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Navigating Parental Resistance: Learning from Responses of LGBTQ-Inclusive Elementary School Teachers

One of the most common responses from pre- and in-service teachers related to addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) topics in elementary school is a concern about parents' responses. This article explores these concerns by examining two elementary school teachers' interactions with

parents in relation to their LGBTQ-inclusive teaching. This article provides a possible road map for other teachers who are nervous about parental responses to LGBTQ-inclusive teaching and interrupts notions that negative responses from parents are reason enough to avoid including these topics in elementary classrooms.

For the past decade, through our university teaching to preservice teachers at our large regional universities and through our professional development presentations to in-service

teachers around the country, we have advocated for the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people and families in elementary schools. No matter whether our students and audience members agree or disagree with the wisdom of this recommendation or see the necessity for such inclusion, the single most common response we receive to such suggestions is, “What about the parents?” Their reaction, echoed in other research (Clark, 2010; Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009; Thein, Kavanagh, & Fink, 2013), indicates the significant gate-keeping mechanism teachers understand parents to play when it comes to approving or disapproving their curricular choices, especially related to

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topics that have been historically silenced or that challenge particular communities' beliefs or standards.

When we get such responses, we try to challenge their fear of parents'¹ concerns by reminding them of a few things. First of all, the category of *parents* is not homogeneously straight/conservative (DePalma & Jennett, 2010). In many instances, parents are neutral toward, or even explicitly appreciative of, teachers making their classrooms more inclusive (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). Second, portrayals of sexuality are still present in elementary school classrooms if LGBTQ topics are not included (Blaise, 2005; Allan, Atkinson, Brace, De Palma, & Hemingway, 2008; Cullen & Sandy, 2009; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Ryan, 2016; Wallace & VanEvery, 2000)—think fairy tales and playground kissing games! And finally, we remind them, it's more important to teach children about our diverse world and to ensure that LGBTQ children and families feel safe and included in our schools, rather than to protect a mythical innocence we project onto children that talking about LGBTQ topics might somehow taint (Kehily & Montgomery, 2004; Piper, 2000; Renold, 2005; Silin, 1995; Tobin, 1997).

Yet although these reminders ring true and clear for us, it is also true that parental objections to LGBTQ-inclusive teaching happen (Ring, 2015; Smith, 2006) and that teachers who challenge the heteronormativity of elementary schools through their teaching can be vulnerable to such objections and their consequences. Therefore, this article investigates the parental resistance that two classroom teachers in different states and teaching contexts encountered when they included LGBTQ topics in their elementary teaching and how they navigated such resistance. Three questions guided our analysis:

What kind of parental resistance did they face, if any? In what ways did these teachers navigate parental resistance to LGBTQ-inclusive teaching? And what informed the ways they responded to this resistance? Although every context differs, we hope this research can provide an empirical guide to the kinds of objections that parents might have. Additionally, we provide a blueprint to help pre- and in-service teachers consider as they prepare their own responses.

Theoretical Framework

This work draws on critical frameworks (Freire, 1970/1993; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015) to help us consider how power circulates with regard to the negotiation of multiple and intersecting identities converging in dialogue. Such identities, including those around sexuality and those of traditional school roles like *parent* or *teacher*, inform the ways that teachers and parents relate to each other around classroom practices. The collision of these differently positioned perspectives shapes the kinds of questions and responses adults who care deeply about the same children bring to each other within these culturally-defined roles.

Specifically, our analysis focuses on how components of the critical literacy framework that these two teachers used in their teaching also served to shape their interactions with parents. The work of Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) informs our use of critical literacy. This approach often includes elements such as “1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues and 4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382). Where critical literacy is a lens that teachers might use when thinking about texts and teaching, we note the elements of this approach to teaching that parallel these teachers' engagement with parental resistance to an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum. This is appropriate, given the ways that critical literacy directs attention to how language, power, and social institutions interact with and affect each other (Dozier,

¹ We understand *parents* in this article to be inclusive of all types of adult caregivers of children, whether those be biological parents, adoptive parents, step parents, foster parents, grandparents, extended-kin networks, or other arrangements. We use *parents* here for clarity and because it is overwhelmingly the way teachers most often frame their questions and concerns related to LGBTQ topics.

Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Freire, 1970/1993; Janks, 2000), making it particularly useful for understanding the situation under analysis here. Simultaneously, we use a lens of queer theory (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1977/1995) to inform our understanding of how, why, and where discussions of nonnormative genders and sexualities become marked as deviant by parents, particularly in classrooms, and particularly around elementary aged children.

Data Sources

Data for this article come from a long-term, multisite, ethnographic instrumental case study (Stake, 2008) project in two different Midwestern cities. One site was Linda's racially and economically diverse public school in a large urban district where Caitlin (Author 2) was the primary researcher. The other site was Fern's small private school where Jill (Author 1) was the primary researcher and frequent coteacher. Both Linda and Fern are White veteran teachers, with over 20 years of experience, who regularly incorporate social justice topics around race and class into their teaching and who have only more recently begun incorporating LGBTQ topics into their classrooms, mostly through read-alouds and ELA curriculum. Linda identifies as a lesbian and is genderqueer. Fern identifies as a cisgender, straight ally. They have both taught many different grades, but they both most often teach 4th and 5th grades, which is what they were teaching over the course of this project. Data sources include field notes from participant observations, interview transcripts, and written reflections from the teachers provided to the researchers in between research visits. For purposes of this article, we examined situations in the data where Linda and Fern referenced their interactions with parents.

Findings

When it came to Linda and Fern's work with parents, only a small portion of interactions were

negative. Contrary to the fears of many teachers, the vast majority of Linda and Fern's students' parents never expressed objections or resistance to their LGBTQ-inclusive teaching. Many, in fact, were incredibly impressed with Linda and Fern's abilities as teachers and their willingness to lead their students in explorations of diversity in the world. As Linda explained, "I had parents who were in the room when we would have some of these discussions who thought 'Wow, kids can talk about things on this level!'" Linda also recounted how a grandmother of another student came into the classroom to observe and left feeling "impressed with [the students'] ability to have a deep discussion about an issue, as opposed to just sitting and listening to somebody just lecture about stuff." These responses challenge traditional notions that LGBTQ-inclusive teaching will automatically be rejected by all parents.

Nevertheless, the potential for parental resistance to their LGBTQ-inclusive teaching and their fear of what might happen if it occurred informed Linda and Fern's choices at many points in their separate pedagogical processes. These points include their curriculum and lesson planning, their interactions and accommodations of individual students, and their approach to any parents' concerns as a conversation. Throughout these different points, Linda and Fern's vision of their role as critical literacy educators proved to be hugely influential in establishing how they thought about and negotiated their curriculum and possible parental resistance to their teaching, especially because it provided them with a perspective on teaching and a place to stand from where they could be answerable (Bakhtin, 1986, 1992) to others. Central to both teachers' critical literacy lens was a critique of power (Dozier et al., 2006; Janks, 2000). To Fern and Linda, parents who resisted LGBTQ-inclusive teaching represent status quo power relations that deny equality to those deemed outside of typically represented identities. In their interactions with resistant parents, Linda and Fern lay bare this notion through their language, choices, and expectations, even as they accounted for the

ways that parents in their community understood power and the place of power in the classroom. To illustrate this, we now detail the specific ways Linda and Fern each negotiated parental resistance throughout various points of their planning and teaching.

