# Creating Affirming Spaces for LGBTQ Youth: An ELA Based Approach

by

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**Abstract**

LGBTQ students throughout the country attend schools that are not affirming or safe spaces for them. Many LGBTQ students face harassment, bullying, and general mistreatment within their school communities. Peers, educators, and school personnel often cause detrimental emotional, psychological, and physical harm to LGBTQ students. Legislation surrounding LGBTQ rights - in schools and in general - is vague, exclusionary, or even non-existent. When LGBTQ students do not feel safe and secure in their school communities, the opportunity for learning and growth is minimal. Students need spaces where they feel respected, represented, and understood. Through the introduction of GSAs, a curriculum that shows LGBTQ individuals in a positive light, and legislation that protects LGBTQ students, educators can develop LGBTQ affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth. No matter the scale of these efforts, the positive outcomes for LGBTQ students are great.

## Table of Contents

## Part One: Introduction

### Topic of Focus

The English Language Arts classroom presents a unique possibility within the school setting: allowing students to see themselves represented in the ideas they read about, research, and discuss. This also means that English educators have an obligation to create a classroom and environment that actualizes this possibility. One group of students that often experiences underrepresentation within their school setting is the LGBTQ community. Students who identify as LGBTQ often lack representation in many of the spaces they are required to participate in, and the English classroom should be a place in which they feel not only welcomed, but also seen and affirmed for who they are. English educators can begin this affirmation by compiling a syllabus of texts that includes various LGBTQ characters, authors, story lines, and voices. Creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth is a crucial step in providing a quality, personalized educational experience to all students.

**The Importance of Affirming Spaces for LGBTQ Youth.** While it may seem that the only way to create spaces that are harmful to LGBTQ individuals is to share negative opinions about the community, this is far from the truth. Creating spaces that do not represent the LGBTQ community is a major issue that implies that they either do not exist or do not belong within the space. It is microaggressions and lack of discussions involving LGBTQ topics that truly create a space that is unwelcoming. Regardless of the community they belong to, "all children need curricular mirrors to see themselves reflected and thus feel safe in being themselves, and they also need curricular windows to feel safe with the differences of others" (Keenan 2017). Not only does representation help LGBTQ students feel secure in their place within the community,

but it allows those outside the community to internalize the normalization of LGBTQ topics they are exposed to.

Unfortunately, in many districts across the country, LGBTQ students are un(der)represented in their own education. As Mayo wrote, “Curricula, texts, school policies, and even mundane examples, such as illustrations of magnets showing males attracted to females but repulsed by one another, are most often construed to reflect that heterosexuality is not only the norm, but also the only possible option for students” (2014). Wozolek furthers this notion, stating, “the local actors of schools and schooling unknowingly gaslight queerness in educational contexts through daily interactions that are often veiled in the privilege of straight cultural norms and values” (2018). Heterosexuality has long been seen as the ‘norm,’ which in turn ‘others’ students who are part of the LGBTQ community and paints them – whether intentionally or not – as an outsider within their own school community. This heteronormativity creates a space that appears unwelcoming and hostile to LGBTQ+ individuals.

LGBTQ students are part of a unique community that faces constant, unwarranted criticism from various sources. Because of the lack of understanding surrounding the LGBTQ community, many students are told that their voices are insignificant to the majority of the narrative, and they often do not feel represented or safe within their communities. As Mayo wrote, “Lessons and policies represent the interests of dominant members of any community and, through the decision to limit representation, can contribute to keeping identities and issues from students” (2014). LGBTQ students are underrepresented in their communities, which in turn means that they are underrepresented within their schools and schooling.

**The Results of Underrepresentation.** The lack of adequate representation of the LGBTQ community often leads to a lack of acceptance by peers, who may turn to bullying,

threatening, or committing flat out violence against their LGBTQ peers. Wozolek et. al. found that, “In addition to more frequently contemplating self-harm or suicide, LGBTQ youth often experience anxiety and fear for their physical and emotional safety at school” (2017). Similarly, Keenan references a 2015 US Trans Survey, which found that “77 percent of trans people report some form of gender-related mistreatment during their K-12 experiences” (2017). This lack of representation creates not only feelings of unacceptance, but potentially dangerous – even deadly – schooling situations for LGBTQ youth.

**Results of Positive LGBTQ Representation.** When LGBTQ youth are represented in schools, there is a greater sense of security and safety within the school. One way to create this representation is through a Genders & Sexualities Alliance (GSA), especially when it includes LGBTQ educators and school personnel, and support from other adults within the school. When students are able to look towards something like a GSA, they may feel safer within their community. As Lapointe wrote, “GSAs have been adopted by the district government policy because these school clubs are effective in promoting safer spaces for SGM [Sexual and Gender Minority] youth and reducing bullying and harassment in schools” (2017). Mayo concurs, stating, “LGBT students in schools that have GSAs have fewer negative experiences, including lower suicide risk, fewer symptoms of depression, and fewer instances of substance abuse” (2014). The positive impact of representation through a GSA spreads past the four walls of a school, and influences LGBTQ students in their lives in a much greater way.

Creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth is essential in being an effective educator. There are many ways to affirm LGBTQ youth, but it is important to begin with your own classroom and teaching - hold yourself accountable for your language and discourse.

**Personal Interest**

I was originally drawn to the idea of an English Language Arts classroom that affirms the LGBTQ community during the summer semester of 2020, when I was enrolled in a course titled "Gender Issues in the K-12 Classroom." Through digesting all of the articles about representation in the classroom, I realized that during my own schooling I had never encountered so much as one LGBTQ character, let alone an author, topic, or voice. The only times LGBTQ individuals were even mentioned, it was tied to abuse, violence, and condemnation. There was never an affirming experience for my LGBTQ peers. Because I believe that representation creates a space that is safe for those included, it is not enough to say that you are an advocate for LGBTQ students – you need to show it daily through planning, teaching, and action.

