Walking a Tightrope

Lucy Morris
morris_l7@denison.edu

Our world is constantly transforming and changing how people live their lives. Especially this past month, people in the United States have felt the floor beneath them shift. Minority groups like the LGBTQ community, for example, have potentially lost a level of security with the result of this election, but this is not the first time they have faced oppression and persecution. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, the queer community has faced suppression in workplaces, schools, and recreational spaces. More specifically, queer educators have been placed in a particularly unique situation where their identity, morals, and intentions have constantly been questioned. The challenges these teachers, as well as LGBTQ students, have faced have not gone away but rather have altered with the addition of laws and policies surrounding queer issues in schools. These new policies have influenced the way queer issues are discussed, or not discussed, in schools across the country directly affecting school environments.

Throughout the past few weeks, I have had the opportunity to hear directly from teachers, librarians, and other school workers about how LGBTQ topics are addressed in their schools. They have shared stories of success and safety, but most of our conversations have been centered around surveillance and restriction. To start, there are critical policies that have benefitted queer teachers and students, contributing to making schools a safer environment. According to the 2020 landmark Supreme Court case, Bostock v. Clayton, "an employer who fires an individual employee for being gay or transgender violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964".[1] Having these set precedents protects LGBTQ workers from losing their jobs based on their identity alone. For teachers, this is important because of the particular scrutiny they are placed under.[2] Instances of this protection and freedom for teachers became apparent when I interviewed an early elementary school teacher in New England who described the

[1] "Bostock v. Clayton County," Oyez, accessed November 11, 2024, https://www.oyez.org/cases/2019/17-1618.
[2] This scrutiny gets at teachers being in a unique place to influence their students, especially at the elementary grade levels. This also connects to points of surveillance described later in this essay.

circumstances for queer teachers at her public school. This teacher has been teaching at the same public elementary school for 25 years and while not being part of the LGBTQ community herself has multiple queer coworkers who she considers close friends. During our conversation, she described how there are 4 openly gay teachers at her school, but how each has a different level of comfort in discussing their sexuality.[3] For example, there is an openly gay teacher who often discusses her partner with her students and coworkers, showing pictures of their wedding, travels, etc. However, there is another teacher who refrains from discussing her partner with her students and will only talk about their children (Interviewee, 2024). These differences reflect one's comfort level in the classroom, but the underlying connection is that these teachers can discuss their identity however they choose. If a teacher wants to discuss their identity, they have the space to do so in a way that makes them comfortable.[4] With the protection of legislation and policy, teachers and employees more broadly are protected based on their gender and sexual identity.

This also relates to LGBTQ students as they are protected under similar landmark legislation. Queer students over the last multiple decades have been subjected to bullying and suppression based on their gender and sexual identity. Not until the groundbreaking 1996 court case, Nabozny v. Podlesny, were schools found responsible for protecting their students from antigay discrimination[5]. This historic victory recognized LGBTQ people (including youth) as a protected class and set an important precedent for future cases. The same teacher who I introduced above also described some experiences of queer students in her school. Of course, she has limited information on their situation and is only seeing it from an outsider's perspective (as

[3] It is important to note that this level of comfortability changes depending on who the audience is (that is whether it is students or coworkers).
[4] It is important to note that this is coming from one school in a fairly progressive area of the country and might not reflect other people and places.
[5] "Nabozny v. Podlesny," Lambda Legal, accessed November 11, 2024, https://legacy.lambdalegal.org/in-court/cases/nabozny-v-podlesny.

she did not directly teach these students), but she explained that there have been two or three students during her time at this school who are gender nonconforming. From what she describes, these students have been supported in that the administration guaranteed gender-neutral bathrooms for students (Interviewee, 2024).[6] During our conversation, the teacher commented on how the school needs to be able to support transgender students and have a consistent dialogue on how to do that best. Based on the legal precedent set by cases like Nabozny v. Podlesny, Lawrence v. Texas, and Whitaker v. Kenosha, schools are responsible for making queer students feel safe. In the words of Suárez and Mangin, "Schools can avoid putting transgender students or employees through this gauntlet by understanding that implementing nondiscrimination law entails a proactive and holistic process of translating equity-related expectations into existing school policies and practices".[7] There are actions that schools should take to secure the safety and liberty of their students, but sometimes that is more easily said than done.

