

Chapter 19

Sounds of Silence: Patterns of Censorship and Resources for Change With LGBTQ+ Texts

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ABSTRACT

*This chapter juxtaposes the efforts of the authors to bring an LGBTQ+ text, *Love is Love* (2017), into their curriculum through a literature circle versus the hostile response of a district's administrators censoring its use in the classroom. The first section of this chapter provides a review of literature to encourage the use of diverse texts in the curriculum in support of this vulnerable population and is followed by a theoretical framework for analyzing and including LGBTQ+ texts in curriculum. The next section describes the events that occurred that led to the censorship of the literature circle and the eventual banning of the LGBTQ+ text. This section ends with a resource list to support teachers who advocate for diverse texts. The final section connects the events at the school with an analysis that demonstrates the efforts to silence the voices of LGBTQ+ students and their advocates. This case provides patterns of oppression in the hopes of naming and ending these practices and offering solidarity to others who may have these experiences.*

INTRODUCTION

“Of the eight books reviewed, only ‘Love is Love’ was not approved.” (... , personal communication,” September 23, 2018). For five months, the district was silent after an eight-book literature circle was whisked from the classrooms. The rumors had been true, and now it was in writing. The superintendent, in response to an unnamed community member, had pulled an entire literature circle collection from eight ninth-grade classrooms because one of the books, *Love is Love*, according to an off-the-record district administrator, “promoted being gay.”

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This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section will demonstrate the need for LGBTQ+ texts in school curricula for students in heteronormative schools before describing environmental constraints that must be confronted to create a space for a curriculum that supports diversity and equity. The next section situates this need within the framework of a post-structural theoretical analysis, so that the events can be viewed in relation to heteronormative expectations.

The final section includes the authors' narrative about the development of an inclusive curriculum plan that led to censorship of an LGBTQ+ graphic novel. As district administrators silenced the curricular voice of the diverse students that the literature circle represented, they used the privilege of their positions to choose silence as a tool in response to the authors' advocacy for these graphic novels. This section contains a collection of resources available to educators who need support to uphold their intellectual freedom and fight censorship, and it concludes with the eight ways the district used silence to oppress LGBTQ+ representation in texts.

RATIONALE FOR LGBTQ+ REPRESENTATION IN THE CLASSROOM

In today's increasingly diverse classrooms, literary representation in the coursework can build connections and give voices to students who feel isolated. Across the country, educators recognize the importance of including texts that represent their classroom demographics. In recent years, an explosion of diverse texts by diverse authors have flooded book stores and school libraries. Simultaneously, many teachers are exchanging traditional texts in favor of student choice for in-class reading materials. These changes provide students the opportunity to seek texts that speak to their identity and their interests.

However, few LGBTQ+ students find themselves in the texts they read, the discussions they share, or the history they learn, leaving many to feel "endangered or invisible" (Bigelow, Bloomekatz, & Gonzales, 2018, p. 6). The 2017 National School Climate Survey conducted by Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) paints a grim picture for this vulnerable population. They reported 87.3% students had experienced harassment or assault based on their expressions of self. For these students, participating in a hostile school environment resulted in missed school, lowered GPAs, increased levels of depression, poor self-esteem, avoidance of bathrooms and locker rooms, and less interest in attending college. However, schools where LGBTQ+ students were valued and included recorded increased attendance, higher academic performance, and less harassment (GLSEN, 2017).

Community values are reflected in the school's curriculum, and teachers could bridge the divide between privileged and marginalized students by honoring their identities (Bigelow, Bloomekatz, & Gonzales, 2018). But neither schools nor teachers are stepping up to the task. When surveyed, 64.8% of LGBTQ+ students had not witnessed any efforts to bring LGBTQ+ topics in their classes, and when it was included, 19.9% that reported a positive representation was negated, while 18.6% reported negative coverage (GLSEN, 2017). Traditional curricula that rely on whole-class texts that privilege heteronormative expectations do a great disservice to diverse learners. These texts isolate students. However, texts with LGBTQ+ representation normalize LGBTQ+ students, creating a safe space for academic and emotional growth.

Yet, many teachers resist inclusion of LGBTQ+ texts. Whether intentional or not, omission is a choice of the privileged to control the dialogue by not participating. Unfortunately, inclusive choices could lead to severe consequences for some teachers. Those who teach from these texts are at risk of having a text challenged, a frightening and lonely experience. To avoid harassment, some teachers may

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