

Teaching, affirming, and recognizing trans* and gender creative youth: A queer literacy framework

By S.J. Miller
Palgrave Macmillan

Reviewed by: Matthew Panozzo
Sam Houston State University

“We’re so fearful of parents’ complaints,” Jessica Lifshitz said, “and yet I don’t understand why we’re not more fearful of children sitting in our classrooms feeling like they’re invisible” (O'Donnell, 2018, p. 37). Imagine, for a second, what it feels like to live in a world where who you love or how you see yourself does not match the gender roles and gender norms that construct the world in which you live. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth, feeling invisible or misunderstood is all too common an experience in schools as LGBTQ students navigate a heteronormative world filled with gender constructs that pressure them to look, act, and love a certain way in order to fit in. Previous researchers have advocated for greater attention to LGBTQ issues in schools. MacGillivray (2000) stated that supporting LGBTQ students also supports cisgendered (those who identify as the gender marked at birth) and heterosexual students who don't fit the gender binary. Others have advocated for recognition of LGBTQ issues as universal issues (Swarts, 2003; Meyer, Taylor, & Peter, 2014). And others, like Payne and Smith (2011), have reminded educators that they do not get to pick which students deserve a safe learning environment. Yet, it's Miller's (2016) *Teaching, Affirming, and Recognizing Trans* and Gender Creative Youth: A Queer Literacy Framework* that provides educators of all grade levels practical lessons and moving testimonies to help reach trans* and gender creative students. This book utilizes the Queer Literacy Framework in an attempt to create spaces in classrooms for trans* and gender creative

youth. Being a teacher in a conservative state, I really appreciated the realistic approach to including trans* and gender creative youth. Hicks (2016), the author of Chapter 5 “Beyond This or That: Challenging the Limits of Binary Language in Elementary Education through Poetry, Word Art, and Creative Bookmaking”, reminded the reader that:

Lesson plans are very much a beginning. They are the first few sentences of a dialog that I hope will be taken up by teachers and then evolve organically through careful listening, observation, and direct responsive action to student needs (p. 88).

The localized mindset Hicks shared is reinforced by other contributors, who address some of the fears and hesitations teachers have in creating more inclusive classroom practices and representative curriculum with suggested starting points. As Kedley (2016) shared

As a teacher, I know we struggle with comfort zones, our own histories, insecurities, and strengths. We deal with parents, with students, with administration, with available materials, and with the complexities and intersections of race, gender, sexuality, religion, citizenship status, national origin, ability, geography, and language, both in and out of our classrooms (p. 113-114).

Thus, approaching the conversation of the various intersections of our identity can be powerful for trans* and gender creative youth. The discussions can also be a powerful tool in creating a close-knit classroom community, where students are comfortable being vulnerable.

For those who do not know, the Queer Literacy Framework (QLF), "a strategy for literacy teachers to reinscribe, instate, affirm, and recognize differential bodied realities and give voice to those who experience illegibility and deligitimization" (p. 31-32), consists of ten principles. Each principle addresses either a teacher's responsibility, concepts of gender, or an evaluation of social

norms. QLF was used in a variety of lessons and contexts to create spaces in our classrooms for teaching, affirming, and recognizing our youth. Some examples include:

- use of poetry with third and fourth graders (Hicks, 2016)
- Shelton and Lester (2016) who share their experience as trans* students growing up in the rural south
- the collaboration of students and teachers in creating curriculum that allows students to explore issues and experiences of LGBTQ people (Wenk, 2016)
- the integration of queer discussions using various plays and sonnets from Shakespeare (Cloonan, 2016)

As a teacher in a conservative state, I've often been fearful of parent complaints. What makes Miller (2016) such an important resource for educators is that they address this fear. I found the authors to be very understanding of the fears and hesitations that prevent teachers from supporting LGBTQ students. I personally appreciated the tiered approach most lessons took to accommodate for various levels of a school community's openness to these discussions. The book wasn't about revolutionizing the entire system overnight, but about making small changes that would bring about a positive experience for youth who do not fit the traditional gender binary. Furthermore, Miller and the authors highlight that making space for trans* and gender creative youth ultimately empowers all students, as once the gender binary is broken, students can express themselves without fear of repercussion. As a reminder, creating safe and nurturing classrooms is constant work, but as Hicks (2016) shared from his journey, “every living thing, at every living moment, is ALL-ways in transition” (p. 104, emphasis in original).

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