

# LGBTQ INCLUSION AS AN OUTCOME OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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## *Abstract*

Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) are at greater personal and academic risk than their heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al., 2014). Many experience a negative school environment and few see themselves represented in the curriculum. According to the literature, few English/Language Arts teachers are utilizing LGBTQ-focused texts in their courses (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Page, 2014). This case study demonstrates how one English/Language Arts teacher provided challenging, safe, inclusive educational experiences for students. In so doing, the instructor also provides an example of critical pedagogy in practice. The multiple strands of the teacher's instructional approach are discussed, with the goal of helping in-service and pre-service teachers to envision ways in which they, too, might engage in critical pedagogy as a means of challenging inequity and supporting sexual minority and other students.

*Keywords:* critical pedagogy, LGBT, curriculum

## PERSPECTIVE AND PURPOSE

Principles of critical pedagogy and critical multicultural education (which includes attention to sexual orientation and gender identity) embrace transforming curriculum, increasing educational equity, and preparing students to live in a diverse society (Banks, 2008; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Mayo, 2010). Critical multiculturalism also demands a change in how educators understand knowledge, difference, and action, envisioning a redefinition of school knowledge from the heterogeneous perspectives and identities of disadvantaged groups. This theory asks that educators avoid either minimizing or universalizing difference, or emphasizing or exoticizing otherness. Both critical pedagogy and critical multicultural education require a reorientation from an ethnocentric perspective to a consideration of diverse, contradictory, and marginalized (or silenced) interpretations. Such perspectives call for the acknowledgement of power and privilege and the ways they operate to reproduce inequity. Asymmetrical power relationships are established and maintained through obscuring and mythicizing social phenomena and keeping oppressed groups anesthetized and passive (Freire, 1997). “The dominant class secures hegemony—the consent of the dominated—by supplying the symbols, representation, and practices of social life in such a way that the basis of social authority and the unequal relations of power and privilege remain hidden” (McLaren, 2003, pp. 76-77). Schools often serve as sites of hegemonic control, reproducing inequitable outcomes.

Yet, schools and classrooms can also function as sites of resistance (McLaren, 2003, p. 78). Teachers and students can unveil power structures and discourses in order to question them. If educators view the curriculum as a place of conflict and struggle, we can use it for empowerment, “the process by which students learn to question and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming, rather than merely serving, the wider social order” (p. 89). According to critical values, teachers, teacher educators, and researchers should challenge social and structural inequity and commit ourselves to carrying our critique into transformative action.

Unfortunately, practices based on principles of equity, inclusion,

and transformative action are not implemented effectively where K-12 students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)<sup>1</sup> are concerned. Sexual minority students feel less safe, less engaged, less respected, and less valued in schools than do their heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al., 2012; Lecesne, 2012; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). The National School Climate Survey (NSCS) reports that LGBT students still commonly experience a negative school environment (Kosciw et al., 2014). A negative school environment not only affects students' attitudes toward school but also impacts students' academic achievement and goals. According to the NSCS report, LGBT students who experienced harassment had lower grade point averages and were more than twice as likely to report that they did not intend to pursue post-secondary education (Kosciw et al., 2012, p. xv). Lower educational achievement and aspirations, in turn, can influence students' future wealth, stability, and economic, social, and political power.

Recently, fueled in part by these findings as well as by publicized youth suicides, bullying has been in the national spotlight. While victimization of youth is an important issue, there is evidence to suggest that bullying alone may not fully account for the psychological and educational risks experienced by LGBTQ students. In a recent study, Robinson and Espelage (2012) found that “although victimization does explain a portion of the LGBTQ–heterosexual risk disparities, substantial differences persist even when the differences in victimization are taken into account” (p. 309). They continue to say that schools and educators must attend to stigmatizing messages through implementing other means of addressing school climate than just anti-bullying policies.

Such findings suggest that other approaches to creating a positive school environment for LGBTQ students, such as implementing LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, are imperative. Studies find that few students (<17%) have experienced inclusive curriculum (Kosciw et al., 2012; Blackburn and Buckley, 2005). In schools where students *do* report usage of an inclusive curriculum, LGBT students experience a safer school environment, less absenteeism, a feeling of more connection to their schools, and greater acceptance from their peers (GLSEN,

2011). Other studies have reported positive impacts of inclusive curriculum, including a greater perception of safety (Toomey et al.; 2012, Russell et al., 2006; O’Shaughnessey et al., 2004) and reduced homophobia (Knotts & Gregorio, 2011).

