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LGBTQ self-efficacy in the social studies



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ABSTRACT

Multicultural education, in some capacity, is a part of nearly every teacher education program in the country. Studies have shown, though, that this multicultural education does not often include issues of gender non-conformity and sexuality as a part of the instruction. Given these experiences in teacher preparation programs, we wanted to investigate pre-service and in-service social studies teachers' sense of self-efficacy in working with LGBTQ youth, teaching LGBTQ content, and addressing LGBTQ bias in school context. Using a Likert-scale we assessed the self-efficacy of 47 pre-service teachers. We found that the teachers had the highest sense of self-efficacy working with LGBTQ students and families. The participants reported a lower sense of self-efficacy teaching LGBTQ content and the lowest sense of self-efficacy addressing bias against LGBTQ individuals in commercial teaching materials and school contexts. The results of this study reveal the need for social studies teacher educators to be purposeful in the inclusion of these topics in their teacher preparation courses.

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Introduction

"You want me to teach about what? Is it not that something that should be addressed in the home by the parents?"

"I want to teach elementary school, issues of sexuality in schools are not relevant to me."

"I am afraid to stand up for LGBTQ issues. Someone may think I am gay."

"I want to address these issues in school, but will not I get fired?"

We as educators teach social studies methods and multicultural education courses from a social justice perspective. We develop our courses in ways that invite pre-service and in-service teachers to purposefully deliberate with issues related to gender non-conformity and human sexuality. When we do, we often get responses of surprise, denial, and fear, such as the ones above. Often our students agree that issues of human sexuality and gender non-conformity belong in the curriculum, however, they voice a number of concerns regarding the potential implications for doing so. After an examination of the literature in social studies and multicultural studies in teacher education, we found an existing gap related to teachers' self-efficacy when addressing LGBTQ issues in the PreK-12 classroom.

In this study we sought to investigate pre-service and in-service teachers' sense of self-efficacy in working with and teaching about LGBTQ people, building upon previous research (Brant, 2014) focusing on teacher self-efficacy in addressing LGBTQ in curriculum. This study build upon those findings and investigates social studies teachers' self-efficacy, with

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particular focus on interactions with LGBTQ youth and families, teaching historical content about LGBTQ events and people, and in working against LGBTQ bias in schools.

In this article we argue that it is critical for social studies teachers to have a high sense of self-efficacy in these areas to create safer school spaces for LGBTQ youth and to teach social studies content in inclusive ways. Teachers with higher levels of efficacy with issues of gender non-conformity and human sexuality are more likely to support LGBTQ students and families while simultaneously developing curriculum and instruction that is inclusive of LGBTQ content.

Literature review

There is no shortage of literature about the difficulties LGBTQ youth face in schools. Studies have shown that most students who “come out” and reveal their gender identification or sexual orientation to friends, family, or peers during their middle or high school years experience moderate to severe levels of bullying, harassment, and hostility from their peers, which can lead to a number of negative effects, including isolation from friends and family, depression, drug and/or alcohol use and addiction, low self-esteem, lack of engagement in school, academic failure, and fighting (Beam, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Meyer, 2010; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009; Vaccaro, 2009). Given this research, it is critical that schools do more to meet the needs of this population.

At the same time, the research on teachers' attitudes about addressing gay, lesbian, and gender non-conformity issues has shown that teachers are hesitant to address these issues in schools. Teachers have a number of concerns, including the fear that addressing these topics in the current political climate can put their jobs in jeopardy; that talking about sex and sexuality are jobs best left for parents; that teachers should not impose their own values on their students; and that it is up to the parents to address moral and value issues at home (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Clark, 2010; Kumashiro, 2002; Meyer, 2010; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001; Rowell, 2007). Finally, although some teachers would be willing to address sexuality, homophobia, and transphobia in schools, they feel that their teacher education programs have not adequately prepared them to do so (Clark, 2010; Kumashiro, 2002). These scholars argue that one way for teachers to address LGBTQ issues in schools is to develop and adopt a multicultural curriculum that is LGBTQ inclusive.

An LGBTQ inclusive curriculum

A curriculum can be made LGBTQ inclusive across all subject areas and grade levels. In the early years, students can investigate gender roles and stereotypes, engage in critical conversations about what happens when individuals cross gender boundaries, like when boys play with “girl toys” and have discussions around what jobs men and women stereotypically can or cannot do (Meyer, 2010). As early as the elementary years, teachers can address LGBTQ issues through literature that presents non-traditional family structures, including those with two moms or two dads, books that specifically address the stereotypes surrounding gays and lesbians, and queer-themed young adult literature (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Clark, 2010; Martino, 2009; North, 2010; Rowell, 2007).

A queer-inclusive curriculum is more than merely including texts with LGBTQ themes or characters. Instead, teachers need to teach students to not only see heteronormativity and LGBTQ oppression, but also to critique them (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Martino, 2009). Critical, queer-inclusive education gives teachers and students an opportunity to explore the existence and effects of heteronormativity and heterosexual privilege in their own lives (Gonzales, 2010; Kumashiro, 2001, 2002; Meyer, 2010; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 2009; Young, 2009). These types of curricular experiences give LGBTQ students the opportunity to see themselves represented in the curriculum, which may allow them to realize that they are not alone in their experiences.

Scholars (Crocco, 2008; Jennings, 2006; Kumashiro, 2002; Meyer, 2010; Thornton, 2010) have pointed out the lack of and the need for LGBTQ issues to be addressed as a part of the social studies curriculum. They emphasize the importance of acknowledging the LGBTQ identities of historical figures that are traditionally included in textbooks, such as Alexander the Great, Susan B. Anthony, Langston Hughes, and J. Edgar Hoover (Jennings, 2006), as well as including lesser-talked about LGBTQ individuals. These authors also argue that while various social movements are included in history lessons, such as the civil rights, women's equality, and Latino movements, social studies teachers need to make connections between these movements and gay and lesbian civil rights issues. Students can be given the opportunity to discuss current events relevant to gay, lesbian, and transgender/transsexual people, including same-sex marriage, gay and lesbian adoption, and local Gay Pride events (Meyer, 2010).

The ability to teach in these ways may be second nature for some teacher candidates and in-service teachers, but for most, it is a skill that needs to be honed through pre-service teacher education. Teachers need to have the content and pedagogical knowledge to teach about LGBTQ issues and individuals. In order for them to go into their classrooms to teach these topics they need the self-efficacy, or the belief in one's own ability, to actually do so. It is important to note, though, that self-efficacy deals with a self-perception of competence rather than an actual level of competence.

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