Planning Curriculum

The first place where Linda's and Fern's LGBTQ-inclusive teaching was shaped by (possible) parental resistance was in their curriculum planning. For example, Linda and her grade-level team members often used a larger unit, frequently a year-long inquiry, to frame their curricular choices. Linda, for example, used an exploration of "being problem solvers" as an opportunity to read LGBTQ-inclusive books alongside books about other issues of oppression, such as racism, classism, and sexism. Although she understood the pedagogical value of this kind of framework, she also explicitly appreciated its value in rationalizing her choices for parents. As Linda said, "I think it's nice to have that 'we're doing this because' [frame of a larger unit] because we can really justify [the inclusion of LGBTQ topics] for parents." The texts in this way didn't stand on their own as a reflection of a separate agenda, but, instead, were part and parcel of larger learning goals. Linda also chose to explicitly share these frameworks and units with parents at the beginning of the year to inform them of the kinds of texts and approaches she would be using, but she was particular about the words she used to describe them. As she said, "I like the language that [says] teachers ... 'teach inclusively.' Because ...it helps frame it for parents in a way that is more palatable for anybody who might have an issue." To Linda, more general language was strategic or, as she said, "palatable" and, therefore, was less likely to receive critique.

Fern, the only upper elementary teacher at her school, also situated her LGBTQ-inclusive teaching within a larger study. Her students' exploration of gender and transgender topics,

for example, was contextualized within their year-long investigation of social justice and identity. These topics included environmental racism in the Flint water crisis, the removal of the Confederate flag from the state house in South Carolina, Japanese internment camps during World War II, and an inquiry into the absence of the history of women and people of color on the timeline bordering the walls of their classroom. Because LGBTQ identities were not the only identities students were investigating, Fern hoped the class' study of LGBTQ inclusive books and topics would not stand out as odd or problematic to parents.

Both teachers also drew on the authority of their mandated curriculum to validate their decisions, mobilizing the official discourse of administrator and parental expectations as justification for—and to create "cover" (Yoshino, 2007, p. ix) for—their queer work. As Linda explained, "I can justify it curricularly. I don't do anything that's inappropriate." This is particularly interesting, given that, traditionally, the idea of *appropriateness* has been employed by parents and others worried about the inclusion of queer topics as an attack against inclusive teaching.²

Here, Linda disrupted more common notions of *appropriateness*, making the term about the learning that students do and the ways that learning fits within curriculum, rather than about a particular construction of sexuality.

Fern also grounded her pedagogical focus firmly within the literacy skills typically taught at the upper elementary level in ways she knew would satisfy her students' parents. She foregrounded traditional literacy skills while asking students to read, write, and research, even when the subject of that work was transgender people's need for access to bathrooms that match their gender identity. If a parent argued that she had "an agenda," she knew she could show them how that agenda was centered in her responsibilities to develop students' literacy. The high

² See, for example, <http://ncac.org/resource/krrp-lgbtq-content-right-to-read-resource> and <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/state/north-carolina/article20991027.html>.

expectation that she had of their literacy skills placed ELA and LGBTQ-inclusive teaching on equal ground. For example, one child's parents had expressed concern about the class reading Alex Gino's *George* (2015) and discussing transgender identities. When that child was working on a project related to the book, Jill asked if he'd had some help. The student nodded slowly and said, "My dad checked my work for commas." Because of Fern's strong focus on ELA skills, parents who might not agree with the LGBTQ-related content could find ways to come to terms with what their child was learning by focusing on their ELA skills.

Both teachers also understood their inclusive teaching as directed toward larger goals of social justice even while satisfying more instrumental content standards. As Linda said, "You have to take it back to an issue of human equality. You know, like human rights ... social justice." The balance and overlap of these various reasons for teaching with LGBTQ-inclusive texts was, in and of itself, yet another tool in Linda's mind for planning in ways that minimized resistance. As she said, "[Reading LGBTQ books] has to have a real valid purpose that is academic and also community based, you know what I mean? That social learning, emotional learning, academic learning. It has to have all those pieces to it." Likewise, at Fern's school, project-based learning was common schoolwide. As she explained to parents over and over, the project for this particular school year was an examination of social justice and fairness. This fit squarely within the bounds of curricular expectations.

