

Choosing to Do the Work: Thoughts on Creating an LGBTQ-Inclusive Classroom

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Summary

In this article, I aim to support teachers and other educators as they begin or continue the work of creating LGBTQ-inclusive classrooms. To support teachers, I organize my suggestions within three touchstones that have been helpful to me as a middle school language arts teacher: Choose to be vulnerable, Choose to change your instruction, Choose the work as your path.

Keywords:

LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, language arts, reading, middle school, activism



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We've all been through it: the three-hour-long professional development that culminates in a half-hearted attempt at a unit you'll never use. Similarly, we've all slogged our way through the district-mandated teacher resource book which includes extensive suggestions that would be oh-so-easy to implement—if you had classes of 14 high-performers, an endless flow of free resources, and three planning periods. Almost 10 years ago, as a brand new middle school language arts teacher, I found these time-sucking activities challenging to endure, but tolerable.

Then, four years ago, everything changed. Working with [A Queer Endeavor](#) at the University of Colorado, I found my voice as an advocate for LGBTQ-inclusive schools and curricula. I found my path and calling as an activist educator. And I found wasted time and resources substantially harder to bear. Now, I want to spend my professional development time doing the important work of becoming an activist educator. And I feel that others might desire the same. To this end, I'm offering the following ideas for teachers hoping to begin or continue the work of creating LGBTQ-inclusive classrooms and schools. These aren't step-by-step instructions. Rather they function as touchstones, places to check in, signposts. Hopefully, these suggestions honor the challenge of the work while also recognizing that we need to *do* something now.

Choose to Be Vulnerable

My first few years of teaching (and sometimes still when I'm feeling a little too stressed, a little too tired, a little too incompetent), I did everything I could to avoid making a mistake. Or perhaps I should say, I did everything I could to avoid someone else knowing I'd made a mistake.

This reality made doing the work of creating an LGBTQ-inclusive classroom nearly impossible. I just knew if I even said the word “gay” or “trans” in class, my face would get bright red, my mouth would fill with saliva, I would spit all over the front row, and I would leave kids with the message that it was somehow completely humiliating to talk about sexuality and gender in school. This, I believed, would result in a situation even worse than if I hadn't said anything. So, to avoid saying the “wrong thing,” I said nothing.

In remaining silent, however, I knew in my heart I was failing my students and, ultimately, betraying myself. Every time I let a moment to affirm a student's identity pass by, I was reminded of myself at their age. I was teased pretty ruthlessly in elementary school for being overweight, and then in middle school and high school for being perceived gay. I didn't find many adults willing to stand up for me. Their suggestions were to “fit in better,” laugh it off, or ignore it.

As painful as those moments were, they motivated my initial decision to teach. And yet I was following the same path my teachers walked. So when A Queer Endeavor Institute was

advertised as a professional development opportunity, I knew it was something I wanted to be a part of.

Gaining not only permission but also encouragement to affirm students' gender and sexual diversity, and the tools to do so, was invaluable. I started small, calling attention to my awkwardness by saying something like, "When I talk about gender and sexuality, sometimes it feels weird for me. I feel embarrassed. My face gets hot."

Somehow, simply naming my discomfort eased the tension. It made more space for vulnerability in the classroom. The more I admitted my struggles, not just concerning LGBTQ topics, but around everything from comma rules to handling my four-year-old child's tantrums, the more we were able to dig into the work.

Then, my teaching began to open up in ways I couldn't have imagined. I felt comfortable bringing up issues of gender and sexual diversity in class and among my colleagues. I invited discussions about equity in the classroom with prompts such as, "Do racism, sexism, and homophobia exist in Boulder today?" I even had students come out in class. I was overwhelmed by their bravery, and, because other students clapped and supported their peers, I was moved by how much the educational environment had changed since I went to school. That particular moment illuminated my true path as a teacher—this was why I became an educator, this was my calling.

