

Building Community Through Book Clubs:
How LGBTQ+ High School Students Find a Sense of Belonging

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Abstract

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Teaching, Learning & Curriculum: Language, Literacy & Culture

Across the country, lawmakers are making a concerted effort to dehumanize LGBTQ+ people and their stories, which has led to discriminatory education practices. Previous research shows that for the well-being and safety of LGBTQ+ students, they must feel a sense of belonging. One such space, the Genders and Sexualities Alliance (GSA) in schools, can provide that feeling; however, a singular space cannot meet the needs and desires of the diverse representation of LGBTQ+ students in a school building. Drawing on data from two book club meetings around student engagement with *Gender Queer: a Memoir* by Maia Kobabe and a culminating focus group interview, this paper explores how LGBTQ+ students gather to speak on relevant topics and issues to build a sense of community. This research offers insight into the needs of LGBTQ+ students and possible solutions for educators and administrators. I suggest that LGBTQ+-focused book clubs, in addition to GSAs, offer space to reject heteronormativity and provide an opportunity for students to find the place where they belong in school.

Positionality Statement

The journey to write this thesis began more than two years ago before I began my studies at the University of Washington. I came out as gay to my family when I was a junior in high school, but faced immense scrutiny and homophobia from my family and the church we belonged to. It was not until I was a senior in college, at 22 years old, that I felt comfortable being openly gay. Then, as I was teaching high school language arts in Texas, my school district began removing books from my curriculum that centered around LGBTQ+ voices and stories. Here, I saw the faces of my LGBTQ+ students and their realization that their school district did not care about their life experience or well-being. In an effort to fight the recent onslaught of censorship, I came to graduate school. This thesis is the product of the cycle of hatred that has been prevalent in and around my life and is the first step in my effort to fight back.

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Introduction and Rationale

Across the United States, there is a concerted and targeted effort to dehumanize LGBTQ+-identifying students. In Florida, lawmakers passed a law that now prohibits students and teachers from discussing topics on gender and sexuality in the classroom (Branigin, 2022). Other states, such as Indiana and South Dakota, have passed similarly restrictive legislation preventing trans students from using bathrooms, lockers, and other facilities that align with their gender (2022). PEN America found that 1,648 book titles have been challenged or banned from July 2021 to July 2022; among this number, 41% (675) titles have LGBTQ+ themes, protagonists, or prominent secondary characters (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). Along with an assault on LGBTQ+ youth from political and policy-driven standpoints, there is a significant number of these students that face discrimination from peers at school and from their families at home.

With the sociopolitical context of this time in the United States, I believe there is value placed in exploring the topics of LGBTQ+ students in a secondary high school setting. Through my years as a gay student in secondary schools, I was subject to an onslaught of homophobia from my peers and family, both because I was perceived as gay and because I came out as gay as a junior in high school. This led to my own shame and lack of self-confidence. Never once did we learn about LGBTQ+ people, history, culture, or literature in my high school classes. This ingrained homophobia even led my music teacher in high school to hide the fact that he was gay to avoid any homophobic complaints that were not related to his teaching ability. As a young gay person, I saw this and concluded that I would also need to shield myself from living my authentic self.

All children face the prevalent challenge of self-discovery and identity exploration; however, sexual minority youth face a steeper challenge, as they feel pressure to disclose their identity to others that may reject their self-identity (Kim et al., 2021; The Trevor Project, 2021). One study outlines that one-third of youth experience parental acceptance, one-third experience parental rejection, and the final third did not come out until they were into adulthood (Rosario & Schrimshaw, 2012). Throughout child development, parental love and acceptance can be key moments in a child's life as they learn how to accept and love others; essentially, parental figures must model this when their child comes out as part of the LGBTQ+ community (Kim et al., 2021). Another study highlights that when young gay men experience emotional distance from a parental figure due to rejection and insufficient support in response to their sexual orientation disclosure, the young gay men find it difficult to believe that they are worthy of love and value (Kim et al., 2021; Allan & Westhaver, 2018).

Through the process of coming out, LGBTQ+ youth can experience social stressors, which are sources of stress that can cause negative mental and physical effects caused by conditions in the social environment. An extension of the social stress theory is referred to as minority stress, which is used to designate the stress that individuals from stigmatized social backgrounds experience because of their social position (Meyer, 2003). Triggers for minority stress can include “experience of prejudice events, expectation of rejection or discrimination, concealment of one's sexual orientation, and internalized homophobia,” (Baams et al., 2015, p. 688-689). LGBTQ+ youth are facing attacks from many directions—from the laws government officials in power pass to the negative reactions and isolation after coming out. It is in this space of dehumanization that we must explore how other adults in their lives can support their process of development.

Purpose

While previous research has showcased possible solutions such as the implementation of GSAs and LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula, LGBTQ+ students continue to face a slew of hatred and discrimination on interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels. Therefore, this research study aims to explore a possible way for LGBTQ+ students to find solace, through community and reading, and to help students navigate the difficulties of growing up queer and/or transgender. Specifically, it will explore how LGBTQ+-identifying students, defined as those who have previously done and are continuing to do the challenging work of grappling with their own sexual identity, examine an LGBTQ+-themed text and interact with their peers. The overarching research question for this study is:

- How can book clubs serve as a catalyst for LGBTQ+-identifying high school students to find a sense of belonging and community at school?

Literature Review

There is a distinct opportunity at the institutional level to provide support for LGBTQ+ youth in their quest for acceptance and a sense of belonging, as these students spend a significant amount of time at school, outside of their family environment (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). However, this presents a new array of challenges as LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience harassment, victimization, and bullying in schools (Day et al., 2018). Nearly 48% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students reported having seriously considered suicide (Kann et al., 2016). Among transgender youth, evidence suggests that around 40% of individuals have considered or attempted to take their own life in adolescence or young adulthood (Austin et al., 2022). A 2016 survey of LGBTQ youth found that 67% of students frequently heard

homophobic remarks in school, but only 12% of students reported that a teacher intervened most or all the time when they heard homophobic remarks (Kosciw et al., 2016; Day et al., 2020).

When students are exposed to this level of hostility, they remove themselves from the environment, thus leading to a higher risk of absenteeism, more frequent school discipline problems, and lower levels of engagement and academic achievement (Kosciw et al., 2012). If students face rejection and insufficient support at home, where they spend most of their time, and face discrimination and bullying at school, where they spend their second most amount of time, school staff members must work to identify how schools can provide a sense of belonging and community for LGBTQ+ students.