Personally, I believe that middle and high school, the time in which many adolescents are exploring their gender and sexuality the most should provide texts that affirm experiences, feelings, and exploration, as well as foster a safe environment where this can occur. English teachers who have the opportunity to choose the texts that they teach should be inclusive of LGBTQ voices when creating their syllabus, planning lessons, and assigning written assignments. Those who do not have the choice to pick their texts must work a bit harder so that they can still include diverse voices in their classroom by utilizing supplementary texts written by and for LGBTQ individuals. It is the role of every English Language Arts educator to set up these spaces that are safe and affirming for all students.

As an English Language Arts teacher and a member of the LGBTQ community myself, the importance of creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth is two-fold. I wish that I had found an affirming place within my own schooling, and now I strive to create that for my own students.

**Current Relationship with the Topic**

Last year, I was a ninth and twelfth grade English Language Arts teacher at a local high school. In my teaching, I supplemented my district's curriculum with articles, songs, images, and poetry by and for LGBTQ individuals. Additionally, I was a vocal supporter of the LGBTQ community in the ways that I presented myself. I knew that something as simple as a visual representation of my support would go a long way. I had a Pride flag on my desk, pronoun pins on my badge, and I went all out for our first ever Pride Day during spirit week. These simple gestures to show my support resulted in four students "coming out" to me within the first few months of classes. While these students were all previously "out" to their friends, I believe that my physical show of acceptance was a steppingstone to their comfort in sharing that information with me, a young educator. These students saw my visual support for the LGBTQ community and used this as an opportunity to come to me for support and validation. To me, this is a testament to the positive impact our show of support has on our LGBTQ students.

While I am not currently teaching English Language Arts, I am still in an educational setting, teaching toddlers at a local daycare. Even within this space, I know the importance of representation, diversity, and an environment that is welcoming and safe for all. While most of my little ones currently are not exploring their identity past their favorite colors and how they like to play with friends, I am still striving to create an environment that removes the boundaries of heteronormativity, just on a much smaller scale. I have purchased board books that include images of diverse family dynamics, I use gender neutral language when appropriate, and I encourage my kids to explore their interests without the veil of gendered norms that often surrounds children's toys and clothes. Hopefully, these small but intentional shifts will follow these kids through to their high school years and beyond.

Creating a space that is affirming for all students, I believe, is the first step in becoming a good educator. Teaching is more than just sharing your knowledge with a group of adolescents – it is also helping to meet their social-emotional needs, form acceptable and sincere relationships with their peers, and creating a space in which they feel accepted and safe. It is about the whole student, not just their grade in your English Language Arts class or their ability to create a concrete thesis statement.

## Part Two: Literature Review

### Schools and LGBTQ Issues

A large portion of students identify as LBGTQ, which stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer" (Mayo, 2014) or "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning" (Wozolek et. al, 2017). These students, whether 'out' or 'closeted' need what every other student needs – to see themselves represented in the curriculum, legislation, and staff within their school. Unfortunately, this representation often does not occur, and LGBTQ students are pushed aside, 'othered,' or harmed within their schools. Educators have an obligation to address the shortcomings of their curriculum, teaching philosophy, and practices in a way that creates an affirming classroom space for *all* students – not just those who fall into the 'norm.' This means pushing for affirming legislation, inclusive curriculum, and anti-discrimination policies that include protections for LGBTQ students.

### LGBTQ Legislation

Legislation surrounding LGBTQ individuals and their rights is nothing new in the United States. From the discussion of same-sex marriage to the military policy of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, LGBTQ rights have been a hot button issue for decades (Mayo, 2014). Unfortunately, much of this legislation is rooted in homophobia: the "fear or hostility toward lesbian, gay, and/or

bisexual people, often expressed as discrimination, harassment, and violence," or transphobia: the "fear or hatred of, or discomfort with, transgender people" which "may manifest into transphobic actions, such as violence, harassment, misrepresentation or exclusion" (Miller et. al, 2020). Because of the homophobia and transphobia ingrained in our society, LGBTQ individuals are not afforded the same rights to marriage, healthcare, education, or employment as their cisgender, heterosexual peers. Since the legalization of same-sex marriage, national and state legislation throughout the United States has been created, signed, or overturned, and this impacts LGBTQ adolescents, including those within our schools.

**National Laws.** National laws relating to LGBTQ individuals are the most important set of legislation to consider. National legislation impacts every LGBTQ individual, regardless of their own state or local legislation. Perhaps the most publicly covered national decision regarding lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals was that of *Obergefell v. Hodges,* "which legalized same-sex marriages across the United States on 26 June 2015" (Mayo, 2020). This decision was a ground-breaking victory for same-sex couples, and validated marriages that had previously been performed in states where same-sex marriage was already legal.

Despite the legalization of same-sex marriage, LGBTQ individuals still face discrimination, and the question remains – in the public's eye - of whether or not this discrimination is illegal and unjust. While workplace discrimination laws have existed for decades, they do not protect every class of people. In 2020, Mayo wrote about three different Supreme Court cases, which brought into question whether current anti-discrimination laws protect LGBTQ individuals. Even within the presentation of national laws, LGBTQ individuals do not have the same protections as their cisgender, heterosexual peers. This distinction between cisgender, heterosexual people and LGBTQ individuals serves as a further 'othering' for

LGBTQ people. LGBTQ students who are paying attention to current rulings at the national level will, no doubt, pick up on this 'othering,' and they may begin to wonder if their safety within schools will be regarded the same way.

Certainly, there are some advancements being made for LGBTQ individuals. As Keenan recounts, "In recent years, mainstream news sources have reported major civil rights victories for LGBT people: we can get married, select a gay-friendly employer from the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, and march in pride parades alongside prominent government officials" (2017). These are great strides for LGBTQ individuals, but not nearly enough to create safe, affirming environments for the adolescents within our schools.

**Laws Concerning LGBTQ Topics & Public Education.** The laws that exist nationally and statewide certainly overarch into education – after all, schools do not exist in a vacuum, free from public policy. As a result, many LGBTQ students find themselves being silenced, pushed aside, or 'othered.' Additionally, there are laws that have been written to specifically dictate what can and cannot be done within schools in regard to LGBTQ topics and students. Many of these laws are, unfortunately, anti-LGBTQ and show students that they are not the population that is protected within their schools. One example of this idea came about when it was announced that, "Betsy DeVos, the United States Secretary of Education under the Trump administration, has overturned rulings that protected transgender students" (Wozolek, 2018). Removing the protections that once existed for transgender students is a clear message that transgender students, in DeVos' eyes, do not deserve to be treated like their peers – like human beings. As Keenan posits, "Policy is pedagogy. When the Department [of Education] says that it will not review complaints about bathrooms from trans children, they teach children that their suffering does not matter" (2018). Transgender students are being shown - by national and

district specific officials - that their safety does not matter, and they do not have a safe place in their own schools.