Perhaps more important than the functionality of inclusive curriculum is the fact that curriculum is tied to power. The curriculum demonstrates whose stories deserve to be told and who deserves to be represented—and most often, LGBTQ youth are not represented (Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Curwood et al., 2009; McLean, 1997). “There is a loud silence in curricula that indicates to all students that there are some people in the school who do not deserve to be spoken about and that even some interested in protecting sexual minority youth appear willing to use a community agreement on civil silence as protection” (Mayo, 2009, p. 267). Discourses in schools normalize invisibility of sexual minority youth and thus perpetuate dehumanizing bias against them. “Official silence makes schools hostile places for sexual minority youth and any youth perceived to be a sexual minority” (Mayo, 2009, p. 268).

## QUESTIONS

Research highlights the need for teachers to support LGBTQ students through structures, policies, and equitable practices in addition to addressing bullying (Kosciw et al., 2012; Robinson & Espelage, 2011, 2012). Educators must adopt broader understandings of LGBTQ-inclusive environments. Pre-service and in-service teachers can benefit from seeing examples of inclusion in action. I sought out an English/Language Arts teacher who regularly integrated LGBTQ texts in her courses as a focus for a case study in order to provide such a portrait. The questions explored in this case study were: How does one English/Language Arts teacher integrate LGBTQ curriculum in the classroom? What are the elements of her practice that make her practice inclusive (or not)? How did inclusion occur? In what ways were LGBTQ people and themes included in the classroom and curriculum?

While the study began as an investigation of curriculum and how students were included or excluded in the classroom, as I analyzed data I found that this case study also provided an example of an evolv-

ing critical pedagogy. Therefore, I also asked “What elements of critical pedagogy were most prominent in the teacher’s practice?” since the teacher’s engagement in inclusive education seemed to reflect core concepts and practices of critical pedagogy. Scholars point out that critical pedagogy can be seen as deeply theoretical, in need of living strategies to carry out its theoretical and conceptual goals (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres 2003; Ellsworth 1989). This case study provides a model not only for LGBTQ-inclusive practice but also a portrait of critical pedagogy in action.

The case teacher, Ms. Lanza<sup>2</sup>, spoke frequently and explicitly of power, equity, and democracy; therefore, I have chosen to focus on critical pedagogy as the primary construct. Critical pedagogy, however, serves as a philosophical support for approaches such as queer pedagogy and critical multicultural education. Like critical pedagogy, queer pedagogy de-centers dominant power discourses and makes visible marginalized voices and experiences, as it encourages oppositional and resistant teaching (Britzman, 1995; Bryson & de Castell, 1993). Thus, this case might provide insights into an enacted queer pedagogy as well as critical pedagogy.

## METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

I explored these questions and topics by studying the focal teacher’s curriculum, pedagogical practices, and students’ perspectives. In order to understand the complex and multi-faceted nature of teaching and learning in this context, I utilized ethnographic methods of participant-observation and qualitative interviews to collect and analyze data (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Creswell, 1998). The classroom teacher participated in one semi-structured interview of approximately two hours and four unstructured interviews that varied in duration from 30 to 90 minutes. In addition, numerous other informal conversations and interactions were captured in field notes. Students in the teacher’s classes also participated in a semi-structured interview of approximately 45 minutes. Students were given the option to participate in focus groups or to engage in individual interviews. A total of 22 students participated in interviews, while other additional student perspectives were included in field notes.

I was immersed in the research site full time for at least 10 days twice during the school year in order to gather information about the school community beyond the classroom. In addition to interviews, I gathered data in the form of field notes resulting from participant-observation of three instructional units, and I collected and analyzed documents and artifacts (such as student work samples and photographs). I used an inductive, recursive coding technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994), reading data multiple times and applying a coding system to identify emerging themes (Seidman, 1998). At every reading, themes were further refined and confirmed from other data sources. Utilizing multiple data sources, as advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1990), as well as discussing and verifying emerging themes with the research participant (the classroom teacher), helped to establish trustworthiness.

The context of the study was a small secondary school (grades 9-12) of approximately 150 students, located in a community of about 40,000 residents, which is often described as “metropolitan adjacent” in the Upper Midwest United States. Woodland Hills Senior High is highly diverse in terms of race and approximately 85% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The school primarily serves students who have had personal difficulties that impacted their performance in other high schools—for example, students who were expelled, incarcerated, homeless; dealt with substance abuse; or faced other issues. Though the school identified itself as an alternative school, it followed the same curriculum as the other schools in the district and met the same state and district standards. The classroom teacher is female, White Italian-American, in her early 30s, and has approximately ten years of teaching experience. She self-identifies as a straight ally to the LGBTQ community. Approximately 17% of Ms. Lanza’s students openly identified as LGBTQ, and every student who focused on this topic in interviews or informal conversation informed me that her classroom was known as a safe space for all students.

