of texts related to underrepresented groups. Upon informal questioning during class, the professors realized that many of the teachers were not comfortable with the content or appeared to lack the vocabulary for discussing the issues. After the classroom discussion, the authors reflected on the course from the previous year, and they noted that there was a similar lack of discussion and presentation concerning LGBTQ+ books. They made a note to more purposefully include this underrepresented group in the implementation of the class during the following fall.

The following spring semester, one of the professors taught a graduate level course addressing trends in language arts curriculum. The course was completely online. Students completed six projects over the course of the semester to increase

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