Many schools have also prohibited teaching about LGBTQ topics, for fear of promoting an LGBTQ lifestyle. Mayo describes these laws, explaining:

> 'No Promo Homo' laws are local or state education laws that prohibit the 'promotion of homosexuality' … [and] 'expressly forbid teachers of health/sexuality education from discussing lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) people or topics in a positive light – if at all' … some of these laws even require that teachers actively portray LGB people in a negative or inaccurate way (2020).

Additionally, there are currently:

> 'Anti-gay curriculum laws' that 'exist in twenty states' where 'more than 25 million children are attending public schools' … and … laws in states like South Dakota and Missouri where local districts are forbidden by law from having anti-bullying policies that enumerate specific protected classes of students – in this case sexual orientation and gender identity (Mayo, 2020).

Not only does the legislation in various states invalidate LGBTQ identities, but it makes discussion of those identities punishable. When LGBTQ students are pushed aside, shunned, and told that they will not be protected from homophobic and transphobic students – or even staff – they are shown that they are not cared for within their schools.

However, not every state, city, or school regards LGBTQ students the same way. Keenan exemplifies this divide in policy, writing, "Cities like New York and San Francisco are working to develop trans-affirming school policies, while states like Tennessee and South Dakota are attempting to ban trans youth from using bathrooms that align with their gender identities"

(2017). The differences in the way districts discuss LGBTQ students are generally representative of the populations in the surrounding areas. This means that LGBTQ students who are not accepted or protected within their schools are likely mistreated within their home communities as well. These adolescents have no escape from the ill-will and poor treatment that they experience in schools. This is a heavy burden to bear and is likely a contributing factor to the suicidal ideation that many LGBTQ adolescents describe (Wozolek et. al, 2017).

**Treatment of LGBTQ Students**

As a result of legislation enacted within national and educational settings, many LGBTQ students report negative experiences in schools. Hope & Hall confirm the impact of legislation on students, stating, "Academic and practitioner-led research over the last decade has provided extensive evidence that LGBTQ-identified children and young people have experienced significant levels of homophobia within schools" (2018). Munro et. al concur, explaining that LGBTQ youth experience almost daily discrimination and microaggressions (2019). Wozolek et. al further this idea, explaining, "LGBTQ youth often experience anxiety and fear for their physical and emotional safety at school" (Wozolek et. al, 2017).

These experiences in turn funnel into the school-to-coffin pipeline; "a system that (un)intentionally positions LGBTQ teens in what has become a horrific, yet normalized, epidemic of queer youth suicide" (Wozolek et. al, 2017). This epidemic has been the subject of various studies, and many scholars discuss the impact that teachers can have on situations of bullying and discrimination (Munro et. al, 2019; Miller et. al, 2020; Wozolek et. al, 2017; Mayo, 2016). To understand what teachers are up against in terms of LGBTQ experiences, it is important to look into the ways LGBTQ students are treated by peers, educators, and administration.

**Treatment by Peers.** The lack of education on – or complete avoidance of – LGBTQ topics in schools often leads to mistreatment at the hands of peers. These peers may not understand LGBTQ individuals, or they may be exposed to negative sentiments surrounding LGBTQ individuals at home, in the media, or in discussions of legislation. Whatever the reason may be, this has deep-rooted negative impacts on those who are being targeted. Munro et. al cite a Canadian study which found that "70% of 3,700 LGBTQ students reported hearing homophobic remarks such as 'that's so gay' and 'faggot' every day" while "approximately 52% described encountering verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation, and more than 20% reported physical harassment. Furthermore, two thirds described feeling unsafe in their schools" (2019). In conjunction with Wozolek, Lindsey, a cisgender, bisexual student recounted, "In seventh grade, the pressure of my peers' comments became too great and I began to starve myself and then cut myself until I felt the only relief would be suicide" (2017). The treatment that many students face when they identify or are perceived as LGBTQ often leads to suicidal thoughts or actions. This alone should be enough for educators to push for clear cut anti-discrimination policies and LGBTQ affirming spaces within schools.

**Treatment by Educators, School Personnel, and Administration.** Certainly, educators, school personnel, and administration should be held to higher standards when it comes to the treatment of students and the discussions surrounding LGBTQ topics. However, that is not always the case, and some educators and school personnel mistreat or ignore LGBTQ students as well. Rands exemplifies this idea, stating, "School faculty and staff rarely intervene and sometimes participate in cases of harassment related to gender identity and gender expression" (2013). The adults that are supposed to protect their students are sometimes found to be just as involved in harming them.

When Lindsey, the aforementioned bisexual student, brought her concerns about bullying and homophobia in her community to school personnel, she not only did not receive help, but was told her sexual orientation meant she could not receive needed comfort for coping with the current circumstances. She recounts, "A guidance counselor that I trusted told me that she did not 'deal with sexual orientation problems.' And she referred me to a 'special counselor' for gays" (Wozolek et. al, 2017). As is the experience of many LGBTQ students, Lindsey's discussion with her guidance counselor left her feeling more isolated than before. When LGBTQ students are 'othered' by the very people who are meant to protect them, they are once again made to feel that they do not have a place within their own school.

Many gender non-conforming students are made to feel that they do not belong because of the cisnormative language that exists within schooling. Munro et. al, when discussing LGBTQ treatment within schools, explained this: "Participants described their school environments as rife with reminders of the gender binary and the pervasiveness of cisnormativity. The language of 'ladies and gentlemen' and 'girls and boys' was highlighted as being used by teachers and administrators in the context of assemblies and classrooms" (2019). When educators use language that excludes those who do not identify with a binary gender, they are quite literally pushing them from the conversation. Aaron, a transgender student discusses this, stating:

> In school I often feel alone in my experience. Teachers often do not know how to treat me, so they fail to acknowledge my presence to avoid dealing with my gender identity. While I am settled now, no longer living in an identifiable state of in-between, the past hangs with me in my everyday experiences at school, in my life, and on my body through unmistakable markers of living in dysphoria (Wozolek et. al, 2017).