Ms. Lanza divided her time between teaching three courses and two class periods of instructional coach duties. The three courses she taught (and I observed) were a “reading intervention”-focused grade 10 English class, Read 180 (a course which used the Scholastic Read

180 program to assist struggling readers), and a senior English elective course focused on essential questions about art and literature. During my time in Ms. Lanza's classes, I observed readers' workshops, a unit on Sherlock Holmes (which also integrated study of censorship and academic freedom), a unit on nonfiction text related to illness and epidemics, and a unit about banned, censored, and challenged books.

## FINDINGS AND THEMES

At the heart of this study is concern over the school experiences of sexual minority students. The case study teacher displayed several attitudes and behaviors that, taken together, created a safe yet challenging educational space for all, but particularly for LGBTQ students. This section will detail the elements of Ms. Lanza's classroom that signaled inclusion and safety to sexual minority students. Then, the ways in which critical pedagogy played out and supported curricular and pedagogical inclusion of LGBTQ students and themes are discussed.

### ELEMENTS OF INCLUSION

The district's senior high curriculum is comprised of sets of texts that have been approved by a curriculum team as meeting the themes of the curriculum and meeting the state standards. Individual instructors choose texts to teach from these collections. Ms. Lanza's choices included as many LGBTQ characters, storylines, and issues as possible within the approved curriculum. She also made the curriculum more inclusive and multicultural by encouraging LGBTQ texts for student choice reading in readers' workshops, and by utilizing some of these texts in whole-class readings. The school does not have a school library; the only texts available to students come from Ms. Lanza's classroom library that she has created. Her collection is multicultural and includes a large number of texts featuring LGBTQ characters and storylines, thus signaling inclusion to her diverse array of students and demonstrating Ms. Lanza's commitment to equitable representation of diverse groups.

Ms. Lanza utilized several other techniques to include marginalized groups in her curriculum. She taught units on academic freedom and censorship wherein she skillfully and sensitively engaged students

with questions of LGBTQ curricular inclusion, discussions of racism, and questions of privilege. In addition, student identities were honored through the building of a learning community in which members supported each other and understood the need to eliminate slurs and discriminatory speech. Through questioning, inclusion of students' choices in the curriculum, and attention to experiences and issues in students' worlds, the definition of what could be known was expanded and transformed (McLaren, 2003).

Though there were multiple “curricular layers” present in the classroom—units on academic freedom and censorship, focuses on gender and gender identity in non-fiction articles, the use of whole-class readings that included LGBTQ characters or issues—LGBTQ literature featured most prominently in Ms. Lanza’s reader workshops. Students enthusiastically reported reading works such as *Hard Love*, *Killing Mr. Griffin*, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* during their choice reading time. While these LGBTQ texts were the most often cited in interviews, many other texts were read by students, including choices like *Ask the Passengers* and *Rainbow Boys*. Ms. Lanza had a clearly articulated philosophy when working with curriculum selection at both the district level and for her individual courses. At the district level, she helped to shift the focus to be a more student-centered one; she attempted to serve as a proxy for student voices in the process:

...But we really kind of hashed through [book selection]...and this was kind of an uncomfortable conversation, but [I kept saying] ‘Let’s pick books that address contemporary issues that are facing young people now.’ Because I think that so many times the students are not the main part of the equation when we make these instructional decisions, because you’ve got adults at the table reading young adult lit, and reacting to it as adults would react to it.

Ms. Lanza believed that if the curriculum was student-centered it would need to include texts that addressed real world issues and themes relevant to students’ experiences—and some adults being uncomfortable with those texts came with the territory. Drawing on students’ lives and experiences in curriculum choices was empowering, making LGBTQ students and experiences visible.



## ELEMENTS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

I assert that though the multiple approaches Ms. Lanza utilized were effective (as judged by improvement in test scores and by students' responses), they were enhanced by the philosophies and practices of critical pedagogy which permeated everything she did. Ms. Lanza's multifaceted approach illustrated critical pedagogy in action. This is helpful, as critical pedagogy carries with it a diverse range of meanings and practices that are ever contested and evolving. As such, it is not a mechanistic series of steps to be followed (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003). This complexity can challenge pre-service and in-service teachers who ask, "How do we DO critical pedagogy?" Portraits such as this are not meant to provide a prescriptive formula to "doing" critical pedagogy but to provide a means of concretizing the abstract and spurring reflection on individual practice, as educators seek how they can "do" critical pedagogy within their own contexts and positionalities.

Though I observed several dimensions of critical pedagogy in action (such as enacting a loving community, centering student voice, and using critical literacy practices), here I will focus primarily on equity and power (empowerment) and dialogue.