Simply stating that LGBTQ+ students are welcomed and loved is not enough support for LGBTQ+-identifying students, thus schools must be intentional with the support that is provided to youth that experience discrimination and disengagement from school caused by it. Recently, four strategies have emerged to prevent the risks that this group of students often face: “specifically inclusive antibullying policies, professional development on LGBTQ issues, LGBTQ-related resources, and student-led clubs like Gender and Sexuality Alliances,” (Russell et al., 2021, p. 161). While all strategies should be explored and implemented by school administrators, this paper will look at school-wide supports and student-led clubs, such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). GSAs are organizations made up of both students and advisors and can serve as an opportunity for LGBTQ+ students (and, at times, their heterosexual allies) to work to promote social inclusion and create a positive school climate for all students, particularly LGBTQ+ students (2021). Early examples of GSAs and similar organizations can be traced back to the 1980s and qualitative research over the years has shown that students’ experiences in GSAs have led to a feeling of empowerment, connectedness, and support,

especially where students have felt most targeted (Marx & Ketterly, 2016). Field observations completed in the early 2000s show that GSAs have four major roles: providing support and counseling for students, creating safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies, increasing the visibility of LGBTQ+ issues in school, and making improvements to safety for LGBTQ+ students (Griffin et al., 2004). There is a positive correlation between the association of GSAs at school and lower reports of victimization among adolescents “thus, GSAs may be a promising resource for protecting LGBTQ+ students from victimization,” (Marx & Ketterly, 2016, p. 1278).

While GSAs and extra-curricular activities can provide a space for students to exist and find a sense of belonging outside of school hours, students need to feel the same level of acceptance throughout their school day. One such option is through school-wide programming or curricular design that can reach all students, regardless of sexuality. There has been an increase in the social-emotional learning commitment in schools to reduce bullying and improve school climate all around, specifically for LGBTQ+ students (Durlak et al., 2011). This shift provides opportunities for educators to create LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum for all students, thus creating a safer environment for youth that identify with the community and fostering empathy for students who identify as heterosexual (Snapp et al., 2015). One such method for inclusive curricula design is through reading in Language Arts classrooms. Blackburn and Buckley have argued that a “...queer-inclusive curriculum would educate students about the interconnections among sexuality, identity, and literature,” thus working against the tendency to position a different perspective as either insiders or outsiders in a social dichotomy (2011, p. 202). Similarly, Helmer (2014) found that through a Gay and Lesbian Literature course in high school, students were actively disrupting the heteronormative space of Language Arts classrooms as they normalized talking about LGBTQ topics, which can be seen as highly unusual for a context

where topics of sexuality are taboo and often ignored. Additionally, Blackburn's (2003) pivotal study explored how students engage in literacy events and performances outside of an institutional setting, as she conducted her research at an LGBTQ+ organization in the Midwest. She conducted research with several youths, most of who were identified as students bullied in high school due to the perception of their queerness or because they did come out as LGBTQ+ (472). Johns and colleagues (2019) praise such moves that educators make to create inclusive curricula for all students but question the level of effectiveness and how it is measured. We cannot be certain that all adjustments will change the negative perceptions that heterosexual students and adults have about LGBTQ+ students.

I graduated high school in 2014 and throughout my four years of language arts classes, we were asked to do some independent reading (or sustained silent reading), but we were mostly asked to read novels with the full class. I remember reading novels like *Frankenstein*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Odyssey*, *Jane Eyre*, and *East of Eden*. We were assigned a certain number of pages to read each night and took frequent comprehension quizzes that eventually led to some version of a literature analysis paper. Through this pedagogical approach, literacy teachers do work to ensure students have approaches to intellectually analyzing literature and plot structures, but when teachers rely too heavily on the text itself, they miss an opportunity "to help readers critique the world that such stories describe or represent" (McGinley, Conley, & White, 2000, p. 1). While the introduction of book clubs, also known as literature circles, is not a new concept in education, the experience of high school students enrolled in language arts differs from campus to campus and even from classroom to classroom. Book clubs offer a unique opportunity to engage students both in literature analysis and discussion with peers. Parsons et al. (2011) explains that as students engage in such dialogue with their peers, social transactions

occur that help students understand both themselves and others more deeply. The structure of book clubs provides a unique opportunity for students to discuss their own lived experiences, the lived experiences of diverse characters in their novels, gain empathy for others, and learn more about themselves.

Another challenge that educators face when planning an upcoming unit, or simply assisting a student in finding a novel that they will read and enjoy, is that reading can be a divisive activity for students. In my practice as an educator in Seattle and previously in Austin, Texas, I ran into the common response from students that they did not like to read and did not want to be told to read a novel for independent reading. Graphic novels are different than novels in that they ask students to engage with a different set of literacy skills to access the pictures or drawings on the page. Moeller and Becnel (2018) write that “graphic novels are helping to shape children’s ideas of what is normal, acceptable, and powerful” (p. 2), and by reading graphic novels, children have an opportunity to engage with images that “have the power to make something more real, more visceral, and more representational” (p. 8). Graphic novels have a unique opportunity to present a wide array of viewpoints and information to children engagingly.

With the various research on including LGBTQ+ voices and experiences in school-wide curricula, researchers must ask what that accomplishes for the individual needs of LGBTQ+ students. If teachers are making pedagogical moves and adjusting curricula for inclusion and representation, does this meet the social and emotional needs of each student? Does the adjustment to inclusive texts create a more hostile environment for LGBTQ+ students? When such texts are introduced, do the eyes of the heterosexual classmates turn to the queer and trans students? I argue that these adjustments to curricula are stellar; however, there seems to be a gap

in the research on the individual level and I seek to understand if an LGBTQ+ book club focused on graphic novels can help those individual needs.

Methodology

Research Setting

The research study will be conducted at Lincoln High School (LHS), which is a 9-12 grade school in the Seattle Public Schools district, in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. LHS is located in the Wallingford neighborhood of Seattle and serves students from Wallingford, Queen Anne, and Green Lake neighborhoods. LHS has an enrollment of 1,653 students for the 2022-23 school year. Table 1 includes a breakdown of the racial, class, and gender makeup of the student population at LHS as reported by the Washington State Office of Superintendent and Public Instruction (2022).