While Aaron was experiencing the already challenging dysphoria sometimes associated with gender non-conforming and transgender individuals, he was also met with complete avoidance from educators. Despite the current security in his gender identity, previous mistreatment by peers and educators leaves constant reminders, both mentally and physically.

**Effects of Mistreatment, Homophobia, and Bullying.** Mistreatment in schools does not end within the walls of the school or when the school day ends. Munro et. al explain how mistreatment by peers and educators goes even further than schools: "LGBTQ adolescents are frequently isolated, bullied, and marginalized within their schools and families and often cannot turn to their families for support" (2019). The mistreatment that many LGBTQ students face at schools is exacerbated by unsupportive families.

Additionally, this mistreatment and bullying has lasting impacts on LGBTQ students. Various researchers have found this mistreatment to impact the mental health and academic success of LGBTQ youth. One such researcher found that, "Based on research findings of lower academic achievement (GPAs) and higher truancy among LGBTQ adolescents…, LGBTQ students likely experience less frequent positive academic emotions than their non-LGBTQ peers do" (White et. al, 2018). Munro et. al concur, citing "Kelleher (2009) found that minority stressors, including heterosexist experiences, predict negative psychological outcomes among LGBTQ youth" and "he stipulated that the stigma and discrimination sexual minorities experience 'create[s] a hostile and stressful environment that causes mental health problems'" (2019). White et. al go on to say:

> "Despite cultural shifts promoting greater acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals …, societal challenges and discrimination persist in the United States (including banning transgender individuals from serving in

> the military and proposing exclusionary, so-called 'bathroom bills'…) … LGBTQ youth have greater rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation … and they experience greater rates of bullying than their non-LGBTQ peers …, which negatively impacts their academic performance… (2018).

In discussing the effects of mistreatment, Rands cites data compiled by Kosciw who found that,

> "…the majority of students in our surveys reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation or their gender expression…. Further, the results revealed that students who identify as transgender were at particular risk for victimization in school. Our previous reports have shown how experiences of harassment and assault in school can have direct, negative bearing on student learning and academic success" (2013).

Certainly, there is a wealth of evidence pointing to the negative impact that mistreatment, bullying, and lack of support from adults has. LGBTQ students need support from the adults within their schools, and an unfortunately small portion of students actually receive this support.

The personal accounts of Lindsey and Aaron, as well as the findings presented by Wozolek, Munro, Rands, and White, "demonstrate a particular absence of care at school that is sustained by their peers, teachers, and administrators. It is this absence of care often demonstrated by (in)action against injustices and the maintenance of school policies that allow the school-to-coffin pipeline to thrive" (2017). By ignoring the mistreatment of LGBTQ students, the adults in schools are perpetuating the epidemic of LGBTQ youth suicide.

**GSAs**

There are many ways to create affirming spaces for LGBTQ students, in which adults encourage the discussion of and support for LGBTQ topics. One way this can happen, while directly involving students is through Genders and Sexualities Alliances (GSAs), formerly

known as ‘Gay Straight Alliances.’ GSAs have many purposes within different schools. GSAs are meant to provide either “(1) support and counseling; (2) ‘safe’ spaces for LGBTQ youth and allies; (3) primary sites for education and awareness about LGBTQ issue; and (4) part of broader school efforts to improve school climate for LGBTQ students” (Munro et. al, 2019). Some GSAs even accomplish all four of these purposes.

There are many reasons that GSAs are important for LGBTQ students. Some of these tie into the aforementioned purposes they serve, while others depend on the students involved. One of the main reasons that GSAs are so important is because “being with others with the same identity has the potential to be liberating” (Hope & Hall, 2018). If students are constantly surrounded by negative thoughts surrounding LGBTQ topics and individuals, they may start to internalize these feelings. GSAs can be a great outlet for discussion and validation about these feelings.

The success of GSAs has been shown in recent years. White et. al found that, “The importance of these in-school support systems has been emphasized in research showing that LGBTQ students report more teacher and classmate support than they had a decade ago…and that, in general, the presence of GSAs is associated with positive outcomes for LGBTQ adolescents” (2018). Lapointe and Mayo concur, with the former stating, “GSAs have been adopted by the district government policy because these school clubs are effective in promoting safer spaces for SGM [Sexual and Gender Minority] youth and reducing bullying and harassment in schools” (2017) and the latter stating, “LGBT students in schools that have GSAs have fewer negative experiences, including lower suicide risk, fewer symptoms of depression, and fewer instances of substance abuse” (2014). While the presence of GSAs alone does not change the attitudes or actions of the students around LGBTQ youth, is does give LGBTQ youth a place to

find solace. Affording LGBTQ youth an escape from the mistreatment they receive daily has changed the way that a portion of students regard schooling. This is a monumental finding which should encourage more districts to create and uphold GSAs.

It is important to note, however, that GSAs are only as strong as the staff that organize them. “Without the presence of supportive adults at school to complement the efforts of the GSA advisor, the positive effects of the advisor’s enacted pedagogy during GSA meetings would have been severely limited” (Mayo, 2016). The adults within GSAs need to be committed to making meetings a space where students feel they are being seen and heard by a trusted adult. If LGBTQ students feel the GSA is not serving them or the adults present are not standing against mistreatments within the school, the positive effects will fade, and students will be pushed back into a space that does not accept them.

**The Impact of Supportive Teachers.** While negative experiences with adults at GSAs will have impacts on students, positive experiences will pour out into the broader school community. When discussing the presence of multiple supportive teachers at GSA meetings, Mayo recounts, “For one openly gay junior student, [their presence] indicated to him that the advisor’s classroom was not the only safe space at school. He commented, … You know they support [LGBTQ] issues; so having them discuss what they feel is helpful because now I know that I can go into many classrooms and be safe there’” (2016). Having an adult advocate to organize GSA meetings is one of the first steps in making the GSA successful. However, bringing many vocal, supportive adults to meetings or events shows students that the GSA is not the only space in which they are welcomed and affirmed. Finding ways to show teacher support to students is paramount to creating an affirming school community.