**Empowerment: Equity and power.** Ms. Lanza cited equity as the core of her philosophy of education. Though she considered herself an ardent advocate for the LGBTQ community, her focus was on equity for all and justice for those who were marginalized, not solely on converting homophobic students or boosting self-esteem of LGBTQ students (Britzman, 1995). She frequently discussed fairness and equity of opportunity for students and also often referred to structural inequity in her interviews. She was deeply aware of how societal structures, asymmetrical power relationships, and imbalances of resource distribution affected students' educations and their lives. She saw how inequities in society based on income level, sexual orientation, gender, and race marginalized and disempowered her students. One example of her understanding and critique emerged in her initial interview. She said,

I think that there's a huge disparity in [our community]. I think

we've got the diversity piece; people are really working on [that], because we're seeing the community change [to] being a big hub for recent immigrants from Western Africa and Sudan... I think that [the community is] more ready to deal with that because it's a visible change in the district...[W]e're not talking as much about [the fact that]...there's a huge disparity wealth-wise in our community. We've got a huge population of students who are homeless, or who are bouncing from motel to motel to a friend's couch, and I don't think people are as aware of what the new face of homelessness looks like, because we think of homeless as the people who live under the bridge by the [river]...but there's a huge population of these kids who don't have a place to stay...[O]n the other end you've got a huge community of people who are very, very wealthy because of the corporations and the businesses...And so what does that mean for our students, and what is the role of school in all that, and what do we want our [school] community to look like.

An equity lens filtered the teacher's actions in and out of the classroom. For example, Ms. Lanza commented how her students experience poverty and inequity:

Isn't it interesting that 85% of our kids who end up here are low-income students who get free and reduced lunch? What does that say about...all of these things set up against them that are not equal? What does that say about how the district views these kids?

The students who were filtered out of the other high schools in the region (whether intentionally or unintentionally) were primarily low income students and/or students of color and/or LGBTQ students. Ms. Lanza and her students were very aware of Woodland Hills being seen by other students and teachers as a devalued school attended by devalued students. The differential status of the students at various schools was experienced painfully when Ms. Lanza's students were regularly not invited to district-wide activities—until the assembly on drug use was held and her students were encouraged to attend.

Not only was Ms. Lanza aware of the factors that affected her stu-

dents' lives outside of school, but she also worked to help colleagues reflect on this. At Woodland Hills Senior High, the faculty and administration made the decision not to assign homework. The school understood that students do not all have the same advantages or access to resources. Ms. Lanza commented on this policy:

We read so much research when we made that decision to go homework-free...because kids are like, "Well, I have to work from 3:30 to 9:30 to support a family that I'm taking care of." We have students who are the mom for six other kids, you know? And so, they don't have the time to do homework. It's not that they don't want to do it, it's that...it's an older worldview, to think that every kid is gonna leave school and go home and have a snack and a desk, and a quiet place to work, and a mom who's gonna be like, "You need to do your homework." They don't have that, and so we're not gonna do them any favors by sending them home with seventy problems.

Ms. Lanza saw that school structures and practices (such as homework) set up students for success or failure, which ultimately marginalizes or empowers youth. She saw problems not only as individual but systemic (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; McLaren, 2003), whether those issues be related to class, sexuality, race, or things like struggling in school. As the problems were systemic, they called for systemic "solutions" such as the school-wide homework policy. Ms. Lanza saw the homework policy particularly benefitting low income students and sexual minority students, as a large number of her students were homeless and LGBTQ students were disproportionately represented in this population.

Other examples of understanding problems as rooted in individual and institutional systems of power are Ms. Lanza's political activism (she was very active in the fight to defeat a bill banning same-sex marriage) and her willingness to address school culture. She described how the school has been challenged by its students and faculty to support LGBTQ persons:

We bust a lot of same-sex PDA [public displays of affection] in the hallway...I remember there was one instance where

there were girls making out in the stairwell, and I [told them to stop]...And they were like, “You’re a homophobe!” Part of me wanted to say, “Obviously you’re talking to the wrong lady!” Because it was the first time anyone has ever said that to me, but I get that...maybe as a student people have responded to you that way, and so it’s less about me and more about what their experiences are...And so I had to say, really genuinely, “Why would you think that?” and talk it through with them...So with teachers, I brought that up at the staff meeting, and we really talked through, are we calling heterosexual students on [PDA] as much as we are calling the same-sex-partnered students on it? Because if we aren’t, then that’s something we need to take into consideration...It’s an opportunity to take stock, and to just take a step back and look instead of reacting defensively and saying, “I am not!”, but to say, “This is indicative of something in their experience”, so it’s just a gut check. Let’s step back, let’s take a look, and if we can honestly say it’s all equal, then great! Um, but maybe we can’t, maybe they’re experiencing something that we need to know about. It’s not about me, it’s about the whole situation.

The idea of equity and fairness was not only interpersonal to Ms. Lanza in terms of treating all students well, but was institutional as she and her colleagues explored their policies and the ways fairness was or was not experienced by students in their school. Equity was not assumed by Ms. Lanza; rather, she continually questioned how she and her colleagues could create more fair and supportive policies and practices for the students. In this small way, Ms. Lanza began to question the practices and policies of the school (McLaren, 2003) and also challenge a deeply embedded heterosexism which permeates schools.

