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A Moral Debate at the Invisible Rainbow: Thoughts about Best Practices in Servicing LGBTQ Students in Special Education

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There is a problem within many teacher preparation programs: the special education diversity training component, which has the potential to serve as a powerful tool for teaching and learning, instead is often overlooked and certainly under-imagined (Pohl, 2013). This is especially evident when it comes to training future teachers to work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students receiving special education services in public schools (Dykes, 2010; Dykes & Thomas, 2015). As a result, many aspiring special education teachers do not receive the training and mentorship required to provide services to, and meet the needs of, the LGBTQ community (Arrieta & Palladino, 2015).

In teacher preparation programs, special education often takes limited forms, sometimes as required courses for certification in special education, if this type of program is even available within the teacher education program. However, in most cases, special education is covered in courses that are only available as electives or as a one-course requirement for general education teachers. In any of these cases, special education seems to occupy a relatively small space within teacher certification programs and post-university career induction and training. As a result, many future special education teachers fail to receive the proper training needed to serve diverse groups of students. This problem is especially evident in the lack of adequate preparation of preservice teachers in serving LGBTQ students with identified learning or emotional disabilities (Dykes & Thomas, 2015). Special education holds rich potential for serving a meaningful purpose in preparing future teachers for diversity and inclusion (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2003; Meyer, Taylor, & Peter, 2015; Nieto & Bode, 2012). Given the important roles that special education, individualized education plans, accommodations, and modifications play in the general education classroom, LGBTQ students with disabilities should not be overlooked.

The purpose of this article is to examine and discuss ways in which teacher preparation programs can better prepare future special education teachers to work with LGBTQ students with disabilities. To do this, we need to understand the unique needs of this population of students. Additionally, we seek to explore the structure and spirit of special education—together and separately. Although structure and spirit are not the same, they are closely related. We examine ways to carve new spaces for, and to include, the LGBTQ community within the structure of special education so that courses and degree requirements do not overlook this population of students. We also look at ways of approaching disability and the education of LGBTQ students to help future teachers expand and grow in how they think about personal experience and learning when it comes to diversity and

inclusion. Further, we explore ways that preservice teachers and faculty in teacher preparation programs can imagine new possibilities in the education of LGBTQ students with disabilities. Finally, we conclude this article by discussing the implications of this proposed paradigm shift to help improve the approaches of preservice teachers, and teacher-preparation programs in general, when it comes to servicing this marginalized community.

Understanding the Needs of LGBTQ Students

In recent years, the age at which LGBTQ youth come out publicly is now younger than ever before (Child Welfare League of America & Lambda Legal, 2012; Frank & Cannon, 2009). More than half (56%) of school-aged youth identifying as LGBTQ reported that they are out to their immediate family (Human Rights Campaign, 2017). Additionally, nearly two-thirds (61%) reported being out at school, with 91% saying that they were out to close friends and 64% reporting that they were out to their teachers (Human Rights Campaign, 2013). This cultural shift highlights the importance of understanding the issues that these young people face.

While many of these youth thrive during their adolescence, surrounded by a loving and positive environment, others are not as lucky. According to the Human Rights Campaign's Youth Report (2013), LGBTQ youth reported that they were two times more likely to be verbally harassed, to be physically assaulted, and to experience feelings of isolation in school than their non-LGBTQ peers. Additionally, Frank and Cannon (2009) pointed out that many of these students face pressures to deny their feelings and suppress their behaviors. They further stated that "[LGBTQ] individuals are the only cultural minority to typically grow up in families and communities that are outside their cultural group" (p. 6), and therefore they are often faced with the reality of coming out as a sexual minority without the benefit of having a close mentor or role model to help them navigate this difficult process. All of this occurs during a time when they are not developmentally prepared to deal with the pressure to conform to perceived societal norms. As a result, these factors can lead to higher incidences of substance abuse, depression, school dropout, and suicide within the LGBTQ youth population than with their heterosexual peers.

While LGBTQ students with disabilities have many of the same academic needs as other students receiving special education services (Dykes & Thomas, 2015), their unique social-emotional needs often go unnoticed, exacerbating their feelings of social isolation as members of a group identifying as both a sexual minority and as having a disability (Arrieta & Palladino, 2014). Unfortunately, calls for more research into the lived

experiences of LGBTQ students with disabilities (e.g., Duke, 2011; Dykes & Thomas, 2015; Morgan, Mancl, Kaffar, & Ferreira, 2011) have gone largely unanswered.