Choose to Change Your Instruction (A Little and A Lot)

The more work I've done with A Queer Endeavor to create an LGBTQ-inclusive classroom, the more I realize how the work is both dramatic and subtle; it's both large curriculum shifts and in-the-moment conversations. The work, in some ways, begins the first day, and, in other ways, doesn't really start until halfway through the year. I believe everyone has to travel their own path when it comes to this work, but I also think sometimes, as teachers, we just want to know, "So, how do you do it?" Here's a brief rundown of how I do it.

The First Week

The first day, I share my pronouns, and I ask students to share theirs, if they are comfortable. The first year that I asked kids their pronouns, I didn't frontload the idea enough, and lots of kids responded with, "I don't really care what pronouns you use with me." Now I share this story and directly teach pronouns, and kids understand the idea much better. I also pave the way for this work by stating that creating an LGBTQ-inclusive space is important to me. I tell kids and families (at Back to School night) that we will be talking about social justice throughout the year, and that these topics are dear to my teaching and my heart.

The First Semester

I spend a lot of time during the first few months of school sharing about myself and giving kids opportunities to share about themselves. If we don't know each other, we can't really dig into deep conversations about gender and sexuality. I share a narrative I wrote about my grandmother having a heart attack, and I invite students to share their own courage narratives. I share a "[Hero's Journey](#)" website I made about my mom, and I ask students to craft their own websites.

I also begin to intermix conversations about gender and sexuality into the space in small ways. For instance, a few days a week I start with a sentence starter to highlight a grammar rule. In the sentence, I might refer to a person using a non-binary pronoun, or I might reference a same-sex couple. As another example, I teach a unit early on about literary elements, and as part of this unit kids read a picture book. As one of the choices, I include *And Tango Makes Three*, a book about two male penguins who raise a baby.

These small moves allow students to become familiar with LGBTQ-terminology. They also demystify gender and sexuality a bit, showing kids over and over that these topics are part of what we do in this class. Additionally, although I don't always push for longer conversations at this point, if students want to engage in a deeper discussion, I always make space for it.

Finally, I start to encourage critical thinking around the topics of power, privilege, and assumptions. One way I do this is through the novel *Endangered* by Eliot Schrefer. This novel is about civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. So I ask students questions like, "Why is this war the most deadly war since World War II, and, yet, we don't know anything about it?" and, "Given that this war was somewhat about the minerals used in cell phones, who is at fault?" These questions encourage the critical thinking and self-reflection necessary to learn and apply queer theory, which we tackle second semester.

The Second Semester

After winter break, I introduce a unit about identity. I teach students [six different critical lenses](#), including queer theory. To teach each lens, I simplify the academic definition and provide students with guiding questions to apply the lens. I then show a few clips from movies or commercials, and we practice applying the lens together.

Then, students work in small groups to read a novel, choose and apply a lens, and craft a presentation where they apply their lens to their book. I allow students to choose their books, but I suggest and provide copies of novels where gender, sexuality, race, class, or ability might come into play. To support students in their projects, I also read aloud the novel *George* by Alex Gino, which is about a transgender girl. As I read, we apply queer theory to the novel as a class.

Following the identity unit, conversations about gender and sexuality specifically and justice and equity in general grow and intensify. I continue to intermix LGBTQ authors and topics into our work, but students also now take up the charge, applying what they've learned to whatever we are reading and writing.

Choose the Work as Your Path

As I believe many teachers do, when I first started teaching, I tried to integrate every idea, lesson, and suggestion into my work. I felt overwhelmed, scattered, and, ultimately, rather voiceless. When I decided to become an activist educator specifically focused on LGBTQ topics, I found my path in teaching. Rather than trying to integrate every new idea, I now have a litmus test. Is this lesson, unit, technique, etc. working toward the goal of creating a classroom focused on justice and equity? If not, I let it go.

This also means that, if students are sharing personal stories or thinking critically about equity, I drop my plans for the day. And, it means bringing the work to my administrators over and over. It means sharing my pronouns at school events even when few or no other teachers do. It means shaking off nerves when a colleague passes my room and raises an eyebrow at a video I'm showing or a discussion we're having.

Ultimately, it means coming back to what my heart knows is true again and again, despite pressure from district personnel, administration, colleagues, or families. For me, this deep personal knowledge has been the greatest and most unexpected reward.