Table 1

Racial Makeup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White students – 62.1% (1,026) • Asian students – 10.2% (168) • Black students – 3% (50) • Latinx students – 9.6% (159) • Biracial students – 14.9% (246) • Native Hawaiian/Native Alaskan/Indigenous students – 0.3% (5)
Class Makeup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-income students* – 11.6% (192) • Non-low-income students – 88.4% (1,461)
Gender Makeup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male students – 55.6% (919) • Female students – 42.2% (698) • Gender non-conforming students – 2.2% (36)

*Free and reduced-price meal eligibility is used as the identification of low-income.

In the chosen school district, there are organizations, such as GSA, that are operated by students in their high schools. At the chosen research site, Lincoln High School, the organization is called SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Alliance) and follows many of the same purposes and procedures as described previously. There is an executive board made up of LGBTQ+-identifying students who oversee weekly meetings, activities, activism, and community-building events. During the COVID-19 pandemic when school was moved virtual, the organization began to host book clubs for students who were missing that communal interaction provided at the meetings and through in-person instruction. Similarly, at a school near the research site, a student-led queer book club was created by students and an advisor to read and discuss queer literature and provide a space for students to build community with one another. The existence of these book clubs provides an opportunity to examine the purpose and effectiveness of providing a space for students to build community.

At LHS, it is common to hear amongst the staff and students that there is a significant population of LGBTQ+-identifying students, several of whom participate in SAGA or another student-led organization called Bread Club, which is described by students to be a bread-themed safe community space for all students. However, students further explained that because it is a space for students to build community in a relaxed environment, it has become another queer space at LHS. In the first quarter of the 2022 school year, school leaders asked all students to take a school culture and climate survey to assess how students felt and behaved at school. This questionnaire provided the school with a snapshot of how students felt while on campus, with questions focusing on categories such as subject areas, belonging and relationships, and student voice and leadership. Of the 1459 students (87.5%) that participated in the survey, 1345 students (92%) responded favorably (strongly agree, agree, or kind of agree) to the question “I feel like

people at school accept me for who I am as a person” (Seattle Public Schools, 2022). While a significant number of students indicated that they felt as if their peers and the adults in the school building are supportive of their identity, there are 159 students (8%) who indicated that they do not feel that people at their school accept them or support their identity (2022). As education researchers, we must work to ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging at their school; this is where the research study comes in.

Study Design and Participants

Gender Queer: a Memoir is a graphic novel that was published in May 2019 and chronicles the life of author Maia Kobabe (Maia uses e/em/eir pronouns) and eir journey with gender and sexuality. Tackling topics such as gender dysphoria, menstruation, queer fantasies and crushes, and sex, this graphic novel was the most banned book in America in 2022 according to the American Library Association (American Library Association, 2022). *Gender Queer: a Memoir* is a prime example of what Helmer (2016) identifies as a queer counter-narrative, which are stories that offer “alternative images of sexuality and gender that intervene into hetero-/cis-normative narratives as they work to undermine and rewrite the attendant discourses” (p. 905). Helmer further explains that while there has been a recent push for literacy educators to include LGBTQ+ perspectives in their courses and the novels read in those courses, queer counter-narratives work to challenge, disrupt, and rework discourses that produce hetero- and cis-normativity, even in LGBTQ+ texts. *Gender Queer: a Memoir* disrupts the ever-prevalent homonormative representation of “straight-acting, cisgender, white maleness” in LGBTQ+ literature (Bittner, 2020, p. 38), by sharing the journey of someone who identifies outside of the gender binary.

Through the assistance of the sponsors of SAGA at Lincoln High School, I asked for volunteers to participate in a student-led LGBTQ+ book club where students read and discussed the book *Gender Queer: a Memoir*. To make sense of how students can use books to help build community and find a sense of belonging, we must understand where students are in their identity-forming process, before beginning the book club process, and examine how students have experienced the book club together, as a community. To create an intimate yet productive book club environment, I intended to limit the number of participants to six students to ensure that the research method captures the in-depth experiences necessary for examining the phenomena (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

I have spent time during the school year observing and volunteering at the Lincoln SAGA meetings to get to know the members. To recruit participants in the research study, I utilized my relationship with the Lincoln SAGA organization and the sponsor, Claire, the school librarian, to select students to participate in the research study. Since this is my first year teaching and Lincoln and I mostly teach one grade level, I believed it was a necessary step to ensure that the wide array of LGBTQ+ identities is represented in the book club. From there, using network sampling, I spoke with the recommended students and asked for their participation. To ensure there were enough students interested in the study, I asked those students to recommend one person they know to participate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). The recruitment stage goal was to select six focus students for the study who had fewer pre-existing relationships with other LGBTQ+ students in the high school, had not read the selected text, and were willing to be interviewed and fully participate in the book club activities. However, I faced some difficulty in the process of recruiting students to participate in the research study because of student scheduling constraints. Due to the overwhelming time-consuming nature of high school, I was

able to recruit three students who are all freshmen: Haley, Frances, and Sam. I have used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the three students. Haley, Frances, and Sam belong to a similar friend group and have pre-existing relationships before this study.

Haley describes herself as a cisgender lesbian who uses she/her pronouns. She is active in theater arts, which due to a large number of LGBTQ+ participants, has been unofficially designated a queer space by Haley and the other participants. Haley also describes herself as an avid reader and an ambivert, as she enjoys the time that she spends with herself reading novels, graphic novels, fanfiction, and comics, but also enjoys being loud, rambunctious, and sociable with her friend group. Haley has been publicly out as a lesbian for a couple of years but explained in the book club process that her parents had mixed reactions to her sexual identity. Ultimately, she is confident in herself and explained that no matter what her parents think, she will live her life as a proud lesbian.

Frances identifies as a cisgender bisexual female and they use any pronouns. When asked how I should refer to them for this paper, Frances said that they prefer to use them/them pronouns as the default. They are still in the process of discovering their identity, but they enjoy having conversations with other self-identifying LGBTQ+ folks on topics and things related to the community. Frances is an avid artist and enjoys creating graphic novel depictions of their life as well as reading graphic novels, romance novels, and fan fiction. Frances is also part of the theater arts program and enjoys dancing and all things artistic.

Sam identifies as trans-masculine and omnisexual and uses he/him pronouns. Similar to his peers participating in the study, he has participated in theater arts and other artistic ventures both in middle and high school. Sam is an avid reader of comics and graphic novels, stating that he first started to read LGBTQ+ literature on the popular website Webtoon, then found his way

into novels and graphic novels from the library. Sam was assigned female at birth and has had support from his parents while he continues to figure out his sexual and gender identity. Sam previously read *Gender Queer: a Memoir* before participating in the book club research study.