Ms. Lanza practiced empowering students through equitable advocacy and policy action on many levels. For instance, in an interview, one transgender student told the story about how when he first came to the school he immediately noticed how Ms. Lanza integrated LGBTQ experiences in terms of the texts they read in class. He also noticed how she created space for all students at the table during instruction. This led the student to share his experiences with Ms. Lanza and ask

her to help him navigate how to handle his transgender identity within the school, which had policies about using students' legal names on records. The policy led school officials to use the student's former, non-preferred name in all interactions, which made the student uncomfortable. Not only did Ms. Lanza go discuss this student's dilemma with the office and ask that the staff use the student's preferred name, but she began an exploration of the value of the policy with the administration to see if the school could be structurally more inclusive of transgender students.

**Empowerment: Literacy.** Ms. Lanza believed literacy could empower students (Delpit, 1995); therefore, she endeavored to help students to be competent and critical readers and thinkers and not just consumers of texts. She stated:

I want them to be proficient readers and proficient writers when they leave us, because I owe it to them to make sure that they can do that. Because if you can't, you're at a disadvantage. And so I think we're seeing that [high priority], because we have 70% of our kids proficient in reading [up from 25%], because we really have decided, 'This matters to them. And it's really important.' And we've done that through aligning with the standards and with high expectations for them. So, we gotta make sure it happens. It affects their lives. Will they only be equipped to make [minimum wage] at McDonald's or will they be able to do something different with their lives? Will they question or will they be drones?

Though critical literacy explores how human subjectivity is transformed through literacy, it also acknowledges the social, economic, and political power that can be exercised through literacy (Luke & Freebody, 1997).

Ms. Lanza recognized that if she and the schools failed to help students become literate citizens, students would simply be channeled into a lower echelon of society. Her low income students would have little chance of social mobility as adults. They would not be able to advocate for themselves or for anyone else. In other words, Ms. Lanza recognized that the school (and she) played a role in social reproduc-

tion (Apple, 1995; McLaren, 2003). She saw that schools prepare students for positions in society and it was important for her students to be able to defy low expectations. Ms. Lanza understood that if students were seen as victims or saw themselves as victims that “they lose sight not only of their strength to resist but of the possibility that they can intervene and change the perspective of those in power” (hooks, 2003, p. 74).

**Empowerment: Pedagogy.** Ms. Lanza enacted critical pedagogy by focusing on issues of power as related to gender, class, race, socioeconomic status, culture, and sexuality in her teaching. Examples were sprinkled throughout nearly all of her lessons. Ms. Lanza discussed one upcoming lesson like this:

I think that the books...and the texts that we choose, really link into that [power, justice, culture, gender]...And so, we even do that with the nonfiction stuff we pick...We do “Article of the Week” every Friday in [English 10]...and the one that we’re gonna be doing this Friday is about the young girl in Pakistan who was attacked because she wanted to go to school. So, we pick different things that have different ideas in them, to promote that. So what does it mean to want to go to school against all odds, and what does that mean about your gender, or what does that mean about, you know, equal access? Who benefits from her going or not going to school? What does that mean about how power functions? How is the story told? What is the impact of that? Is there something comparable happening in our community or in your life? [We dig] through that.

During the unit on *A Study in Scarlet*, a Sherlock Holmes story, Ms. Lanza guided the discussion about the book in ways that helped engage students in critical explorations. For example, the killer in the book has a long back story related to being Mormon and the mistreatment of the woman he loved by the Mormon leadership. Ms. Lanza used this aspect of the novel to discuss with the class the notion of prejudice, the idea of how context influences perception, the role of gender in the occurrences of the story, abuse of power, and the cycle of abuse. When discussing prejudice, the students took the conversation in the direction of who experiences prejudice today. They en-

gaged deeply with how sexual minority people and people of color are framed in our society.

In another lesson with a different set of students, the teacher described historical instances of censorship and also displayed images of contemporary book-burnings. Related to the historical incidents, she asked, “If you’re having a war with someone, why would a library be a target?” In small groups, the students talked about how taking away the library takes away the people’s culture. “It takes away your history,” one student said. “It’s a way to control you.” In these lessons, students not only learned about censorship but about how institutions and cultural forms (texts) serve to control knowledge and engage in social production and reproduction.

