

LGBTQIA+ Censorship in Schools

The LGBTQIA+ acronym has progressively gotten longer to be more inclusive, but many people can't identify what the acronym means. Ironically, society is becoming less inclusive by limiting the amount of accessible LGBTQIA+ themed books. The amount of censorship around books with these themes is absurd. This is having negative repercussions that many people choose to ignore. People's ignorance when it comes to this community is also very upsetting, but it's not their fault. It's how we teach our children that's the real problem. We have been raised in a world where you need to be a boy or a girl to be normal, even though there's an entire spectrum of people that don't fit that mold, that most choose to ignore. We grew up learning that everyone has a mom and a dad, and anything different is looked down upon. These ideologies are ingrained in our society and are very difficult to unlearn. Learning to be accepting of others starts at a young age, and literature achieving this should be praised, not banned. The controversy surrounding LGBTQIA+ themed works is reaching new levels, and it has drastic effects on both school and public libraries all over the country. By including these types of books in and out of the classroom, we can fight heteronormativity, and experience the benefits of inclusivity.

There is a ridiculous amount of controversy around books that portray anything related to the LGBTQIA+ community, which causes LGBTQIA+ content to be scarce and hard to access. Those in the LGBTQIA+ community are usually outside the bounds of what is considered "normal" in our society. We "break the rules" per say. When growing up, we are told that there are only two genders, male and female. So, when we encounter someone that identifies as non-binary, they are not considered normal. We are uncomfortable with things we are unfamiliar with. There are also many religions that are against being transgender or homosexual. Those religions do not support the LGBTQIA+ community because it is against their belief system.

This is true for some religions, but not all. Because of this, there is constant controversy over books with LGBTQIA+ themes. People are uncomfortable with these books, for various reasons. This debate is happening all over the country, and in all different levels of schools. Since there is so much controversy surrounding these books, there is frequently a lack of availability of LGBTQIA+ books among all different age levels. This controversy, as ridiculous as it is, effects the availability of these books to everyone. Because of the debate on LGBTQIA+ themed books, there is not a sufficient amount of these books in both school and public libraries.

LGBTQIA+ themed books continue to show up on the Top 10 Banned books list year after year, proving how much of a problem this is. LGBTQIA+ themed books have a bigger presence on this list than ever before. Over half of the books on the American Library Association's 2016 Top 10 Most Challenged Books List are on that list because of LGBTQIA+ content (LGBTQ Book Bans and Challenges). When looking at the list from 2016 and 2017, it is very noticeable that most of the books on the list are children's books, which is very surprising when talking about books that are continuously banned in the United States ("Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists."). Of those children's books, the majority have some sort of LGBTQIA+ content or characters that identify in the community. One example of this is the children's book, *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell. This book tells the story of two male penguins who raise a chick together in the San Diego Zoo (Richardson, Parnell, and Cole). *And Tango Makes Three* was the #1 most challenged book in the United States in 2006, 2007, and 2008. It has shown up on the ALA Top 10 Most Challenged Book List sporadically ever since then. Those who oppose the book say that it promotes "Homosexual agenda" (LGBTQ Book Bans and Challenges). Which is essentially the term used for the recruitment and persuasion of non-LGBTQIA+ people to join this community. The amount of

debate that this book has caused is completely ridiculous. This book was not written with the intent to convince children to be homosexual. It does not promote homosexual agenda, instead it just introduces a different kind of family in a child-friendly way. This book was also banned in schools, where many don't allow LGBTQIA+ content to be taught in their communities.

Schools of all levels are being affected by the controversy around this topic, and because of this, students are not offered a proper selection of LGBTQIA+ themed books. Studies have been conducted all over the country, to find out if students have access to LGBTQIA+ themed works of literature in their schools. In one particular study, the library collections of 125 different high schools in an undisclosed state in southern United States, were examined for the inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ themed books. The findings of these studies were not surprising at all. In general, the school libraries were vastly undersupplied in books with LGBTQIA+ themes, or even characters that identify in that community (Balkovek, Cate, and Purchio). It was found that "Although LGBTQ teens are estimated to make up 5.9 percent of the students in American high schools, the average number of LGBTQ-themed titles held by these school libraries was 0.4 percent" (Balkovek, Cate, and Purchio). This is completely unacceptable. The literature in school libraries should accurately represent the student body. This study focused on high schools, but the amount of LGBTQIA+ themed books in lower-level schools is even less. Children of all ages need to be able to relate and see themselves in the things they consume every day, whether that is movies, TV shows, social media, or books. This rarely happens for the LGBTQIA+ community, because there is usually pushback when teachers or librarians try to provide a more inclusive range of literature. With the pushback, it's harder for them to provide the range of literature that is needed in school libraries.

The controversy around LGBTQIA+ is so prevalent that it has even been a topic of debate for our country's political parties. A study was done to compare the opinions of democrats verses republicans on the topic of "Pro Banning books with LGBT Characters" (Marusic). This study focused specifically on books with just "LGBT Characters," disregarding the actual themes of the book. The results were very upsetting, as much as 55% of the republican party supports keeping books with "LGBT Characters" away from elementary school aged children. This is completely unnecessary – children need to be exposed to a wide range of peoples and groups in order to be a tolerant person. As the age level goes up, the number of politicians that support banning books with "LGBT Characters" goes down, but even at the college level as many as 20% of republicans think that these books should be banned (Marusic). This implies that some of our politicians think that the sexuality/gender identification of a book character is too much for a college level student to deal with, just because the character is a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. This starts the debate of "Who should have the biggest impact on what books are available in school libraries?" Should it be politicians? Parents? Or should we leave it up to teachers and librarians to know what is best? It is rarely taken into consideration what the students actually want to read, and if that book happens to have LGBTQIA+ characters and themes in it, then they shouldn't be restricted.

