

**Amplifying and Affirming LGBTQIA Voices and Identities
in the World Language Classroom**

Issue in Context

Alicia LeClair

Wheelock College of Education & Human Development, Boston University

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Dr. Catherine Ritz

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Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Agender (LGBTQIA) students fill desks in classrooms across the United States, yet they do not fill the roles of characters in movies shown nor the pages of textbooks taught (Batchelor et al., 2017; Snapp et al., 2015). Approximately 1,994,000, or 9.5% of 13-17 year old students identify as LGBTQ+ in the U.S. (Conron, 2020). Unfortunately, research consistently shows a wide inequality in academic and health outcomes between LGBTQIA students and their non-LGBTQIA classmates, correlated with negative school climates (Kosciw et al. 2016; McGuire et al. 2010). Considering this, it is imperative that all educators utilize their classrooms as a way to connect with and affirm the identities of their LGBTQIA students. Meyer (2007) urges that “by developing a more critical understanding of gender, sex, sexual orientation and how these identities and experiences are shaped and taught in schools, educators can have a profound impact on the way students learn, relate to others, and behave in schools” (p. 17). World Language (WL) educators are afforded additional opportunities to address critical issues through exploration of “the linguistic and cultural identities of the target language” if they also address “the diverse sexual identities found within the target cultures and of the language learners themselves” (Coda, 2018, p. 74). That said, today’s WL educators can and should use their classrooms as a space to amplify and affirm LGBTQIA identities through representation. Beyond representing LGBTQIA people within the curriculum, WL educators must also “take a critical approach to materials and activities in order to provide a framework for exploration” (De Vincenti et al., 2007, p. 70) of queer identities within the classroom.

In this paper, I provide a literature review of relevant research regarding LGBTQIA experiences in schools, changes that have occurred in WL education, and findings regarding LGBTQIA identities and queer theory within the WL classroom. I also review some of the

current practices and principles WL educators are using relevant to LGBTQIA representation and affirmation. Lastly, I outline and describe an action plan of specific work I will commit to in order to address this issue within my WL classroom.

Literature Review

LGBTQIA Student Experiences in Schools

Before approaching the issue of representation and affirmation of LGBTQIA identities in WL classrooms, it is important to understand the historical evolution of LGBTQIA identities and their experiences in U.S. schools. Knowing what the status is now and how it has evolved from the past to the present will aid in ensuring that we recognize what growth has happened and what work still needs to be done. There has been multiple research studies done that conclude that LGBTQIA students do not feel safe in schools and are also more likely to experience suicidal thoughts or ideations than their non-LGBTQIA peers are.

McGuire et al. (2010) carried out a multi-method approach using data from the *Preventing School Harassment* (PSH) survey given to middle and high school students in California and a focus group study. In the survey data, 60% of the full sample and 82% of transgender students responded “sometimes or often” to the question “how often do you hear negative comments based on gender presentation from students?”. Additionally, McGuire et al. found that teacher or staff intervention is uncommon, 45% of students, and only 25% of transgender students, reported intervention. They also found that transgender youth are as likely to hear negative comments made by teachers or school staff (31% responded “sometimes or often”) as they are to hear teachers or school staff stop other youth from making negative comments (25% responded “sometimes or often”). Birkett et al. (2009) similarly found that LGB youth were more likely to respond with experiences of frequent bullying and homophobic

victimization than non-LGB youth. In the same study, sexually questioning youth reported more bullying, more homophobic victimization, more drug use, more frequent feelings of depression and suicidal ideation/attempts, and more truancy than their LGB and non-LGB peers.

Research findings such as those made by Birkett et al. (2009) and McGuire et al. (2010) are further supported by a study conducted by Bontempo et al. (2002). All of these studies ultimately present conclusions relating differences in health risks for LBGTQIA students with victimization at school. Additionally, these studies conclude that when school staff and teachers intervene to stop harassment when it occurs as well as refrain from participating in it themselves, LBGTQIA youth are more likely to report safe environments at school and report more positive tendencies themselves.

Dalley & Campbell (2006) took a different approach and “explore[d] the possibilities and impossibilities of establishing queer discursive spaces (p. 12) in a Francophone high school in Ontario, Canada, “given the heterosexual hegemony that prevailed” (p. 12). They concluded that, “virtually any move by an individual student or teacher to introduce a queer perspective into classroom discussions was systematically negated, meeting with rejection, exclusion, or negative inclusion by teachers and students alike” (p. 25). Additionally, students who identified as LGB “could not safely materialise their sexual identities at school” and as such “developed strategies to remain hidden” (p. 25). And these conclusions are not only fitting for a school in Canada. Findings from the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) 2019 National School Climate Survey concluded that Massachusetts schools were not safe for most LGBTQ high school students. Further, this survey reported that many LGBTQ students did not experience or engage with “an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, and were not protected by supportive and inclusive school policies” (GLSEN, 2021, p. 1).