Students took these lessons about power and control to heart. In focus groups, the students continued to discuss who has the authority to choose books and they expressed adamant opposition to censoring or challenging books, particularly ones that were not part of the core curriculum:

Michaela: Well, the book that I’m reading for first hour...is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*...but I think it’s being banned because it talks about underage kids partying, and one of his friends is gay...A lot of the stuff he says, I can relate to it so much...I don’t see why they would wanna take that away from people to be able to read it, ‘cause I’m a firm believer that when I find a book, it’s like fate for me, ‘cause then I’ll read it and it teaches me something about myself, or it opens me more in my mind to figure myself out. So if you take that away from people, it’s like taking away their chance to find themselves from other people’s literature or work. That’s just messed up to me. That’s controlling my mind.

Jack: Yeah, ‘cause you know that Patrick is gay, but you can still see that he’s a good person. Like, it’s not gonna turn everybody gay if you read that book. They still have really good messages for people to take away from it.

The students used their lessons from Ms. Lanza’s class to question school and societal structures and to reflect on representation. They

appreciated the variety of representations in literature that they encountered in Ms. Lanza's classroom and expressed uniformly positive views toward LGBTQ literature. Additionally, they saw reading and writing as powerful. The critical literacy skills modeled by Ms. Lanza helped students to analyze rhetoric and understand how language was used as a tool of power. As one student reported,

You see how people's opinions are affected by the commercials and marketing and stuff. I'm learning more ways to say things so that maybe things will change. I mean, that's what politicians do, right? Talk a lot? You just have to talk the right way to make things happen.

Ms. Lanza understood the importance of learning language so that students could be armed in the struggle to improve the world (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1998). She consistently articulated her desire to help students to improve their own lives, their communities, and the world. She saw this as the end goal of education—an expression of *phronesis*, the idea that “actions and knowledge must be directed at eliminating pain, oppression, and inequality, and at promoting justice and freedom” (McLaren, 2003, p. 85).

**Dialogue.** One of my pre-service teachers asked Ms. Lanza about her philosophy of teaching. The response was simple: “Everything's a conversation.” She considered all aspects of teaching to be dialogic in some fashion and she enacted the principle of dialogue by various means. She had taken to heart the idea that “conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator” (hooks, 2003, p. 44).

In Ms. Lanza's classes, dialogue occurred throughout instruction. For example, students responded to texts in multiple ways via speaking and writing. It was important to Ms. Lanza to always engage students in discussion and dialogue so that students could process texts and ideas. One way in which she evoked dialogue and helped students learn was to allow all perspectives to be present in the class—she did not have unilateral rules about what opinions could be expressed when responding to literature. Rather, she always challenged students to discuss why they held a perspective or why a text or comment might



be compelling or offensive or inaccurate. Students were constantly engaged in conversations about how to make their communities more just and more inclusive.

One example occurred during the day's opening journal assignment. Ms. Lanza had asked students to write about the five things they thought teens should read about. The students shared their examples with each other, which included such responses as politics, dropping out of school, violence, drugs and alcohol, sex and relationships, friendships, and self-respect. Ms. Lanza said, "A lot of people in the community might be concerned about teens reading about sex or drugs or sexuality. So why is it important that teens read about that stuff?" Students animatedly discussed why adults want to control teenagers and the importance of love and relationships. During this conversation, the students and Ms. Lanza consistently included all kinds of love and relationships:

Taz: I think it's important to have books about sex and love because we [teenagers] are human, too! I think everybody wants to be loved. But it's scary, too. Like when you're first starting to hook up with somebody...

Jaycee: My sister's gay and it's even scarier—you don't know if the person you like is gay or straight sometimes. She asked a girl out once...and then the chick...said she was gonna kick her ass!

Ms. Lanza: That does sound scary. What did...

Jaycee: Yeah, she wasn't so scared about, like, getting beat or anything but just sad that this girl didn't like her and maybe really hated her because of being gay.

Ms. Lanza: Why do you think that books about sex and love would make a difference?

Laura: Maybe if that girl knew some gay people she, like, wouldn't freak out.

Taz: Maybe J's sis needs a book on gaydar! 'Ten Steps to Figuring out Who's Gay.'

Jaycee: I don't get why it matters if you're gay or straight or

whatever. If people could just be who they are it would be so much better. Like, why do you have to pop off when someone likes you? That's stupid.

Ms. Lanza: So reading stories about all sorts of relationships might be helpful in figuring out how to establish those relationships?

Troy: But we already got that fake-ass stuff [delivers movie lines in falsetto]. We don't need no more Romeo and Juliet. If you're gonna make us read that crap you gotta keep it real!

Love and relationships weren't framed only as heterosexual in discussions in Ms. Lanza's class. Because the classroom was a safe space for dialogue in general and students' voices were valued, they were free to express themselves about topics that might be challenging, like sex and sexuality.