Without disparaging the legal and social progress of LGBTQ topics over the last few decades, it is important to recognize the challenges that remain ingrained in our educational system. Educators have an unstandardized curriculum surrounding queer topics and are fearful of saying something that could be taken the wrong way. Walking this tightrope seems to be a common theme among current educators. Alongside topics of policy and experience, I also conversed with the teacher I interviewed about current regulations and curriculum her school has on LGBTQ topics (such as sexuality and gender inclusive health curriculum). She explained frustratingly that the curriculum that is in place is much more centered around language, not specific content, and that she "basically can only teach kindness and respect" (Interviewee,

[6] Some could argue that simply providing gender neutral bathrooms does not make transgender students as comfortable as they could. In this interview we did not dive deeper into whether transgender students could use the bathroom that denotes their chosen gender, but I would be interested in discussing that further.
[7] Mario I. Suárez and Melinda Mangin, *Trans Studies in K-12 Education: Creating an Agenda for Research and Practice* (Harvard Education Press, 2022), 54.

2024). She dove deeper into this by describing that right now she feels like they are in "uncharted territory" in that there is no curriculum on either side, one side being teaching directly about various sexual and gender identities, and the other only being allowed to teach by the gender binary. She provided an example of her school's health curriculum and how it has drastically changed over the last 10 years. About a decade ago, the health curriculum was a well-developed part of her teaching content and covered areas of social and emotional learning, but also topics like the body, puberty, and relationships (Interviewee, 2024). Instead, the current health curriculum has been "completely disregarded" and "is pathetic", only covering the topic of "puberty vocabulary," which explores concepts of identity, defines gender and sex assigned at birth, and teaches about how hormones affect biological males and females during puberty (Interviewee, 2024). This gender norming curriculum seems to reinforce the dangerous gender binary. Inclusive and basic informational content has been stripped from the curriculum because of the perceived "dangers" of teaching gender nonconforming content. This threatens queer students as they need to see themselves represented in the classroom and curriculum, and when they don't feelings of isolation can ensue. Teachers need to be able to create inclusive classroom environments, but if they don't have a standardized curriculum that reflects multiple identities, then they are forced to exclude their own students. Teachers and students are being challenged with a limited curriculum and narrow standards for learning.

Without a standard curriculum, educators have to infer what they are allowed and not allowed to say, putting them at risk of scrutiny. My interviewee explained how she experiences intense levels of fear of sharing certain stories because she might be targeted. She tries to do well by her students and educate them on important issues, but she worries she might get attacked because of it. This fear seems to be a universal emotion among current school workers. Four

South Carolinian librarians also reflected on the surveillance they face having to do with their collections and the "super broad" regulations surrounding LGBTQ topics in their districts (Beaman, 2024). One librarian describes the accusations she has faced for "pushing a pro-LGBTQ agenda" when in fact less than 3 percent of her collection includes LGBTQ issues (Cox, 2024). Facing this backlash, mostly from groups like Moms For Liberty, has been "nerve-wracking" because every book she picks has been under "intense scrutiny" (Cox, 2024). Their job, which was once simply providing students with helpful books and literacy resources, has become overwhelmingly controlled due to the apprehension of promoting queer topics. Overall, for the school workers that I talked to, a common experience was one of fear. We discussed their unique position in educating youth and the positive power that can yield, but all it takes is a parent with power and an admin who cares about the school's reputation for you to lose your position. One teacher states, "Yes, we do have the unique potential to spark change, but we don't have the space to live up to that. It's a shame" (Interviewee, 2024).

While a lot of positive developments have happened over the last few decades, there are still a lot of changes that need to be made to make schools the inclusive environment they can be. To challenge normative discourses and create positive learning opportunities for all students and educators, changes need to be made on three levels: the individual, the district, and the larger policy/research. These calls to action would benefit LGBTQ students and teachers in schools by giving them opportunities to see themselves reflected in their learning spaces. On the individual level, I am referring to the pedagogies of educators and their ability to make their students feel seen and represented. In Gholdy Muhammad's Historically Responsive Literacy, she simply states that "identity matters" and describes how students should "authentically see themselves in the learning".[8] Muhammad is calling for educators to incorporate identity-centered pedagogy in

[8] Gholdy Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius* (Scholastic Teaching Resources, 2020), 69.

their classrooms to make all students feel seen. As for the district, there needs to be administrators who support students and teachers first; too many administrators focus on the reputation of the school before the well-being of their students and staff. I call for the 13,000 school districts across the country to prioritize making their learning spaces inclusive and productive. One aspect that can assist them in this is the continued development of research and policy. Research is the backbone of legislative changes and aids administrators, curriculum developers, teachers, and parents in supporting LGBTQ people in schools.

It is impossible to deny the positive developments for queer educators and youth in schools over the past few decades, but it is also impossible to deny that changes still need to be made to better school environments. Talking to multiple school workers about their experiences, reflecting on my own, and building on recent policy have led me to question our current educational system and envision a school structure that unquestionably welcomes everyone.

Works Cited

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