Data Collection

In qualitative research, we are “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience,” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Through this study, I aimed to capture the essence of both the individual and the shared experience that students have with each other as they participate together in the book club (Patton, 2015). Researchers utilize interviews as a way to collect data when conducting phenomenological qualitative research studies, as an interview is an opportunity to have a conversation with a participant that utilizes some structure and has a distinct purpose (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this research study, I utilized a semi-structured interview style that has components of structure with a distinct purpose but also allows for the exact wording of each question to change depending on the previous answers of the participant. It is reasonable to suggest that each participant has a different coming out experience, schooling experience, and community they belong to that will shape the interview as it progresses.

Once participants were selected and agreed to participate in the book club, they were given a copy of the novel, *Gender Queer: a Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, and were asked to read the first 120 pages, around half of the novel, for the first meeting. Initially, the purpose of the first book club meeting was to set group norms for conversation, since the original intention of the study was to bring together students who had no previously developed relationships, thus setting the tone to ensure all students were comfortable. As this was not the case, the first book club

meeting allowed the three participants to jump right into conversation with each other on sections of the novel that stood out to them. I must note that, as all participants were freshmen, they took part in a book club unit in their language arts class this year before they participated in the LGBTQ+ book club for this research study. These participants were familiar with discussing novels with their peers and had spent time in that unit of study developing appropriate discussion norms and rules to ensure all members had an equal opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings. I believe that this experience transferred over into our book club and there was not as great of a need to set norms of discussion before jumping into the conversation.

In the second book club meeting, the participants continued their discussion from the first meeting and included their thinking on the second half of the book. After they had enough time to discuss the novel itself, we began the focus group interview. Focus group interviews are designed for a group of people to think about a particular set of questions and reflect on their common experiences (Kitzinger, 1995). While my research indicated that focus group interviews are a tool that researchers in the healthcare field often turn to, I felt that it was appropriate to inquire about the group's experience on both reading the shared novel and spending time together discussing the novel and their journey while reading it. Additionally, a focus group interview provided the opportunity for participants to discuss some of the prevalent issues on queer students and their access to LGBTQ+ novels in the country. The questions for the interview were created before the start of the book club (Table 2) but changed slightly during the interview itself due to the constraint of time and based on the answers from the participants.

Table 2

	1. How would you describe your experience as an LGBTQ+ high school student?
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<p>Planned Interview Questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Could you tell me a little more about [referenced experience]? b. Could you expand on what you mean when you said [statement]? 2. How would you describe your experience participating in this book club? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Could you expand on what you mean when you said [statement]? 3. Have you participated in a book club before? What was that like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Did you find this experience to be similar or different? Why? b. Which experience did you prefer? c. Have you ever spent time reading the same book as someone else and talked to them about it? What was that experience like? 4. Describe how you participated in the book club. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What did you find yourself doing, saying, or thinking? 5. Describe your personal experience with reading the book. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Was it a positive or negative experience? Why? b. Would you recommend this book to others? To whom? Why? c. Should this book be read by other LGBTQ+ teens? 6. Should books that deal with topics of gender and sexuality (like this one) be read by all LGBTQ+ teens? Why? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Should books like these be read by all teens? 7. Do you feel that you have grown as a community as a result of this book club? Why? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Do you feel that book clubs could provide you with an opportunity to find people who like similar topics or things? Why? 8. Do you feel that providing book clubs like this at all high schools would be beneficial? Why? 9. Suppose you had one minute to talk to people who are trying to ban books like <i>Gender Queer</i>. What would you want to say to them? 10. Have I missed anything that you would like to share?
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During the book club meetings, I served as the facilitator by taking on the role of the participant as an observer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 144). The participants of the book club knew the purpose of the study and were aware that I was taking field notes as they discussed; however, I found it to be important to share my experiences as a queer person in high school and while reading the novel. This was done to promote a safe environment where all participants felt comfortable sharing in front of me and each other.

Data Analysis

After creating the transcript from the recording of the focus group interview, I used thematic analysis to complete a primary analysis of findings to identify commonalities and themes in the responses of the participants. I have used guidance from Merriam & Tisdell (2016) which explains that when taking a thematic analysis of ethnographic field notes and experiences, one must consider both description—what is happening in the transcript and what happened in the experience itself—and analysis—an identification of the key features of the transcript and experience to paint a clear picture for the audience (p. 229). In this process, I spent quite a bit of time reading the raw data and thinking of the book club and interview. I found the idea of phenomenological reduction (p. 227) to be intriguing, and I aimed to immerse myself in the data for three days to attempt to fully understand all that we had been through as a book club. While we met only twice, the data gathered was immense and many lines of inquiry were explored by and with the participants. Two meetings of around 30 minutes were simply not enough to capture all that was desired, but time played a major role in the constraint. Therefore, when I spent time in phenomenological reduction, I paid close attention to how the three individuals interacted with each other and thoughts about the physical space, body language, and other nonverbal cues from the participants. My goal was to remember not only what was said, but how the students conveyed their feelings.

Once I felt comfortable with and developed a unique understanding of the data, I was ready to move to develop specific codes for data analysis. While I gathered data in the field, I noticed prevalent themes of parents, queer representation, and critique of popular culture, as my previous understanding of data collection and analysis encouraged me to think of the two as simultaneous activities (p. 191). In addition to these themes I identified in the field, I came up

with several more as part of the reduction process: LGBTQ+ experience, gender identity, sexual identity, belonging, friendship, media representation, and heteronormativity. From there, I spent time going through the data once more and adding codes to the various elements of the transcript and field notes. As I went through data in the thematic analysis phase, I discovered that two findings, the second and third parts of the results section below, aligned well with my research question as I looked at the role of representation in books and conversations in community with LGBTQ+ folks. The third major theme that I noticed dealt more heavily with the context surrounding space where LGBTQ+ students could gather. While initially I did not believe this related enough to my research question, I did not ignore the data completely. Rather, as I planned for how to build the results section, I realized that the planning of space for all LGBTQ+ students was a crucial element to creating and running an effective book club, thus I included this as the first finding in the results section.