Accommodating Individual Students

When, despite anticipation, parental resistance to LGBTQ-inclusive teaching occurred, Linda and Fern each remained flexible in their curricular delivery and worked with parents to modify activities for their child, but never allowed one parent's concerns to determine the learning environment or content for the entire class.

For example, when parents objected to one of the LGBTQ-inclusive texts that Linda was reading aloud, Linda let the parent know that she would continue reading the text to the class, but that she would "give [this parent] the option of not having her child participate in the reading or discussion of these books." As Linda explained:

I said that I was going to read the book and if they didn't want their daughter to participate, it would be exclusive to her, unfortunately, but she could be in another area. I have a tutoring room off of the classroom and she could read another book or do something else. That wouldn't be my preference, but if it would be their preference, that would be an option.

When a parent of one of Fern's students was upset that his child had been reading and learning about transgender people, in spite of Fern's regular communications home about the class's work, he demanded that his child not be exposed to any additional LGBTQ content or even be in the room when other students were talking about LGBTQ topics. Fern explained that the class was now working on independent projects, and his child was welcome to work on another project about a different topic while the rest of the class finished theirs. Because of this parent's request, his child went to the office to do equivalent ELA work everyday while the other students worked in their classroom. Like Linda, Fern worked with that concerned parent but refused to allow his objections to alter the curriculum for the class.

When navigating these situations, the key to balancing her curricular choices against parents' resistance was the way Linda and Fern saw their role as a teacher. As Linda explained:

Parents have a right to object about things, but when you're in a public school setting, there are some concessions you make or you make decisions regarding your kid. You can't dictate what happens in the classroom for everybody based on your concerns or wishes or whatever.

As a parent herself, Linda respected how parents might make individual choices, but she would not allow those choices to serve as mandates on her decisions for the class as a whole. In other words, as she explained, “I’m not going to stop reading the book because someone has an issue with it.” Because of these beliefs, Linda’s commitment to her larger class could continue to walk hand-in-hand with her flexibility toward individual parents.

Reframing Resistance as Dialogue

When responding to parents who objected to their LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, Linda and Fern invited parents into dialogue, rather than responding from a place of defensiveness. In this way, the teachers reframed parental concern and resistance into a genuine inquiry about her enactment of curriculum. Several salient examples come from Linda’s class. The first instance of this strategy occurred after Linda stopped during her read-aloud of Roald Dahl’s (Dahl, 1983/2007) *The Witches* to discuss the word *queer*. She initiated a vocabulary lesson about the word because she had heard snickers from students and felt the need to respond. As it appeared in the text, this word meant *different*, so Linda’s conversation focused on the multiple meanings of the word and how students might hear other meanings of the word used in different contexts.

One parent who heard about this teaching moment from her child wrote Linda a letter expressing her displeasure. She stated that she did not appreciate Linda’s exploration of such loaded vocabulary, and argued that the kind of teaching Linda did in her “-isms curriculum” (including racism, sexism, classism) introduced new information children weren’t aware of, didn’t need to know, and actually could harm “sensitive children” like her daughter. After leveling such serious accusations, she ended her letter asking Linda for a dialogue. The letter Linda sent in response demonstrated how she chose to interpret these assertions as a need for more information.

After thanking the parent for writing and being willing to share these concerns, Linda turned to her

pedagogical training to supply information about her instructional choices that, it seemed to Linda, this parent didn’t understand. To answer the parent in this way, Linda drew on her beliefs about the role of discussion, diversity, and safety in classroom communities to offer the parent a new perspective. She explained, for example, that “it would be, in [her] opinion, negligent not to address these words and the impact of their use.” This kind of reflection was important, Linda clarified, because, as she wrote, “An open and affirming [classroom] community doesn’t just evolve on its own. It develops through the self-reflection of the members and the willingness to confront some very difficult and uncomfortable issues.” It is the adults’ responsibility, she argued, “to help children navigate these difficult topics and to help them process the feelings that come up for them, in a positive way.” She went on to say that classrooms like theirs “are simply a microcosm of the larger community of our country.” In this way, Linda normalized differences of opinion. Such conflicts, she reasoned, are expected and even beneficial components of a learning environment. Linda’s answer reflected her beliefs about how classrooms are not meant to be protective bubbles that shield children from the real world, but spaces where diverse people can engage ideas with the help and guidance of more knowledgeable others. In other words, classrooms are the real world. She drew on this belief to justify her inclusion of discussion, even of controversial discussion across differences, for this parent.