Arrieta and Palladino (2014, 2015) are part of the limited group of researchers who have accepted this call. They conducted a collective case study of nine special education teachers to gain a better understanding of the perceptions they held about this population of students with special needs. Participants reported that there was a lack of professional development and policy procedures provided to special education teachers regarding LGBTQ students with disabilities, leaving them in a situation where they were “forced to implement what they deem ‘appropriate’ support” (Arrieta & Paladino, 2015, p. 9). Further, these teachers reported feeling that issues related to bullying, alienation, and potential internal struggles between students’ sexual orientation and religious beliefs could exacerbate the identification of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) in LGBTQ students with disabilities.

LGBTQ Inclusion Issues in Special Education

It is well documented that there is a lack of emphasis on inclusion and diversity from a cultural perspective when it comes to special education and disability in teacher education programs across the nation is well documented (for review see Dykes, 2010; Recchia & Puig, 2011). Over the last two decades, the extant literature regarding the preparation of future teachers in special education shows a genuine concern that teacher education programs are not adequately preparing preservice teachers for inclusion. In previous studies, education students have reported that inclusion training is rare among general education preparation programs (Smith & Smith, 2000). Patton and Braithwaite (1990) reported minimal coursework requirements on inclusion for certification and recertification of teachers. Other researchers have suggested that a lack of proper instruction in dealing with exceptional children and diversity exists (Phillips, Allred, Brulle, & Shank, 1990). Fender and Fiedler (1990) reported an overemphasis in disability content and technical terminology, while they found that a significant lack of instruction on cultural inclusion methodology and pedagogy existed.

Recent research indicates that things have not changed. McLaren and Harp Rutland (2013) reported that teacher preparation programs appear to lack specialized intervention courses. Oliver and Reschly (2010) reported that other studies appeared to show a lack of proper training on classroom management for inclusion and diversity. Unfortunately, there is evidence to indicate that insufficient and low-quality field experiences

related to inclusion for preservice teacher appears to be the norm (Recchia & Puig, 2011). Additionally, Allday, Nielsen-Gatti, and Hudson (2013) described minimal allocation for courses specializing in disability and inclusion with a national average of only 1.3 course units per degree program. When courses related to inclusion and disability are offered, they appear to be clinical- and survey-oriented (Ware, 2009), without any significant exposure to the cultural realities of the classroom (Pohl, 2013).

The situation becomes more problematic for LGBTQ students with special needs, where the training for preservice teachers to serve this particular population of students properly is absent. Current literature appears to suggest that there is a significant absence of attention to LGBTQ students with disabilities in research, training, and policy implementation. For example, Arrieta and Palladino (2015) discussed that there is a dearth of research and pedagogical practice addressing LGBTQ students with disabilities; what does exist, they found, often ignores the social context of these students' sexual identity as teenagers. Morgan, Mancl, Kaffar, and Ferreira (2011) argued that educational research concerning LGBTQ students with disabilities tended to ignore their struggle to discover their social identity. Further, while significant research addressing the needs of LGBTQ adolescents exists within the fields of social work, psychology, and counseling, such efforts have been minimal, if not outright absent, in educational research (Dykes & Thomas, 2015). This is important when considering the marginal space occupied by LGBTQ students within the social structure of the school environment. According to Arrieta and Palladino (2014), LGBTQ students are one of the most vulnerable groups within a school, as they are more likely to be harassed verbally and physically, which can result in a higher rate of suicide among LGBTQ youth.

Another area where LGBTQ students with disabilities are marginalized is in the implementation of special education policy. For one, it is safe to say that social attitudes and barriers have played an important role in how homosexuality and gender identity are addressed in schools and teacher preparation programs (Morgan et al., 2011). As a result, there is a significant amount of negligence when it comes to addressing the needs of LGBTQ students with disabilities in the classroom. For example, Dykes and Thomas (2015) noted that great strides have been made in meeting the needs of students with disabilities from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in public schools. However, they argued that LGBTQ students with disabilities are disregarded when it comes to the implementation of transition planning, instruction, related service, employability, and post-school educational arrangements.