Because throughout her courses Ms. Lanza focused on equity and inclusion related to race, income, and religion in addition to sexual orientation and gender (in other words, focused on equity across the board), students were receptive and open to classroom readings and activities related to gender identity and sexual orientation; they did not see these as extraordinary or as the teacher having a "hidden agenda." Focusing on LGBTQ topics was not a "special event" in the classroom (Britzman, 1995, p. 151) but were just a normal part of the conversation. Not only did this openness allow for all sorts of dialogue, but it created spaces for LGBTQ issues in particular. Ms. Lanza expressed her views on having open linguistic spaces, saying:

There's a fairly clear expectation that, especially when we have conversations like this [about equity, sexual orientation, race, etc.], that it's cool to say whatever you think. Because I think that sometimes...the kids are uncomfortable to wade through their understandings, because...the flip can happen where, if you're a kid who honestly feels conflicted about whether or not we should be talking to children about homosexuality because of what your belief system is [you get shut down]...it feels like they should be allowed to talk through those things, and think about them, instead of other kids shutting them down and say-

ing, ‘That’s hateful, you’re a bigot, blah blah blah.’ ...It’s just as totalitarian to shut down the conversation, you know, quote-unquote ‘for the good’—it’s at least not productive, I think, in terms of learning. They’re not going to really process whatever the issue is that they’re thinking about and they won’t feel welcome or free in the classroom.

Ms. Lanza enacted this philosophy of open dialogue in her classroom not only during discussions of big issues but also in responding to students’ off-the-cuff statements. On the rare occasion when a student would say something like “That’s so gay,” Ms. Lanza did not simply say that this was unacceptable and shut down communication. Rather, she would say to the student something like, “I don’t think that’s what you mean—what are you really trying to say?” or “Tell me more about why you think that” or “I think you’re looking for a different word than the one you used.” Then, privately, Ms. Lanza would have a conversation with the student where she would pose a series of questions to help the student come to the understanding of why this comment was unacceptable (because it is hurtful, inaccurate, reinforced homophobia, etc.) and the student comprehended that statements like these were not allowed in class for reasons other than because “the teacher said so.” Ms. Lanza consistently would work through issues with students dialogically rather than authoritatively.

Through class discussion and classroom management/discipline practices, Ms. Lanza opened dialogue rather than shutting it down. Like Ellsworth (1989) and Blackburn (2003), Ms. Lanza recognized that there may be a sort of backlash in dialogue. Discourses that are intended to be liberating or which appear to be equitable may instead re-establish existing (or inscribe new) forms of oppression. Ms. Lanza was aware of this possibility and prepared to combat it. She attempted to avoid recreating her own totalitarian “regime” in her classroom but rather to create “good hegemony.” As McLaren (2003) writes,

Not all prevailing values are oppressive. Critical educators, too, would like to secure hegemony for their own ideas. The challenge for teachers is to recognize and attempt to transform those undemocratic and oppressive features of hegemonic control that often structure everyday classroom existence in ways not readily

apparent. (p. 78)

Another manifestation of hegemonic control in schools is the curriculum. The formal curriculum, fundamentally, is a conversation or dialogue among professional discourse communities. Teachers have power; they are mediators of formal knowledge and individual students in classrooms (Darder, 2002; Shor, 1992) and they are also mediators of the formal curriculum. Ms. Lanza recognized that while teachers are leaders in their own classrooms, to inform broader learning outcomes, foci, and professional conversations, she needed to collaborate with her colleagues and be a leader in the district. She did this by being an instructional coach and by serving on curriculum development teams. While Ms. Lanza was initially recruited for one review team, she later volunteered for two others. She said:

I was lucky enough to be on the ninth grade, eleventh grade, and twelfth grade alignment teams that re-wrote the curriculum...I found myself having to fight for the books...It got pretty outrageous. People were getting so mad that they would have to get up and leave the room and then come back...and I don't know if that happens in other subject areas or if it's just the English people. Like, I don't know if physics teachers get real wound up about, like, "This is how we're gonna attach molecules!" But, it may happen...

Ms. Lanza used her own personal and professional agency to empower students by including works related to students' lives (McLaren, 2003). She attempted to alter the curricular ideologies in place and integrate diverse perspectives into the core curriculum rather than treat them as add-ons or nonessential (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Wi-nans, 2006). She recognized that if students are not known, not represented, not engaged, they are silent and invisible; they are oppressed (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

## DISCUSSION

Often, when teachers and teacher educators think about LGBTQ inclusion, we think about curriculum, the "stuff" we teach. While the curriculum is one important piece of creating an inclusive schooling experience, we must think about more than the topics or texts that

are integrated. Exposure to LGBTQ texts without critical analysis is simply additive curriculum (rather than knowledge transformation) (Banks, 2008; Winans, 2006). Lankshear and McLaren (1993) remind us that “tokenism does not constitute recognition” (p. 20). Exposure alone does not adequately challenge heteronormativity (Schieble, 2012). However, LGBTQ texts must be present if they are to be a part of a critical pedagogy which engages marginalized students, as in Ms. Lanza’s classroom.