Although much research has been done through surveying LGBTQIA students regarding school climate and their experiences inside and outside of U.S. schools, this research is primarily only done through survey data. There is not much research that has been conducted in the way that Dalley & Campbell (2006) researched whether queer discursive spaces could be fostered within schools through observation and discussions with students. Additionally, there are gaps in research around whether having LGBTQIA teachers or other school staff results in safer school spaces for LGBTQIA students or if it minimizes health risks. A study of this kind might also find other significant impacts such as having more access to LGBTQIA inclusive curriculum and spaces in the schools as a result of there being LGBTQIA representation in school staff.

Research within WL Education and Classrooms

Meyer (2007) cites the importance of schools when it comes to affirming or actively ostracizing LGBTQIA identities since “educational structures wield extraordinary ideological power due to their role in teaching what the culture has deemed as important and valuable to future generations” and school staff and teachers “determine what lessons are passed on to students and whose knowledge or "truth" is valued” (pp. 21-22). Coda (2018) also writes about heteronormativity as “pervasive in schools, classrooms, materials, and pedagogy” (p. 75) which ensures that heterosexuality is the “truth” that is valued.

Additional literature has also insisted on WL classrooms as perpetuating the cis-heteronormative patriarchy within curricula (Cahnmaan & Coda, 2018) and so it is crucial for WL educators to look at research regarding the relationship between heteronormativity and the WL classroom. There is a robust amount of research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory and best practices for teaching a WL, much more research around that than there is research on LGBTQIA representation in the WL classroom and knowledge of LGBTQIA issues

by WL educators. Presenting a bit of the research around WL education and how it has changed builds an important background on what can be done to change the practices even more to support LGBTQIA students and facilitate discussions and learning around critical issues.

Since the 1970s, there has been a push for teachers to “focus on representation of language and language development as essentially meaning-based or communicative in nature instead of on grammar” (Burke, 2007, p. 441), although many secondary-level teachers still persist in their focus on grammatical instruction, translation, and using English as the primary language of instruction (Hall, 2004). Within communicative language teaching, WL teachers focus on implementing student-centered activities and contextualized lessons that provide opportunities for students to use the target language (TL) which “can have a positive impact on student learning with visible improvement in classroom community, language production, student motivation, and student-to-student interaction” (Burke, p. 442).

In support of a focus on communicative teaching, several different approaches were eventually adopted by several WL teachers across the country. Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) was first introduced by Blaine Ray in the late 1990s, inspired by other SLA research-developed approaches to teaching WL such as Asher’s Total Physical Response (TPR) and Krashen and Terrell’s Natural Approach (Cahnmann & Coda, 2018). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL 2015) also developed an outline known as the 5 Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities to guide WL teachers as well, along with Can-Do Statements and World-Readiness Standards. These shifts in WL pedagogy have not resulted in much change regarding challenging the perpetuation of heterosexuality, gender-bias, and othering LGBTQIA identities. Nelson (2006) explains that “as a random browsing through research publications or student learning

materials is likely to reveal, classroom cohorts and curricula tend to be constructed as domains in which straight people are interacting exclusively with other straight people” (p. 1).

To reference the ACTFL 5 Cs again, Miller and Endo (2016) state that “despite these standards not specifically including sexual and (a)gender identities among their goals, there is a recurring theme within these standards that includes using languages to engage with global communities, understand difference, and develop critical thinking” (p. 164). But yet Coda (2018) also states that “proficiency has become a dominant discourse in WL education that takes attention away from issues related to students’ identities and discourages critical classroom discussions” (p. 78). Research from Coda (2018), Miller and Endo (2016), Nelson (2006), and Sunderland (2000) all present issues around current WL practices and the lack of teaching around the importance and complexities of gender, representing LGBTQIA identities in TL culture and societies, as well as making assumptions and not providing space for students to challenge their understanding of heterosexuality and where that understanding came from.

De Vincenti et al. (2007) identified gaps in queer theory research, citing some research around applying queer theory in the context of English as a Second Language classrooms as well as research around gender and language, but “little research on queer theory in the context of the foreign language classroom” (p. 59). That said, the research has increased throughout the past years. There is some research around introducing queer theory into WL classrooms at the university level (Miller & Endo, 2016) as well as research around current practices in WL classrooms and how they contribute to heteronormativity in classrooms and schools (Cahnmann & Coda, 2018; Liddicoat, 2009, as cited in Coda, 2018, pp. 85-86). Gaps now still exist within these topics but more and more research seems to be coming to light.