In another instance in Linda’s class, a parent new to the school questioned Linda’s choice to read aloud *George* (Gino, 2015). This parent told Linda that it should be at home, and not in the classroom, that their child learned about transgender people. Again, Linda reframed the concern around the inclusion of transgender identities as an inquiry into the motivation behind her pedagogy, and she used the moment to explain why she saw such a need for this teaching. Linda reported:

I tried to explain my perspective of teaching inclusively and why that’s important and that a child should see a reflection of self in what we do

in school and that she may not be aware in our community there are many kids who live within the LGBTQ community. We have homes that have same gender parents, we have homes with trans parents, we have kids who are trans within our building. And that I ... [a person] who has faced discrimination for years and years [for being lesbian do] not want any of my students to grow up with that same experience of marginalization.

Here, Linda used this teachable moment to inform this parent about members of the school community who would be represented by a book such as this. These community members included Linda herself. Giving this parent the benefit of the doubt, she took the time to explain, from her first-hand experiences, how marginalization is common for LGBTQ people. This vulnerability and willingness to act as a teacher in such a moment shifted the encounter from one of resistance to one of pedagogy. This transition allowed Linda to engage in dialogue in ways that drew on her teacher self, maintaining her position as content expert. Instead of succumbing to or avoiding resistance by silencing LGBTQ topics, Linda taught parents about the need for this teaching.

Fern also faced parental resistance to teaching Gino's (2015) *George*, and the ways that she asked students to consider gender and gender pronouns as the class prepared for that reading. Fern, like Linda, invited the objecting parent into dialogue about how discussing transgender topics fit into the larger social justice framework of the class. Fern tried to help the teacher understand how an overarching discussion of how gender works in daily language was merely a foreground for understanding transgender identities (for a full description of this classroom activity, see Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). This, indeed, was the activity that upset the parent, so Fern brought a wider lens to the discussion. She informed the parent that the school community, like all communities, had transgender people in it, and that a part of her work as a teacher was helping all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Fern described feeling like this approach betrayed the larger reasons for the class' investigation of

transgender topics, but ultimately, it helped this particular parent. Although the parent still had reservations, she left the dialogue feeling heard, and with a deeper understanding of the reasons Fern enacted her curriculum in the ways that she did.

A Foundation of Critical Literacy

Linda and Fern's approaches to parental resistance rely on their beliefs as critical literacy educators, particularly related to Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys's (2002) four frequently-identified elements of such pedagogy. Not only do Linda and Fern "disrupt the commonplace" (p. 382) with regard to LGBTQ inclusion in their curricula during the school day, but they do so also in how they ask parents to reconsider their assumptions of commonplace curriculum. They help parents "interrogate multiple perspectives" when they engage them in dialogue, hearing their concerns while also responding with their own. Because they expect listening, discussion, and exchanging of ideas from all parties' perspectives, they open space for true dialogue (Freire, 1970/1993). Their work fosters a "focus on sociopolitical issues" when they explain to parents why they teach how they teach and how that teaching is meant to include people with marginalized identities, including LGBTQ identities. Simultaneously, Linda and Fern teach parents to rethink the scope of curriculum, reframing community building and equity work as curricular-supported academic skills. And finally, they "call [parents] to take action:" either choose to allow your child to continue to learn in LGBTQ-inclusive ways, or choose to teach your child that not everyone deserves a place at the table. Their classrooms will be inclusive; any change to that arrangement must be initiated by the parents.