Public libraries receive extreme pushback as well, for stocking LGBTQIA+ themed books on their shelves, which restricts the access even more to these kinds of books. With all of the pushback that librarians receive for putting these books into public libraries, there is a struggle to find a balance of having adequate LGBTQIA+ material, while also not upsetting too many people in the process. This struggle limits the accessibility of these books to the public. Getting these books into libraries is very difficult in itself, but when they are introduced into

libraries there is a whole other debate on where these books should be placed and who should have access to them. Many believe that LGBTQIA+ themed books do not need to be accessed by the average student, but they are completely wrong. Everyone should be exposed to this type of content to widen their horizon. In one particular city in Oklahoma, there was a very heated debate on where to place LGBTQIA+ children's books in public libraries. In previous years, the "Metropolitan Library System" has placed children's books with LGBTQIA+ themes in a different section of the library than other children's books (Avery). They have been placed in a section called "Family Talk," along with books about mental illness, sexual assault and drug addiction (Avery). This is extremely harmful, because children will then start to associate the LGBTQIA+ community with that of things like drug addiction and sexual assault. This choice signals out an entire community of people and associating them with something completely unrelated. This action was actually a compromise. This particular library wanted to ban LGBTQIA+ works of literature all together (Avery). This was not feasible, so they just restricted the access to these books. The literature in public libraries needs to be representative of every type of person, and every type of community. Without actively including all types of people, we teach our children to be exclusive.

The lack of LGBTQIA+ content contributes to the development of heteronormativity as early as primary school, and this can have long lasting repercussions. Heteronormativity in schools is simply "the 'organizational structures in schools that support heterosexuality as normal and anything else as deviant'" (Atkinson and DePalma). In schools, children are taught that being anything besides heterosexual is weird or different. This causes those in the LGBTQIA+ community to be outcaste by their peers and teachers. Our school systems tend to focus on individual incidents of homophobia, rather than actually drawing attention to the

cultural factors that cause them. It is quite concerning that bullying is more common among LGBTQIA+ members, than other students. By doing this, we are approaching the problem too late. Heteronormativity needs to be eliminated before it has the chance to develop. One study found that heteronormativity is less likely to develop when children are exposed to LGBTQIA+ content and ideas at a young age (Atkinson and DePalma). By doing this, it would open the minds of children to different types of families, not emphasizing which one is considered “normal.”

Students who identify in the LGBTQIA+ community, or those who have family members in that community will feel more included. They will be able to see themselves in books, proving that they don't need to fit a certain mold in order to be accepted. Inclusion of LGBTQIA+ literature at a young age would also help bullying and isolation that many face who are a part of this community. With more exposure to these themes, it will no longer be “weird” to be a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. It can be as accepted as those who are considered “normal.” Many teachers also decided to step up and include LGBTQIA++ themed books into their curriculum. If people, especially teachers, don't go out of their way to be inclusive, they're being exclusive (Curwood, Schlieman, and Horning). In order for teachers to be inclusive, they need to incorporate LGBTQ themed books into their classrooms. A study found that only “8.5% of responding schools indicated that they use ‘texts, films, or other materials addressing same-sex desire in their English language arts curriculum’” (Curwood, Schlieman, and Horning). This shows that many teachers are not going out of their way to be more inclusive to those in the LGBTQIA+ community. Incorporating these types of books into the classroom can combat heteronormativity in schools and allow for a more inclusive environment. Providing a more

diverse selection of reading material for students can also help decrease bullying in school, because being in the LGBTQIA+ community will no longer seem “abnormal.”

I have experienced the repercussions of the lack of LGBTQIA+ content in the classroom. In high school, I don't remember ever reading a book with any LGBTQIA+ characters in it. I identify as pansexual, and I didn't figure that out until college. It would have been a lot easier for me to come to that conclusion if I had access to LGBTQIA+ content when in school. I spent my entire high school feeling like there was something wrong with me, because I found that I was attracted to both girls and boys. All that I had been exposed to prior to that were the stereotypes of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as the flamboyant gay man, or the butch lesbian. It is very difficult growing up and not being able to relate to those in the media, whether that be books or TV shows. It would have been a lot easier for me to accept the way I was feeling had I been introduced to a more diverse range of literature. It is also difficult for me to share my sexuality with people because we live in a very heteronormative world. It is hard not to feel like an outcast in this society if one identifies with the LGBTQIA+ community. Sexuality seems to be all that defines a person anymore unless they're heterosexual. We all seem to have the stereotype in our head of the one-dimensional gay man, or butch lesbian. As a society, we need to stop defining people by their sexuality or gender identification. When we do that, we add to the one-dimensional stereotype that many in the LGBTQIA+ face every day. Having regular access to LGBTQIA+ themed books would make being part of the LGBTQIA+ community more accepted.

There is so much unneeded censorship surrounding LGBTQIA+ themed works of literature. This is a problem that is affecting public libraries as well as school libraries. By including these books in school curriculum, schools can become more inclusive. Getting these

books into school and public libraries is hard enough as it is, without having to debate where they should be placed in the libraries, and who should have access to them. Studies show that in general, school libraries are vastly undersupplied when it comes to literature with LGBTQIA+ content. The lack of LGBTQIA+ content available has negative repercussions. One of those being heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is very dangerous, especially in a classroom setting, it causes LGBTQIA+ members to be outcast, and can even lead to isolation. I can personally confirm that these things are happening, and it needs to stop. With a wider range of literature, we have the ability to create a more inclusive society, starting as early as primary school.

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