**Changes to be Made**

"Oppressive systems 'don't change just because we name them; they change because we disrupt them'" (Minor, 2018). Pointing out the shortcomings schools have currently is merely the first step in creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth. But addressing them is not enough to change them. Educators must put in the work to make schools safe for all students. This is no easy task, but there are a few steps that educators can take to work towards creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth – within their classrooms, their schools, or their broader communities.

Legislation is not the only thing that makes schooling more challenging for LGBTQ students. As Miller et. al. posit, "the 'silencing of LGBTQ voices within our classrooms and curricula is another, more implicit, form of oppression'" (2020). Educators themselves have a great deal of responsibility to make classrooms and schools welcoming places for all students, especially those who are known to be at an increased risk. Including LGBTQ voices in the classroom can be accomplished in many ways. Whether placing LGBTQ texts in the curriculum or incorporating narratives written by LGBTQ individuals, both LGBTQ students and non-LGBTQ students will benefit from the positive exposure to these topics.

Including LGBTQ topics in the curriculum is important for creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth: "[A] strategy to improve the climate of schools for LGBTQ students is the inclusion of a curriculum that reflects the lives and histories of LGBTQ people" (Snapp et al, 2015). This idea is echoed when Rands quotes Luecke, "'All children need curricular mirrors to see themselves reflected and thus feel safe in being themselves, and they also need curricular windows to feel safe with the differences of others'" (2013) and again: "The inclusion of LGBTQ texts in middle school English classes has been shown to create more affirming spaces

for LGBTQ middle school students" (Miller et. al, 2020). Students benefit from positive exposure to LGBTQ topics and having a space to discuss these topics without being judged.

Incorporating LGBTQ topics does not have to be an its own unit. In fact, creating a unit based entirely on LGBTQ topics may be counterproductive, and may further 'other' LGBTQ individuals. When discussing the inclusion of LGBTQ topics in the curriculum, Crawley & Donovan posit: "We have two perspectives when it comes to using LGBTQ+ texts in K-12 classrooms: (1) texts can be integrated in any unit of instruction without being a designated focus (i.e., 'we are going to learn about LGBTQ+ people now'); and (2) students need space to explore or inquire into contemporary and historical LGBTQ+ lives if we are to disrupt bias. Teachers must choose to act and advocate for equality" (2020). Students benefit from discussing LGBTQ topics in a positive space, and they need a supportive adult to help them explore these topics.

The incorporation of LGBTQ topics in the curriculum is incredibly important in creating affirming spaces for students. It may seem difficult to bring these ideas up to administration, or to counter parental narratives of 'LGBTQ indoctrination.' However, there are many ways to push for LGBTQ inclusion in curriculum. As one student worded it, "'We shouldn't have to censor education for other people's ignorance and, like, internalized homophobia'" (Munro et. al, 2019). Many educational institutes include in their mission that they push for inclusion of all students. Thus, "by framing LGBTQ affirming teaching as a strategy for supporting *all* students, English teachers can counter criticisms of being partisan or indoctrinating" (Miller et. al, 2020). Our schools aim to serve all students, and this cannot be done if LGBTQ topics are restricted from being discussed, and LGBTQ students do not receive the same support as their cisgender, heterosexual peers.

Teaching LGBTQ topics may seem as simple as picking an LGBTQ themed text or incorporating works by LGBTQ writers and artists. This is not the case. Incorporation of LGBTQ topics must be intentional, with great thought put into why books, authors, or themes are being chosen. Picking texts with no regard may leave students confused, LGBTQ students feeling underwhelmed with representation, or simply have no impact on current thoughts and feelings surrounding LGBTQ topics. Mayo discusses the implementation of LGBTQ topics:

> Helmer highlights the importance of the teacher 'setting the stage' and the 'preparatory work' undertaken so that students could maximize their learning potential and successfully navigate any feelings of discomfort caused when they confronted troubling language or images found in various texts or when they were forced to confront their own internalized prejudices (2016).

This idea is echoed by Mayo once again: "'You have a lot of responsibility on your hands. You have the potential to make kids miserable or to help them to be themselves. And you don't know enough and what you will be taught in your program is not enough. You need to do your homework'" (2020). It may be challenging to incorporate LGBTQ topics in the curriculum in a meaningful way. It may be more work than previously considered. But it is critical work in creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth. It is crucial in making strides against the queer youth suicide epidemic.

In the United States, there is a severe lack of support for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students are being shown, through legislation, curriculum, and treatment, that they are not a protected population within their own schools. While discussing the lack of affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth, Keenan writes:

> This problem will not be solved with one-hour or one-day training sessions in which cisgender teachers obediently confess their privileges as cisgender and learn the appropriate words to say and rituals to perform. This is constant work. It will not be solved by calling on students to identify their preferred pronoun at the beginning of the school year. (2017).

Creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth may seem like a daunting task. It will require changes to legislation, curriculum, and anti-discrimination policies. However, we as educators have a responsibility to protect, support, and affirm all of our students.

## Part Three: Contributions to the Profession

### Creating Successful GSAs

LGTBQ students need support from and interactions with peers and educators alike – just as every other student does. As previous paragraphs have discussed, GSAs are a great site for LGBTQ education, support, and affirmation (Munro et. al, 2019). GSAs can be presented in various ways, including as a place for LGBTQ students and their peers to learn about LGBTQ histories, experiences, advocates, and influential LGBTQ public figures. GSAs can also simply be places in which LGBTQ students and peers are able to receive support and guidance from their advisors, discuss the school community in regard to LGBTQ students and staff, organize fundraising events for local LGBTQ funds, or simply muse about the latest music from their favorite artists. No matter purpose an individual GSA serves, its impact within a school community can be monumental, when its focus is paired with intentional, caring advisors who put in the work to affirm their students.