Results

In this section, I describe moments from the book club and focus-group interview process and experience. I provide some insights based on the data and connect them with the relevant literature. First, I lay out the context that surrounds the places where LGBTQ+ students gather. Next, I explore the power of representation in LGBTQ+ novels and graphic novels for young people. Finally, I highlight the critical conversations that LGBTQ+ students share when in community with each other.

There are times as a language arts teacher when I can feel disillusioned by the process of school. The repetitive process of assigning novels to students and thus creating activities and writing prompts for them to complete is almost a rite of passage for high school teachers. While educators are implementing new pedagogical moves and frequently reflecting on the success of

their units of study based on student achievement, it is still refreshing to see young people filled with excitement as they discuss a novel that they enjoyed reading. This was the case when Haley, Frances, and Sam entered our first book club meeting.

“GSAs are not a good place for introverts”: Belonging and Community

Almost immediately upon entering my classroom, Frances explained that she was thrilled to have this experience, as she had been craving a book club that focused on LGBTQ+ authors, characters, and experiences. She explained, “... [another high school in the school district] has a queer book club. My friend is in it!” Sam added that while he and Frances were in middle school, their library put together a queer book club each month and they enjoyed participating in it, as it was an opportunity to make new friends with similar interests in books since Sam’s close group of friends do not share his same love for reading. Haley explained that while her middle school never had a designated LGBTQ+ book club, she had participated in book clubs through the Seattle Public Library.

The three students, who are freshmen in high school, were able to share memories they had from their middle school years, though much of those years were spent at home or in school on Microsoft Teams. Each student had their own stories to share about their time in middle school GSA; however, Sam and Frances shared some of these experiences, as they attended middle school together and have maintained their friendship since then. Hearing this, I asked Haley to recount some of her experiences with GSA in middle and high school, and she found that “GSAs are not a place for introverts, even though the people are usually welcoming.” When Haley would go into the library where meetings were held, she experiences a sense of chaos from her peers as they debriefed their day and finally got to spend some of the pent-up energy. While this experience might be tainted by the fact that it was the end of the day at a middle school, her

point of view is crucial. If the purpose of the GSA is an opportunity to socialize and hang out with friends, introverts like Haley might not find comfort in a space like this. Certainly, one space cannot meet the needs of all students, especially when a significant amount of time in education is spent differentiating the curriculum for the variety of learners. Citing the discomfort that she once felt while attending middle school GSA meetings, Haley shared that this is why she has not walked into the library on Thursday afternoons for the SAGA meetings at Lincoln.

To Haley, her middle school experience with a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) was transformative, as the meeting spaces felt like a true home where she could be herself and talk with other self-identifying LGBTQ+ students about topics that pertained to them. Frances and Sam echoed this sentiment, but Sam shared that in his experience, “established organizations don’t always feel like a place where new people are accepted.” He explained further that when he attended SAGA meetings earlier in the school year, he felt that there were cliques and previously well-established groups that carried over from past years. Frances agreed and added that their belief was the organization was not ready to welcome groups of freshmen. From the initial excitement to sit together and talk about *Gender Queer* to the critical conversation of the dedicated LGBTQ+ space at Lincoln, it is evident that these students desire a place, a community, that meets their needs as self-described book lovers, introverts, queer people, and high school students.

This desire for belonging, interpreted as “a need to form and maintain at least a minimum quality of interpersonal relationships” by Baumeister & Leary (1995), is a feeling that many humans have, to some extent (p. 499). While the participants in the study have close friendships with many of their peers, such interpretation of belonging suggests that they are lacking a sense of belonging tied to their school, therefore lacking a sense of community. Osterman (2000)

connects the two ideas: community can only exist when individuals feel a sense of belonging or personal relatedness (p. 324). Without a space where students feel like they belong, such as an organization or activity, students could feel some disconnect from their school. We can see that this is why the three participants were enthralled to take part in the shared book club experience as they first entered my classroom to begin discussion.

Frances and Sam were sympathetic to Haley's stories, described above, and shared similar memories of relatively organized chaos in their middle school GSA meetings and the few SAGA meetings they had previously attended. In Sam's eyes, GSAs "feel like a place to hang out with friends, not quite to talk about queer things and topics," which led him to stop attending meetings in high school. Furthermore, Sam saw that there was already a tight-knit group of sophomores, juniors, and seniors who formed an important bond and community, which is important, but did not feel welcoming to him or his friends as newcomers to the school. I must note that through my experience working with both the students and sponsors of SAGA, there does not appear to be intentionality in the exclusion of potential members, but the impact that this had on Sam was great enough that it has stuck with him for the entirety of his freshman year of high school. Toomey et al. (2011) found that the sheer presence of a GSA in a school is "a more salient predictor of well-being than GSA membership" itself (p. 182). The authors further explain that one reason could stem from the effectiveness of the GSA: participation in GSA could lead to less beneficial results if the GSA is not effective, though an exploration of an effective GSA was not investigated (p. 183). The results of this study can further question if a student's perception of the effectiveness of a GSA can be found in the structure and ability to include students of all personality types. Either way, Toomey et al. (2011) confirms that the

presence of GSAs in schools correlates with a safer school climate (p. 182), thus leading to a greater sense of well-being and safety for students.

After the first book club meeting, I wanted to get a better sense of the overarching experience of being an LGBTQ+ high school student in Seattle, so the first question posed to the participants in the focus-group interview was about their individual lived experiences. All three students echoed similar sentiments to the ones they shared at the start of the first book club meeting described above. Haley's response centered around her support group of friends that she had mostly made in middle school but had since expanded since starting at Lincoln.

“I mentioned like, my support system is my friends, you know, and I was lucky that a lot of people from my [middle] school did end up going [to Lincoln] ... there were people I knew on my bus in most of my classes and stuff. So, I didn't really have to find new people. But also, if you're going to a new school, and you don't know anyone, that would make it a lot harder, you know, like, just in general.”

I asked Haley to consider if the added self-identification of being LGBTQ+ were to complicate the process of finding a support system. While asking, she quickly shook her head to indicate yes. Sam added that they are lucky to be part of a geographical community that tends to be more supportive of queer people:

“I would say we're lucky to live in an area that is much more accepting than a lot of other places. So, our experiences are wildly different than other teenagers in high school.”