Ms. Lanza successfully garnered the trust of her building administrator, her students, and parents and guardians. In part, this was because of the demonstrated academic achievement of the students. Ms. Lanza’s instruction was standards-based and helped students achieve academically while still using equity and inclusion as an umbrella for her practice. Students’ grades were high and the school’s scores on reading tests dramatically increased under her leadership. This led colleagues and families to have faith in the instructor as a teacher. Ms. Lanza blended academic efficacy with equity, saying, “The standards really tell us what to do for the most part, but we get to decide the how. And I choose to address the standards through essential questions of equity and justice.” In this way, Ms. Lanza attempted to appropriate the discourses and ideologies of schooling (standards) and to use them, resist them, or subvert them.

The case study demonstrates that just choosing the “right” texts is not equivalent to engaging in inclusive practice. Though it was powerful that LGBTQ-inclusive texts were studied in the classroom, this was not the sum of Ms. Lanza’s practice. She habitually enacted dialogic practice wherein she eroded heteronormative discourse in her classroom, school, and curriculum. Likewise, inclusive and critical pedagogy is not simply a collection of the “right” teaching strategies or practices, nor is there any singular exemplar or set of steps in how to implement a critical pedagogy. Rather, many elements combined to form such practice: committing to equity, modeling dialogic and democratic practice, integrating notions of power and privilege in instruction, having an activist mentality and questioning the status quo, attending to student achievement for the purpose of offsetting asymmetrical power relationships, helping students develop critical thinking

skills, and having a deep care for students and community. Ms. Lanza understood her work as interpersonal and individual, but she also understood the importance of structures and institutions. She impacted policy, comprehended social inequity, and understood the effects of power and privilege on her own practice and on her students' lives. In particular, she dramatically affected policies related to sexual minority inclusion in her school. Further, she understood the value of the context in which she taught and saw herself as part of an educational team. She was willing to take risks to impact her students' educations and schooling experiences for the better.

In examining the case of Ms. Lanza, several recommendations as well as questions for future study emerge. First, critical practices are key to helping students "read the word and read the world" (Freire, 1987). Teachers must be equipped with understandings of the theories and practices related to critical pedagogy. Continued study of how to implement these practices is important, including accounts of model lessons from multiple subject areas and grade levels.

Fundamentally, Ms. Lanza had a driving philosophy and disposition that embraced equity and inclusion at the core. Not only did she have a belief in equity, but she had a commitment to it. This commitment led her to keep increasing her knowledge about social issues, her students, her community, pedagogy, and literature. Though Ms. Lanza did not name it as such, her practices and discussions indicate an effort to enact a critical pedagogy. The question arises, then, of how one's educational philosophies and dispositions develop and how they can be impacted or changed. This question has implications for professional relationships, professional development, teacher preparation practices and programs, and teacher recruitment and retention strategies. How do teacher educators incite pre-service and in-service teachers to "do" critical pedagogy? What role do teacher preparation programs play? What are the implications for curriculum? For recruitment? Perhaps modeling critical pedagogy in practice and presenting portraits and case studies such as this one can serve as catalysts to action, change, and hope.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides a portrait of critical practice centered on equity that enhanced LGBTQ inclusion. Such portraits are rare in the literature (particularly related to K-12 settings) and can be extremely helpful in supporting in-service and pre-service teachers as they seek to transform the curriculum and functions of schooling and affect students' lives in impactful ways. In this case, the classroom teacher utilized a layered pedagogical approach built upon dialogue and empowerment, with the goal of providing her students a critical and inclusive educational experience. Many more such portraits of inclusive critical education need to be disseminated so that instructors of various subject areas and grade levels have models to inspire thinking, reflection, and transformation in their own practice. It can be challenging in this era of standardization and testing to envision how one can meet the multiple demands of standards and test preparation while still embracing equity, inclusion, and justice. Even in contemporary American society, which seems more open to LGBTQ people and issues, it is challenging to address sexual orientation in schools. Many teachers are fearful of engaging with this topic and providing curriculum that represents sexual minority students (Page, 2014), but this case study provides one demonstration of critical and inclusive education. This model is not a road map but rather a representation that may incite the sociological imagination, allowing teachers to envision what can be. Simply adding LGBTQ texts may not be enough to transform schooling for LGBTQ students, but engaging a robust, layered, critical approach to education that incorporates many strands can be transformative.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 I will use multiple labels in this paper. The National School Climate Survey utilizes "LGBT" as a label in its reports; when discussing this document or citing research using the same label, I, too, will use "LGBT." However, in other cases when talking about students' identities I will use the slightly more expansive "LGBTQ", which includes "queer" or "questioning" or the term "sexual minority" to capture the underrepresented nature of the group.
- 2 All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