Additionally, further research is needed to show if there is meaningful growth across the school year in students' likelihood to view societal norms with a critical lens and understand the complexities of gender and sexual identities existing across a spectrum. Miller and Endo (2016) use student illustrations and short written excerpts to demonstrate development of student understanding and openness but in the context of a university in Japan and not in U.S. secondary school classrooms. De Vincenti et al. (2007) and Coda (2018) both report teacher experiences and reflections regarding their classroom practices and how certain tasks or discussions contribute to perpetuating heteronormativity or how they challenge it, but do not report on any student perspectives.

Current Principles & Practices in WL Education

Coda (2018) explains that “world language education introduces students to the linguistic and cultural aspects of the target language, while encouraging reflection on comparable and competing elements in the students' languages and cultures” but that “critical issues are often avoided in favor of sanitized topics, especially when considering sexual identities” (p. 75). There are, however, educators across the country working to incorporate queer theory into their WL classrooms and ensure that their LGBTQIA students' identities are represented, affirmed and valued. There are educators who are not assuming pronouns based on their students' names and are using and promoting gender neutral/inclusive pronouns (*elle* in Spanish, *iel* in French, *elu* in Portuguese) as well as non-binary adjective endings (-*x* or -*e* in Spanish, -*u* in Italian, use of dual to avoid gender specification in Arabic) in WL classrooms (Cunning, 2018; Knisely, 2020; Parodi-Brown, 2020).

In addition to using a variety of pronouns and non-binary adjective endings, many WL educators are ensuring that there is representation in the books that they have in their libraries so

that they include LGBTQIA relationships or characters (Dibianca, 2019). On his blog, My Mosaic of World Language Teaching, WL educator Gary Dibianca writes about two authors who have written comprehension-based readers in Spanish that focus on LGBTQ adolescents.

Secretos (2018), written by Jennifer Degenhardt, is an intermediate low/mid level Spanish language novel that includes a teenage character who is working through pronoun usage and his thoughts on telling his family about his gender identity. In addition to this character, the novel also includes a black trans female therapist. Another Spanish reader, Adriana Ramirez's *Julio* (2019), is a novice high to intermediate low level story that is told from the perspective of a teacher about her student, Julio, who changes the school climate by living openly as a gay teen.

In a similar vein to the comprehension-based readers, WL educator Cécile Lainé describes a practice she started at the beginning of last school year to honor diverse identities in her novice level classes, after realizing that her Story Listening (SL) texts had “continued to primarily feature either cis straight body-abled neurotypical white characters or personified animals” (Lainé, 2020). Lainé decided to make her professional teaching goal to have 60% of the stories told via SL to represent identities different from her own. She also explicitly mentions that this professional goal could lead to tokenizing or misrepresenting the identities of others, so she decided to focus on adapting the language of real children's books or other comprehensible stories from English to Spanish for her readers. In this way, Lainé is ensuring that the SL stories she uses are written by authors within marginalized groups and whose books center around characters of color, LGBTQIA characters, characters with disabilities, characters who immigrated to another country, and more, such as *Julián is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, *Fauja Singh Keeps Going* by Simran Jeet Singh, and *Not Quite Snow White* by Ashley Franklin.

Still, however, there are a few crucial aspects of WL education missing from these current educators shifts in creating inclusive spaces and challenging heteronormativity, one being the lack of authentic resources being utilized to do so. Authentic materials “can serve as a reminder to learners that there is an entire population who use the target language in their everyday lives” and “can be used to add more interest for the learner” (ACTFL n.d.). One example of a practice that does incorporate authentic materials is by Spanish teacher Kara Jacobs. She writes about using the song “Vaina loca” by Ozuna and Manuel Turizo along with its music video to focus on *quería que* + imperfect subjunctive with her upper level classes. Additionally, she writes that one reason she wants to use the video in class is because it has a gay couple in it. “Almost all of the relationships that students see in [her] class, and probably school, (in books, movies, music, videos, etc.) are hetero relationships” (Jacobs, 2018), so she wants to include representation for her LGBTQIA students, while using authentic resources.