When I moved from Texas to Washington, this was a difference that I saw, as well. I was one of only two out teachers at a high school in Texas, but even then, I was rather reserved when it came to conversations about my sexual identity. When I began teaching in Seattle, I was

admittedly surprised to see many educators who were unapologetically queer and fiercely advocated for their LGBTQ+ students. The Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) 2022 State Equality Index, which is a comprehensive report that reviews state laws and policies that affect LGBTQ+ people and their families, confirms Sam's belief (Human Rights Campaign, 2022). HRC lists Washington in the most progressive category (states working toward innovative equality) due to the broad range of protections aimed at ensuring equality for LGBTQ+ Washingtonians. States like Florida, Texas, Tennessee, and Arizona are listed as places where advocates are working to raise support for basic protections for LGBTQ+ equality (identified as a high priority to achieve basic equality). The tone of the physical community feels safer for these students, and so does the school climate itself. Research from Wilkinson & Pearson (2009) highlights the relationship between school locale and school climate in concerning LGBTQ+ students, explaining that LGBTQ+ students in rural areas are generally exposed to more homophobia and less acceptance of sexual diversity (p. 548). Thus, schools in urban areas, such as Lincoln in Seattle, play a protective role for LGBTQ+ youth; however, their study shows a more significant correlation between well-being and school locale for same-sex attracted boys (p. 549).

Conversation on belonging in the book club continued as Frances thought that part of the reason they feel that they do not belong to a dedicated LGBTQ+ space in high school is that they have fewer queer friends who want to talk about topics and issues related to queer people:

“...part of it might be that there are more people [enrolled at Lincoln compared to their middle school]. There's a smaller percent of queer people. But that might also not be true? It might just be that I'm making more friends with people who aren't queer. I don't mind that, but it would be nice to have more LGBTQ-identifying friends.”

Anecdotally, I believe that nearly every person can attest to the power of solid friendships during their adolescence. Research confirms the importance of friendships, as they help influence choices such as educational goals, dating and sex, and illicit substance use. Friendships play a significant role in exploration, commitment, and thus, identity formation (Marcia, 1980, as cited in Jones et al., 2014, p. 54). While LGBTQ+ folks inevitably find a place where they can be with peers that share their sexual or gender identity, there is space for institutions like schools to provide more access to dedicated LGBTQ+ spaces. Of course, the opportunity arises with the inclusion of GSAs and into book clubs. Spaces such as these can and should be provided more frequently for students to feel that sense of community with others who share their same sexual orientation and gender identity.

“Maia did a good job at conveying the confusion”: Discussing Shared LGBTQ+ Experiences

Gender Queer: a Memoir itself follows a loose chronological order of events in Maia’s life. The structure of the novel hinges on the stories that Maia wanted to tell and the benefit that the reader gains from reading such stories. For example, Maia will move between experiences that e goes through from childhood through adulthood; in the novel, e moves from discovering and joining eir school’s GSA for a few pages before transitioning to eir experience with discovering eir body odor and learning how to effectively mitigate it. Though the pacing feels rushed, Maia has used this as an opportunity to share a plethora of stories that teenagers who read eir graphic novel might be able to connect with, regardless of their gender or sexual identity.

Following the conversations on finding community at school, we turned our attention back to the graphic novel at hand. Before starting the book club, I asked that the participants bring any ideas or topics that came up for them while reading to discuss with the book club.

Frances quickly flipped through their copy of the novel to find the section where Maia, the main character, gets eir first period, thus leading to a never-ending cycle of bad dreams about em getting eir period in a public place with a long line to get into a bathroom stall (Kobabe, 2020, p. 35). Frances explained that “this section felt relatable. Every person who is [assigned female at birth (AFAB)] and does not identify as female do not enjoy getting their periods.”

On page 43 of the graphic novel, Maia uses a dictionary to search for the definitions of “gay” and “lesbian”. Haley chuckled as she pointed to this section, as one of the quirky common experiences between LGBTQ+ folks today is the rush to the computer to Google how to know if you are gay. With easy access to technology, the participants had the common experience of researching terms associated with the LGBTQ+ community and eventually using that information to come to terms with their own identities. Such access has allowed these participants to quietly conduct research before sharing their thoughts or experiences with anyone until they were ready. In the text, Maia spends time first determining eir sexual identity, as e first had confusion when developing a crush on a female-identifying student a year older than em. Then, as Maia grew older, eir relationship with eir body worsened which led to the confusion surrounding gender. Sam was able to connect more deeply with this element of the graphic novel, as he shares the quality of not identifying as such within their assigned gender identity at birth with the author. Sam shared with the group that he felt hindered by the anatomy of his body, which led to his confusion in gender, and eventual realization of his transness.

The conversation not only highlighted the need for LGBTQ+ or questioning students to have an opportunity to see the confusion other LGBTQ+ folks have endured, but it turned to a conversation on the confusion that parents often face when their child comes out as part of the LGBTQ+ community. I shared with the participants my own coming out story and explained

how my parents were not and have not been receptive since that day. The three participants had mixed experiences with their parents when they came out, but overall, their parents had positive experiences. Haley shared that her father is more willing to be educated and was much more respectful and receptive to Haley's coming out. Whereas she claims that her mother has stayed in a different decade and has shown a willingness to be educated, but seemingly has trouble committing information to memory, which Haley believes is a sign of unwillingness. Frances shared some similar concerns with their parents; while they are supportive of their journey of discovering their identity, their mother has shared reservations because of the stigma LGBTQ+ folks face. Frances explained that their mother does want to learn, but is from a different generation that was not as happily accepting of LGBTQ+ people, so she has a lot to learn and often is confused by new terminology or life experiences. Frances wants to recommend this graphic novel to her mother:

“She's straight and she's trying to get educated about the LGBTQ community because she doesn't want to be homophobic. I think that... it would be a good for her to read a book like that, because she could kind of understand what it's like for who is going through an identity crisis.”

Simply reading the graphic novel had an impact on all of the participants, so much so that they would recommend that queer folks and non-queer folks alike should read it to grow in their understanding of gender and sexuality self-discovery.

Haley asked the group if they thought that all queer teenagers should read this graphic novel. The consensus of the group was yes, LGBTQ+ young people should read the book. Frances clarified that they felt teenagers who are questioning their gender and sexual identity would truly benefit from reading this: “...sometimes when people are questioning, they're like,

‘am I the only person who feels like this?’” Here lies another seemingly universal step in the process of discovering one’s sexual identity. As highlighted in this study, though, some areas of the country are more diverse, open, and accepting, there are parts of the country where policies, laws, and government officials are not receptive nor accepting to LGBTQ+ folks, particularly teenagers. If questioning children are subjected to victimization (i.e., verbal and physical harassment, online harassment and bullying, or sexual harassment) in their community, at their schools, and even by their parents, they are more likely to have lower self-compassion, therefore leading to higher levels of both suicidal ideation and attempts (Hatchel, Merrin, & Espelage, 2019, p. 148). This paper argues that in addition to safe spaces provided to students at school, as research has suggested, children need access to the stories and lived experiences of folks who are just like them.