As their interactions with resistant parents are framed by critical literacy, Linda and Fern's responses to parental resistance also demonstrate elements of queer theory (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1977/1995). Linda's own identity helps her locate queerness as non-deviant and absolutely acceptable. This, in itself,

is queer. Disrupting notions of deviance by turning the gaze back onto the resisting parents' approaches to teaching and children, Linda and Fern's straightforward explanations of their queered curriculum place homophobic exclusion of LGBTQ-topics outside of the norm. Through their language and actions, they show how schools with queer people and LGBTQ-inclusive texts are (or at least should be) no longer in the closet. It is resistant parents who will need to adjust.

Implications

These data reveal more nuanced notions of the relationship between parents and LGBTQ-inclusive teaching than currently exist for many pre- and in-service teachers. Therefore, they help create new narratives about what stances LGBTQ-inclusive teachers might take in relation to families and LGBTQ topics. Because Linda and Fern's teaching and approach to parental resistance builds directly on their sense of themselves as critical educators, their examples encourage the development of such well-informed stances toward teachers' own practices as a resource for more inclusive teaching. Because Linda draws so directly on her own experiences as a lesbian woman, Linda's example shows how lived identities of marginalization are strengths for teachers interfacing with parents instead of, or at least in addition to, being a vulnerability. This perspective invites non-LGBTQ-identified teachers such as Fern to consider how to gain such knowledge—in effect compensating for their straightness—when attempting to teach inclusively. This makes exposure to LGBTQ studies imperative for teacher education programs and professional development sessions and requires teachers to recognize the LGBTQ people already in their community.

Framing topics in curricular ways, as Linda and Fern do, is another important tool for supporting this teaching. By strategically relying on discourses related to mandated curriculum,

teachers, ally and LGBTQ alike, can provide rationales for LGBTQ-inclusive teaching to parents. Like Linda and Fern, teachers, teacher educators, and administrators can see teaching around LGBTQ topics as part of curriculum, not as additive or marginalized. By assuming that LGBTQ people deserve a place in schools and curriculum, teachers can productively consider Linda and Fern's approaches to resistant parents, creating responses that avoid running from the inclusion of LGBTQ topics on the one hand or acquiescing to the demands of resistant parents on the other.

By anticipating parental resistance to LGBTQ inclusion, by remaining flexible around parental resistance with regard to individual children, but not with regard to whole-class instruction, and by reframing and welcoming parental resistance to LGBTQ inclusion as inquiry while using that resistance as teachable moments, Linda and Fern stake claim as expert teachers whose pedagogical choices around queer topics are essential to delivering effective and mandated curriculum not a separate or additive agenda of their own. Their examples interrupt notions that negative responses from parents are reason enough to avoid including queer topics in elementary classrooms. Considering these approaches can help teachers navigate resistance and create a more LGBTQ-inclusive educational system.

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Additional Resources

1. The National Council of Teachers of English Resources for intellectual freedom website:

<http://www2.ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/>

The National Council of Teachers of English has an Intellectual Freedom Center that can help should you receive any complaints about books you read. Information available includes policy statements, rationales for reading challenged books, activities to celebrate Banned Books Week, and a system for reporting a censorship challenge

2. The American Library Association Intellectual Freedom website:

www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/oif

The American Library Association also has an Office for Intellectual Freedom where anyone

facing a book challenge can get confidential support.

3. GLSEN information about state laws website:

www.glsen.org/article/state-maps

Laws and policies that support safe schools often detail protections for LGBTQ students and can be a good source of positive support for justifying teachers' inclusive pedagogical decisions. Chief among these are states' and districts' nondiscrimination and antibullying laws and policies, known collectively as *safe school laws*. State antibullying laws or district policies prohibit bullying and harassment of students in schools. State nondiscrimination laws or district policies provide protection from discrimination to LGBTQ students in schools. You can find information about your state at this site.