**Literacy-based GSAs.** As an English Language Arts teacher, a major goal of mine is to create a GSA with its main purpose being an educational site for LGBTQ youth. This can be

done in various ways, including a literacy-based GSA. Literacy-based GSAs take a bigger picture approach to discussing LGBTQ topics; rather than focusing on what is happening within a specific school in regard to LGBTQ topics, literacy-based GSAs use multimedia texts as a form of education and conversation starters for students. Literacy-based GSAs can use any form of media, like newspaper articles, films, books, and song lyrics, depending on what students attending would benefit from. Thus, it is important to get to know students on a personal level, rather than creating a one-size-fits-all approach to a literacy-based GSA.

***Sample texts to consider.*** The first step to deciding what texts to use in a literacy-based GSA is to learn how the students attending learn best. Perhaps a large group of students who took part in the school musical attend a GSA, and they would benefit from dissecting song lyrics or plays. Maybe a group of students who also participate in the anime club attend, and graphic novels, comic books, or animated video clips would best serve the group. Student interests should always be a driving force behind learning materials, but especially when personal topics such as love, relationships, and bullying may be brought up.

There are many compiled lists of multimedia texts for LGBTQ youth geared towards parents. There are also resources for teachers who want to incorporate LGBTQ topics into their curriculum. Both kinds of resource lists are a great place to begin searching for meaningful texts to use in a literacy-based GSA. The following list is a compilation of pieces of different text lists, including movies, short films, television series, and books (The Best LGBTQ Movies; Bigham & English; Human Rights Campaign; The LGBTQ Library; LGBTQ+ Inclusive; Movies with LGBTQ+ Characters; Rosenberg; Stepaniuk).

Books. Book choices for a literacy-based GSA have many variables. Depending on the age of students, some books may be too graphic, sophisticated, or just based on events younger

students cannot relate to. The following list includes both educational and relatable books suitable for middle grades and high school students.

Educational:

- What Was Stonewall? – by Nico Medina
- You Be You!: The Kid's Guide to Gender, Sexuality, and Family – by Jonathan Branfman
- Gay & Lesbian History for Kids: The Century-long Struggle for LGBT Rights – by Jerome Pohlen
- Queer, There, and Everywhere: 23 People Who Changed the World – by Sarah Prager
- Stonewall: Breaking Out in the Fight for Gay Rights – by Ann Bausum
- Pride Day: Celebrating Diversity & Community – by Robin Stevenson

Relatable:

- The Parker Inheritance – by Varian Johnson
- Ivy Aberdeen's Letter to the World – by Ashley Herring-Blake
- The Stars Beneath Our Feet – by David Barclay Moore
- The Pants Project – by Cat Clarke
- Being Jazz: My Life as A (transgender) Teen – by Jazz Jennings
- The Best Man – by Richard Peck
- The Moon Within – by Aida Salazar
- Double Exposure – by Bridget Birdsall
- Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out – by Susan Kuklin
- I Am J – by Cris Beam
- October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard – by Lesléa Newman

Movies, television, and short films. Media choices should always be reviewed prior to showing them in class to screen for offensive, inappropriate, or triggering scenes. If a media piece has questionable or potentially triggering content, remember to inform students and administrators of this prior to viewing. When possible, choose media with subtitles or closed captioning to accommodate the needs of various learners.

Choosing media to show in a literacy-based GSA can be a complex task. Is the purpose of the viewing material to be educational or entertaining and relatable? Will the media be used to kickstart discussions, or to build off of previous meetings? Again, the age group and needs of the students in a particular GSA should be the driving force behind media selection, and it is totally fine to choose specific scenes, episodes, or durations of media to view. The following list is a compilation of sample media to view in GSA meetings:

Educational & documentary:

- A Place in the Middle: The True Meaning of Aloha – directed by Dean Hamer & Joe Wilson (25 minutes)
- Bullied: A Student, a School and a Case That Made History – produced by Teaching Tolerance (40 minutes)
- Growing up Trans – produced by PBS Frontline (84 minutes)
- Matt Shepard is a Friend of Mine – produced by Liam McNiff & Michele Josue (88 minutes)
- The T Word – produced by Laverne Cox (42 minutes)
- The Most Dangerous Year – directed by Vlada Knowlton (90 minutes)

Relatable or entertaining:

- Love, Simon – directed by Greg Berlanti (110 minutes)

- "Out" – produced by Pixar (9 minutes)
- "In a Heartbeat" – produced by Pixar (4 minutes)
- "Fifteen" – produced by AJ Baldwin (4 minutes)

News articles. News articles are one way to introduce students attending a literacy-based GSA to discussing LGBTQ topics that might be a bit difficult to absorb. News articles provide solid facts about laws, events, activism, and potential violence within a community without including overly emotional language that may make students upset or uncomfortable. Beginning with news articles may be a good way to lead into a school year, or to introduce a new group of students to the literacy-based GSA.

The following list is a compilation of sources and news articles with a wide variety of news articles relating to LGBTQ topics (LGBTQ News, Research, and Analysis; Compton; LGBTQ Youth; Teaching Tolerance: Gender & Sexual Identity):

- Education Week: LGBT Issues
- 'It Gets Better': How a viral video fueled a movement for LGBTQ youth
- Global News: LGBTQ Youth
- The Conversation: LGBTQ
- Teaching Tolerance: Gender & Sexual Identity

***Questions to consider & conversations to have.*** When discussing any text with students in a literacy-based GSA, there is another question to consider: "Should this text lead to an open-ended discussion where students share thoughts, feelings, and connections or is there something specific I want students to consider?" In some instances, a teacher-facilitated discussion will be the most beneficial, while in others it will be important to let students lead the conversation, and interject if students are asking questions, making statements that aren't quite true, or begin to

show signs of discomfort with what others are saying. As with any discussion, students may need to be led to sincere, affirming conversations surrounding LGBTQ topics. Be sure to remind students they do not have to answer questions that make them feel uncomfortable or too vulnerable. This is meant to be a safe space, and they need to feel comfortable and protected first. The following questions may help to guide a conversation (GLSEN):