“We don’t talk much about queer folks”: Critical Conversations on Representation

The three participants not only wanted to talk about the benefits of reading this novel as a catalyst for identity formation but decided during the book club to have robust, critical conversations on the representation of LGBTQ+ folks in the media and through stories. As previously explored, the participants see the value in reading *Gender Queer: a Memoir*, and had no critiques of the novel itself or its representation of an LGBTQ+ experience because of its perceived authenticity. Haley, Frances, and Sam all highlighted that this is an important piece of the LGBTQ+ repertoire of stories since it is the author’s unique story. The book club then focused on the heightened conversation surrounding LGBTQ+ representation in other forms of media, particularly if the representation is perceived as inauthentic by the audience of LGBTQ+ folks.

As we spent some time discussing the specific events in the novel that stood out to us, Haley asked us to focus on the section of the novel where Maia develops a crush and experiences confusion over which gender she was attracted to (p. 44). As a lesbian, Haley was able to connect with this experience because “realizing you like girls is easy, but realizing you don’t like guys is what’s hard” due to the social conditioning we are subjected to as children. Specifically referencing Disney movies, Haley continued, “The prince and princess you know? [A heterosexual relationship] is the dominant narrative that you see. So, it took me a long time to fully accept that I am a lesbian just because of that.” Haley pushes back against the heteronormativity that is thrust upon children from a young age, showing an understanding of representation politics that plays a part in the discourse surrounding the LGBTQ+ community today. Sam agreed with Haley and pointed out that “Disney keeps having their first gay moments... they’re doing it so they’ll get media attention.” Haley responded that the major steps for representation that folks talk about are meaningless because most, if not all, of the queer characters she sees in children’s movies, or more specifically Disney movies, are background characters who do not have much character development. It is important to note that while this conversation led to generalizations and deeper conclusions about the entirety of the media and entertainment industry, Haley, Frances, and Sam chose to highlight the power of Disney throughout. I asked about this during the conversation and the three participants had not realized they were focusing their critique on Disney, but Sam explained that to him, Disney was and still is a staple for American children. While there are a plethora of children’s movies outside of the sphere of Disney, they are a household name and are worthy of such critique.

This line of inquiry at the second book club meeting, on the power of representation in the media, then led to two paths of critique: first, on capitalism and the view that including

LGBTQ+ characters is a cash-grab for corporations and second, on the effect that such heteronormativity has on children. Haley was more fervent in her belief that media uses LGBTQ+ representation as a way to make more money. She explained that when movies include such a character but choose not to highlight the full depth of that character's life and experience as an LGBTQ+ person, they are using the character as surface-level representation.

“Yeah, it's like everyone's so excited. ‘Oh my gosh, we finally got queer characters!’ It's like, girl background characters for five seconds. Then all the homophobes get upset about it. It just adds to the money, it's not that big of a thing. One background character is the tiniest bit of representation. It's better than nothing, but not worth the fuss.”

To her, this feels inauthentic, because LGBTQ+ people are not simply background characters; they exist and live real lives and have legitimate struggles. When media does not focus on that, Haley believes that it is essentially a manipulative technique designed to increase viewership by instilling false hope in LGBTQ+ people, leading to an increase in profits, but an unsatisfied viewer.

Sam and Frances explored the second critical path by positing that the harm of instilling heteronormative ideas in children can lead to homophobia, particularly because the queer experience has not been normalized. To Frances, “homophobia really is taught” and children do not fully understand what bias is, so if they were to misgender someone and they were corrected, they are less likely to have an emotional reaction to it and just accept it. Sam shared the sentiment that homophobia and bias towards LGBTQ+ folks are taught by their parents and reinforced when they are not exposed to any stories with LGBTQ+ folks. Sam furthered his argument by including the role that gendered activities, clothes, and types of child play have in solidifying the belief that heterosexuality is the norm. He shared a story of his father's girlfriend

who saw his brother skipping and commented that skipping is a girl's activity that he should not be doing. Haley added that colors even have genders associated with them and referenced a gender reveal party: "Pink is for girls, blue is for boys. Like stop, it's a color!" Frances did not want to be seen as a girly girl when she was younger, so they hid the fact that they loved the color pink, claiming instead that green was their favorite color. I shared that I wanted so desperately to play with Barbies with my sister when I was in elementary school, but was only ever able to if I played quietly with the Barbie dolls my grandmother kept at her house to hide the fact that I was playing with toys supposedly not meant for boys.

As the critique came full circle, Sam took it back to the representation of gender and sexuality in media. If society is not pushing back against parents who will only teach their children heteronormative beliefs, there will be a community of people that insists on maintaining a culture of hatred, bias, and violence toward the LGBTQ+ community. He finished with a poignant statement that his choices as a person genuinely do not affect anyone other than himself, thus children should be taught about all types of people so they will learn to empathize with others and treat them kindly. Such critical conversations provided an opportunity for these three participants to explore some of their frustrations with the way society treats them and the people who also belong to the shared LGBTQ+ community. The outlet used to air their complaints and concerns surrounding authentic representation filled a need that all three book club members were missing: a safe space to discuss LGBTQ+ topics and things, as highlighted in the first part of the results section.

Discussion

This research study argues that book clubs are a particularly useful tool for the facilitation of gender and sexual identity discovery, building of community and belonging, and discussion of

topics, issues, and things that affect the LGBTQ+ community. Research shows that when people can share and discuss a novel with peers, they value the opportunity to share their own life experiences and address issues evoked by their reading (Smith, 1996, p. 182; Beach & Yussen, 2011, p. 122). Haley, Frances, and Sam were able to come together not only to share about their life experiences but to share in their life experiences. While the journey to self-discovery of one's sexual and gender identity is individual and unique, some elements are shared with others. I must ask if the three participants did not have a place to come together to have these conversations, would they have had these conversations at all? If there is not a dedicated space for LGBTQ+ students, particularly those who do not have an easy time joining a more social or extroverted environment, how can students think, grow, and learn? For this study, I specifically cultivated a space by and for LGBTQ+ folks. From the start of the recruitment of participants, I spoke of my experiences as a teacher and student where there was no space for LGBTQ+ teens and emphasized that I have a deep commitment to providing that space. This study has and will be framed as a first step to ensure that this particular location will keep an LGBTQ+ book club throughout the year. I can only hope that with this research will come more spaces for LGBTQ+ students in Seattle and across the country. Fundamentally, book clubs have historically served as an opportunity for people to co-construct meaning, build community, and build intellectual solidarity (Beach & Yussen, 2011, p. 122). This study has shown that the historical importance of book clubs remains intact present day, as the book club experience for these participants mirrored similar results.