Beyond specific classroom lessons or practices, there are more and more presentations, webinars and professional development sessions for WL educators focused on inclusive practices, decolonizing curriculum, and beyond. WL and antiracist educator Almazán-Vázquez (2021) presented in a session with The Comprehensible Classroom about the movement of using inclusive language in WL classrooms and presenting stories and testimonies of gender non-binary groups and people such as the Muxes community in Oaxaca’s Istmo de Tehuantepec region. Here, there exists three genders, male, female and muxes, which was a part of the Zapotec language and identity prior to colonization when the Zapotec speakers were forced to speak Spanish and thus stripped of their gender non-conforming identities. However, these community members still exist and are becoming more well-known through social media, although they still experience transphobia and discrimination despite their long history of

existence (Almazán-Vázquez, 2021). Parodi-Brown (2020) presented on ways that WL educators can use the common thematic units such as family, clothing, or sports and use them as entry points to include LGBTQ+ voices in the classroom and Knisely (2020) presented on non-binary French and alternative ways of presenting grammatical gender in the WL classroom.

Not only are WL educators encouraging inclusive language and ensuring their curriculum represents LGBTQIA identities, there are also educators who are engaging their students in important conversations. Coda (2018) provides excerpts from WL educators' classrooms "to encourage WL teachers to disrupt their normal, proficiency-related practice, and instead, work to foster a critical language education that deconstructs students' normative assumptions in the classroom" (p. 81). The first excerpt is of a Spanish teacher discussing how a slur used towards the gay community was used in his classroom towards a student. The teacher decided to address it and facilitate a conversation around sexual identities by asking questions. This conversation was not done in the TL, but in English. The second excerpt is provided by a German teacher who facilitated a discussion since students were reacting to Chick-Fil-A's donations to organizations against marriage equality (Coda, p. 82). This teacher was able to facilitate this conversation in German since it was level 4. She "disrupted her normal teaching practice to discuss a topic related to sexual identities" and "provided a space to engage critically with an issue [...] relevant to the students' lives" (p. 83).

Action Plan

The issue of LGBTQIA representation and affirmation, as well as creating spaces for students to think critically about their own biases and perspective of the world is as complex as it is pressing. As current or soon to be WL educators within a teacher preparation program, it is critical that we use our access to classes such as Inclusive Principles & Practices in WL

Education and other courses focused on dismantling colonialism, ableism and white supremacy to teach our students as best we can. Additionally, having access to knowledge and research on best practices in teaching and the true problematic aspects of schools and curriculum is another tool that must be used while advocating for change in our schools.

Steps I will take to combat this issue consist of work to be done within my own classroom practice as well as encouraging my colleagues and providing them with some of the research that urges this work be done. One of the most essential aspects of doing work related to social justice, equity, bias or challenging norms is self-reflection and constant education. I will continuously learn about LGBTQIA identities in the U.S. as well as within the cultures and countries relevant to my classroom content. I also plan on looking at what conferences, webinars and other professional development opportunities focus on queering the WL classroom and other critical topics I can attend this coming school year and the summer, and each year following. If I do find a specific PD or conference that I plan on attending I will share it out with my fellow WL teachers in my district to get as many of them to attend as possible to ensure that all of our practices are growing and questioning what is perpetuated in the classroom.

I will also ensure that I am designing lessons that include tasks and discussions that get students to think critically about heteronormativity, gender-bias, and beyond, while also tying it to building their fluency in the language. The practice of using inclusive language such as non-binary or gender fluid pronouns in the WL classroom, for example, could be extended further to “queer[] our pedagogy and challeng[e] the various dominant discourses and dichotomous oppositions producing our thinking” (Coda, 2018, p. 86) and our students’ thinking. This could look like taking the time to discuss the context in which these pronouns have developed in TL cultures as well as utilizing authentic resources to amplify this discussion. In so

doing, heteronormativity would be challenged not only within the classroom but also shown to be challenged in the real world by authentic speakers of the language.

Similar to Lainé's (2020) SL stories and work done by Miller and Endo (2016), I will also focus on incorporating books, photos, videos and authentic resources that present counter-narratives to what are U.S. societal "norms". I will modify the language used and the complexity of the questions by level while also incorporating illustrations and collaborative group work. I also will dedicate time to creating lesson plans that provide more agency for students to explore their own identities through the TL and using those lessons to also compare their identities to identities within the TL culture.

Ensuring that my lessons are inclusive and challenge students' perceptions and understanding of the world is important to me and will be one way that I advocate for social justice and equity in my classroom. Another part of my action plan will go beyond my classroom curriculum and focus on advocating for changes within my school community and the handbook that positively benefits LGBTQIA students and questions why some policies are the way that they are, such as the dress code. I am the advisor for Students Promoting Inclusion & Civic Engagement (SPICE) and I support the members in their endeavours to stand up for themselves and question school authority in a productive, responsible way. There are some teachers at my school who refuse to use singular they and I will not sit silently and allow that to occur when I know the harm that that causes students, remembering that "our students see what we believe, not necessarily by what we say but by what we do" (Miller & Endo, 2016, p. 181).

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