- *"Was there anything in this text that you'd like clarification about?"* – Students may ask about terminology used, laws cited, character relationships, or various other topics involved in the text. This is why it is crucial that any text used is critically screened by the advisor(s). Students asking for clarification from advisors will become discouraged if the only response they receive is "I don't know" or "I'm not sure about that."
- *"What did you notice about how LGBTQ individuals in this text discussed their gender/sexuality? Did they use any terms you want clarified?"* – This question allows students to ask questions about genders and sexualities they may be unfamiliar with, in a concrete context.
- *"What expectations of your identity have you felt pressured to look, dress, or act like (consider fashion/ dress stereotypes)? How did that impact how you felt about your identity?"*
- *"How can you be supportive to people who might be terrified to "come out" and share their identities?"*
- *"What does support look like for you and how do you communicate this to the folks who care about you?"*

- *"How does heteronormativity show up in your day-to-day life? What are ways you can help shift the conversations to be more inclusive of unassuming?"*

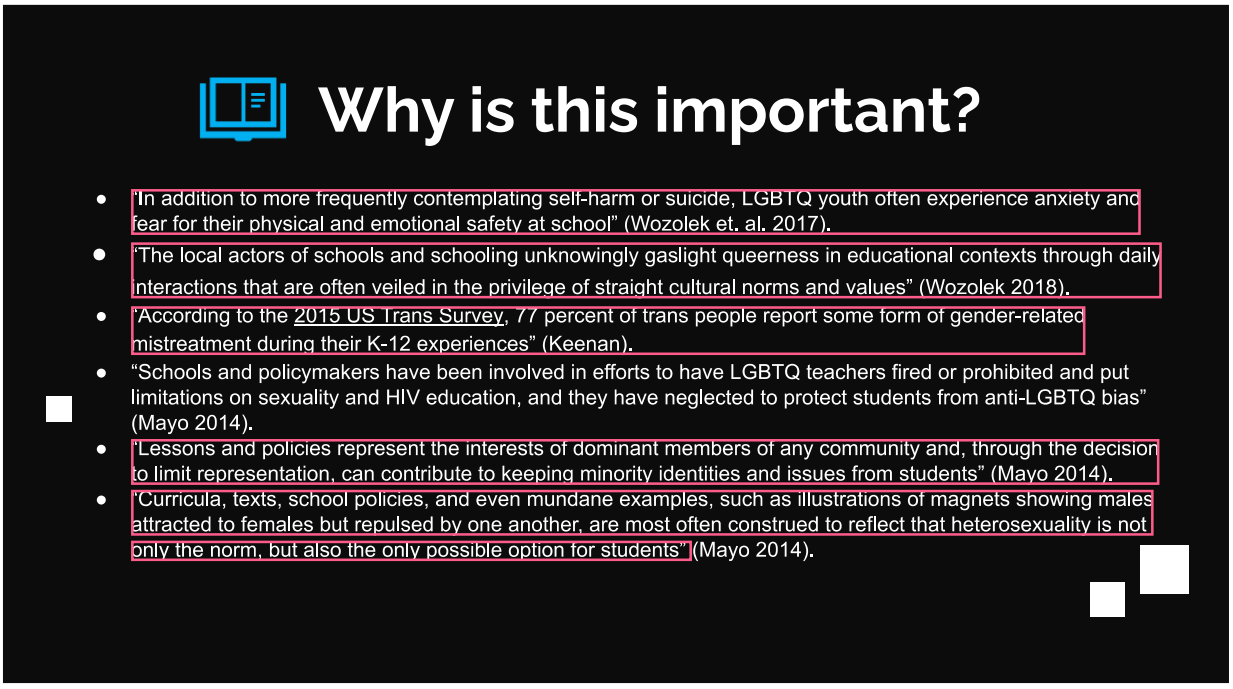
**Resources for GSA Advisors.** Starting a GSA, whether literacy-based of not, can be a tricky task. Between receiving advisor permission to form a club, advertising the club to gain members, and keeping members engaged, there is a lot of work to do. After all of this, the planning and designing activities can begin. On top of other school duties, it may seem like a daunting task with no concrete place to start. However, it has been done time and time again by educators just like you. Many educators, LGBTQ groups, and education based social justice networks have put together guides for starting and facilitating an effective, affirming GSA for students (Colorado GSA Network; Build It Up; The Trevor Project; Live Out Loud).These are all great resources for any educator who wishes to start a GSA, but can't figure out where to start.

- Build It Up: A Guide for Creating Effective GSA Programming
- GLSEN's Activity Guides
- The Trevor Project
- Live Out Loud – Lesson Plans for GSAs

**A Professional Development for Teachers Interested in Creating Affirming Spaces**

Many practicing or preservice teachers have every intention of creating safe, welcoming spaces for all students. However, many fall short because of lack of support from parents, co-workers and administration, misunderstandings of what students truly need, or under preparation in preservice training. The following images are screengrabs from a professional development I created to educate teachers a bit more about why creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ students is so important, as well as some steps these teachers can take within their communities. As an English teacher myself, I designed the professional development for English Language Arts

teachers, but it can be adapted and presented to teachers of all subjects, as well as other school staff. The presentation includes tips for creating affirming classrooms, schools, and broader communities.

# LGBTQ+ Youth Experiences

- "Students are energetic advocates for their own freedoms" (Mayo 2014).
- "Students also reported that they were more likely to hear homophobic comments in the presence of teachers than other forms of biased comments" (Mayo 2014).
- "Experiences of harassment, assault, or simply not seeing any representation of LGBTQ lives in the curricula all contribute to negative school-based experiences" (Mayo 2014).
- "Racialized, sexualized, and gendered violence, as an instrument of sociopolitical terrorism and control, has been increasingly normalized so that the policing, punishment, and subjugation of certain bodies (namely racialized and gendered bodies" go unnoticed" (Mayo 2014).
- "Even students who are not gay report overt homophobic and sexual harassment when they express support for sexual minorities" (Mayo 2014).
- "Their survey found that a whopping 75 percent of trans youth felt unsafe in school, and that trans students were more likely than others to experience harassment and rejection" (Baker 2018).