The novel chosen for this book club was selected because of the controversy surrounding it. The selection of *Gender Queer: a Memoir* provided a unique opportunity for the participants to explore a story that had both similar and different attributes to their own stories of coming out

as part of the LGBTQ+ community. While each participant did not relate to every detail of the novel, they were able to use the novel itself as a catalyst for identity-centered conversations. At each step of the research process, all participants were filled with excitement and enthusiasm to read this novel. This highlights the critical conversations that took place as part of the process, as well. Haley, Frances, and Sam all advocated for a deeper, more meaningful, and authentic push to include LGBTQ+ voices and stories in movies, television, and books. For them, access to a wide array of stories from a young age would have enhanced their journey to self-discovery of their gender and sexual identities.

This study illustrates two important notions when it comes to providing space for LGBTQ+ students in high school. First, GSAs are crucial, powerful organizations that can offer a space for students to build community. However, through the anecdotes from the three participants, it is reasonable to conclude that GSAs are not places for every LGBTQ+ person, and believing so would be a reduction of the breadth of the community. Some folks, like the participants in this study, are not extroverted and would prefer to spend their time in a dedicated space dissecting the LGBTQ+ experience and engaging in insightful, critical conversations. While GSAs serve to decrease victimization and peer-to-peer harassment in schools, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Second, book clubs can fill a missing space for some LGBTQ+ students that might not fit into the GSA space for whatever reason. As seen in the findings, a book club can be a place for people to deconstruct a text, address their thoughts and opinions, share their experiences and beliefs, and ultimately build community. Book clubs are not a space for all students, but the combination of literacy skills and identity exploration offers some iteration of queer spaces to discuss media, literature, and art with all students.

For those that want to begin a book club such as this, or provide a space for LGBTQ+ students to gather and build community, we must understand that the medium used to initiate conversations is simply that: a tool. These tools provide students with an entry point to conversation on identity and belonging. Students, like Frances, Haley, and Sam, will use the medium to generate dialogue on their own journeys to discovery of true identity. We must aim to ensure there is space for students to share their authentic lives and lived experiences, which includes the opportunity to share in their thoughts and critiques of the world that surrounds them. The three participants show that students are dreamers and are consistently examining the world and discussing how to make the world a better place. The critique that Haley shared on the role that Disney movies play in reinforcing heteronormativity is the key example. While it may be easy for educators to slip into a deficit mindset of their students, we must remember that they have unique points of view and are keenly aware of the world they live in. If we are committed to transforming education, to transforming the space for LGBTQ+ students, we must first listen to their ideas, beliefs, experiences, and desires.

Limitations

This study was small: only three students participated in the book club. The patterns stated here cannot be said to represent the breadth of the LGBTQ+ student experience. The students who participated in the study are all of the same age and had built a previous bond before entering the research study, leading to a possibility of bias with stories, statements, and beliefs shared by the students. The friendship between the participants prevented the book club from following much of a structure in terms of preparing and asking questions, which could be a detriment to the results. Finally, this study required students to receive parental permission to participate, thus all participants are out to their parents or guardians. This leaves out a large

population of students who are questioning and/or afraid to come out. Further collection of data is needed to represent the wide array of experiences of LGBTQ+ high school students.

Implications

In practice, institutions and schools have a duty to the students that they serve. While schools can be thought of first as a place of learning and building academic skills that will be beneficial in the future, schools must first work to provide safety, both physical and emotional, to their students. Schools want and need students to feel that they belong. Osterman (2000) concludes that as a psychological phenomenon, a sense of belonging can be traced to impacts on human behavior and motivations (p. 359). Within the context of schools, research strongly suggests that when students belong to a space, they will perform better academically and they are more committed to their school (p. 360). Whether or not students face difficulty when coming out at home, they can benefit from sharing a space with their LGBTQ+ peers. Schools must provide such a space if they are at all concerned with the well-being and emotional health and safety of their students, particularly the vulnerable LGBTQ+ students. Book clubs can be a strategy implemented to provide such space for those students.

Though the scope of this study looks at gender and sexual identity within the context of LGBTQ+ students, one can make a reasonable conclusion that spaces for students with a marginalized aspect of identity are crucial. School administrators have an opportunity to look at their vulnerable populations of students, those that are exposed to bias, hate, and abuse from their peers and society as a whole, and work to plan and implement dedicated spaces for those particular students.

Finally, this study can provide some insight to educators as a group, though I will focus on how these findings can particularly help support English language arts (ELA) teachers. ELA teachers are most likely familiar with the concept set forth by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (p. ix). Books provide a unique opportunity for all students to learn about other cultures, groups of people, and facets of identity, thus building empathy and understanding for people different from themselves. ELA teachers can look at the critical conversations the participants of this study had to see that there is an opportunity and need for all students to break their learned beliefs centered on heteronormativity. When selecting novels for the classroom, ELA teachers should look at their classroom of diverse students and select books accordingly. Gone are the days of reading only canonical texts; teachers must make a concerted effort to provide texts that will help disrupt heteronormativity by showcasing the plethora of LGBTQ+ life experiences available.

I must note that I recognize the power of place in the selection of texts and curriculum development. In Seattle, we have innate privilege purely based on location: we are in a progressive area where LGBTQ+ people and students generally feel comfortable living an open life. In other parts of the country, these same folks would feel much more cautious and closed off to ensure they are not subjected to hate and homophobia from their neighbors. When thinking about the inclusion of such LGBTQ+ texts, educators must be keenly aware of their state and local guidelines, regardless of their legitimacy in relation to previously cited research. Ultimately, we dream of a country where all students can feel accepted and loved in their community, but that is not our current reality. I encourage educators to include LGBTQ+ texts for these students, but I also recognize the desire to maintain stable employment in the face of hateful policies.

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