# More LGBTQ+ Youth Experiences

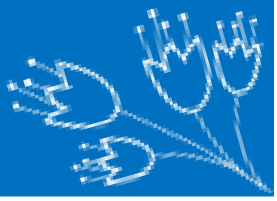
- "Schools are still institutions where gender sorting occurs, whether it is in the classroom or in community settings that debate policy and curricula" (Mayo 2014).
- For one openly gay junior student, the presence of other adults indicated to him that the advisor's classroom was not the only safe space at school" (Mayo 2016).
- "Heterosexual peers rated their schools safer than LGB students did, and further, than LGB students rated their schools safer from gender identity harassment than transgender students did" (Mayo 2014).
- "Framing schools as spaces in which it is important to "avoid controversial issues" is a hegemonic move to maintain the privilege of certain groups in schools" (Rands 2013).
- "I found that schooling is still a site of sorting and conditioning bodies into a system of binary gender, a system steeped in hegemonic whiteness for both its teachers and its students" (Keenan 2017).
- "GSAs have been adopted by the district government policy because these school clubs are effective in promoting safer spaces for SGM youth and reducing bullying and harassment in schools" (Lapointe 2017).
- "All children need curricular mirrors to see themselves reflected and thus feel safe in being themselves, and they also need curricular windows to feel safe with the differences of others" (Keenan 2017).


*LGBTQ+ youth face discrimination, harassment, and assault in schools. Educators have a major role in making schools safe spaces for all students to attend, learn, and grow. How can we do this?*

**What does all of this mean?**

# The Major Spaces to Consider

- ✔ Your classroom
- ✔ Your department
- ✔ Your school
- ✔ Your district
- ✔ Your community



# Your Classroom

Be inclusive of LGBTQ+ creators in your teaching using:

- song lyrics
- poems
- articles
- free-read books
- artwork

Normalize discussing LGBTQ+ topics such as:

- new laws regarding LGBTQ+ rights
- non-traditional romantic relationships
- gender neutral language usage - singular "they"
- remove gendered language when appropriate (ex. "boys and girls" for "class" or "friends")

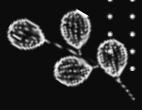
Above all, be an active advocate for all students, and make your allyship known!

# Your Department

When writing curriculum, bring up ideas such as:

- incorporating texts written by and for LGBTQ+ folks
- moving away from the literary canon, which is predominantly made up of work by hetero white men
- adding more diverse creators to the curriculum
- removing work by known LGBTQ+ opponents from curriculum and classroom libraries (yes, even J.K. Rowling)
- collaborating with the history department to plan lessons surrounding LGBTQ+ movements and Stonewall riots
- encouraging choice readings in which students can pick texts that they can relate to - allow for flexibility and representation

# Your School



- Create or plug a GSA (Genders & Sexualities Alliance)
  - leave advisor roles for those within the LGBTQ+ community if possible - experience is important
  - connect students with the GSA - share it with your classes, point questioning kids towards it, talk about it on morning announcements, hang posters in your class/hallway, etc.
- Make sure your school's GSA is intersectional - having a space that is welcoming for ALL students is crucial
- Advocate for gender neutral bathrooms and locker/changing rooms, whether there is an active need or not
- Advocate for the rights of transgender students, allowing them to use the spaces that match their identity - have this in place before it becomes an active need

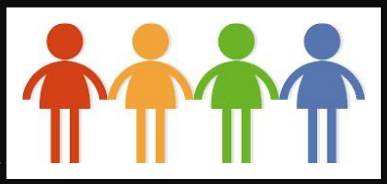
# Your District

- Advocate for comprehensive sex ed - sex ed that includes non-heteronormative relationships, gender neutral language, and resources for all gender and sexual identities
- Push for protections for LGBTQ+ students, including anti-bullying, anti-discriminatory, and sports inclusion policies
- Speak out when something (policy, language, sports teams, etc.) seems trans-exclusionary
- Push for diverse staffing in offices, classrooms, positions of power, etc. - students and families deserve representation on all levels


District_Policy Image

# Your Community

- Attend pride events - show your community your allyship
- Volunteer at spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals
- Attend educational events regarding LGBTQ+ topics



- Vote for officials who will support the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals
- Financially support organizations that work with LGBTQ+ individuals
- Sign petitions that fight for LGBTQ+ rights

"LGBT students in schools that have GSAs have fewer negative experiences, including lower suicide risk, fewer symptoms of depression, and fewer incidents of substance abuse" (Mayo 2014).


https://www.pexels.com/@mikebirdy

# Baker's Tips for Equity

1. "Respect pronoun choice and own up to misgendering"
   a. apologize and move forward - pronouns ARE identity
2. "Increase representation with trans-specific "inclusion signals"
   a. mugs, posters, pins, flags, etc.
3. "Help students unlearn transphobia with restorative discipline"
   a. peace circles and peer mediation - accountability
4. "Monitor bullying hotspots"
   a. bathrooms, locker rooms, cafeterias, etc. - spaces without active supervision
5. "Ensure that GSAs are trans-inclusive"
   a. make GSAs safe for ALL LGBTQ+ youth

(Baker 2018)

"Find aspects of your identity that are deviant and find ways to share them with the world. And do a fuck load of homework . . . You have a lot of responsibility on your hands. You have the potential to make kids miserable or to help them to be themselves. And you don't know enough and what you will be taught in your program is not enough. You need to do your homework" (Mayo 2016).

As a closing activity, please discuss the following questions with your table group:

1. What is one thing you will put into practice in your own classroom this month?
2. What is one way you will affirm student needs when speaking with your peers?
3. How can you use your platform as a classroom teacher to create an affirming space for LGBTQ+ youth?

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## Conclusion

All students need to feel represented in their education. Creating affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth is a major step in slowing the school-to-coffin pipeline for LGBTQ youth. Providing spaces for LGBTQ youth to discuss struggles, relationships, and experiences is crucial to creating comfortable spaces. Developing a strong, safe GSA for LGBTQ students is a good first step to creating an affirming experience for LGBTQ youth. GSAs can be successful sites of education, affirmation, support, or school community improvement efforts. Literacy-based GSAs are a successful way to educate students, in which LGBTQ topics, histories, and experiences are discussed. Choosing texts and discussion topics should revolve around the students within your particular GSA, and discussions should be student-centered whenever possible. Providing LGBTQ students and their peers a safe space to discuss challenging topics such as love, relationship, bullying, and identity can make a world of difference in creating a better school environment for students, both inside and outside of the GSA.

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