Additionally, social taboos can often play a significant role in how teachers address the needs of LGBTQ students with or without disabilities. For instance, teacher preparation programs continue to minimize the role of sex education among their preservice teachers, making it difficult for them to address these important issues inside their classrooms (Morgan et al., 2011). Last but not least, although diversity has become the main staple and principal motto of many teacher preparation programs, many continue to ignore disability and LGBTQ issues alike as topics for discourse in diversity (Dykes, 2010).

A New Direction

If teacher education programs are going to better prepare future special education teachers to serve LGBTQ students with disabilities, a new approach to how we work with these preservice teachers must be developed. Otherwise, how special education addresses the needs of its LGBTQ students will remain an insignificant activity. Let us examine how this new form of special education may manifest: teacher education programs are social by nature, where people gather and talk. There are few variants in how this interaction takes place—in a classroom, as a cohort, within clubs, with advisors, and with faculty. The physical spaces where these interactions take place do not change; they constitute the structure of the program. The real change, and significant evolution of the learning experience, takes place in the conversations that we have and in what we ask students to do. This is where change to the spirit of special education begins and leads to a better understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ students with special needs.

Within teacher preparation programs, one vision for this new direction is to give a significant amount of responsibility to students to create their own meaningful learning proficiencies. Students can be encouraged to seek new experiences that they can write about, share with others, and discuss with classmates, faculty, administrators, and mentors. These meaningful experiences let preservice teachers explore new frontiers, analyze their world, and envision a new capacity to experience and understand LGBTQ students in special education.

For such an exercise, any experience will do. Dewey (1916) wrote, “Nothing is more striking than the difference between an activity as merely physical and the wealth of *meaning* which the same activity may assume” (p. 207). Borrowing from Dewey, we can assume that activities can be merely physical actions or transcendental opportunities for growth. When a scientist looks through a microscope, there is the physical action of just looking at a microscopic organism through a tube and glass, and then there

is the awe-inspiring opportunity to make a discovery. At the core, experiences like this are what sustain us spiritually and socially. As Dewey argues, experiences are more than physiological moments but rather are events that recreate our very sense of belief, despair, hope, and happiness.

Are there any limits to the experiences that students in teacher preparation programs can write about to prepare them for working with LGBTQ students with disabilities? Can they reflect on a movie that they watch or on a visit to an EC-6 self-contained classroom? Can they have coffee hours with their teacher mentors, field supervisors, or professors? Can they interview the parents of an LGBTQ student with disabilities? Our answer is simple: Why not? As Neumann (2009) reminds us, when we were little, we were told that we could get an education anywhere: the bus stop, the supermarket, the classroom, or Sunday school. Preservice teachers can attend keynote speeches, volunteer at buddy fairs, attend IEP meetings, work in after-school programs, or have regular, scheduled lunches with their professors. It is important to remember that mere attendance does not constitute an experience; rather, it is the transformation and interaction within a particular activity that creates an experience.

Despite the fact that we agree that learning experiences can happen anywhere, we need to be critical of the learning and reflection that occur as a result of those experiences. This means that faculty must not remain voiceless on the sidelines. Rather, the existing structure needs to be reenvisioned as a mutual collaboration between faculty and preservice teachers, allowing opportunities for true praxis—a hermeneutical process that allows the student to investigate, in depth, his or her learning. This is when real conversations about the LGBTQ experience can take place and inquiry starts to happen, where meaningful questions arise. What worked? What was thought? What was truly learned? This process allows the preservice teacher to analyze the real impact, flaws, and growth opportunities of the experience. What are my goals as a special education teacher? Do I really understand the social-emotional needs of the LGBTQ student with disabilities? If not, how do I go about developing experiences that will better prepare me to work with this population of students?

The importance of this new paradigm cannot be stressed enough. We should provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to experience an education that promotes the spiritual ideals of educating and learning (Eisner, 2002). For the most part, concentrating on assessments, evaluations, competencies, curricular standards, and procedures will not have meaning if we do not pay attention to, and care for, the imagination, artistry, and spirit of teaching (Eisner, 2002). Why is this important for

teachers who work with LGBTQ students with disabilities to understand? It is in the halls of academia where the majority of us learned to see the world and our lives with different eyes (Neumann, 2009; Pohl, 2013). We must ensure that future teachers understand the social-emotional barriers that many LGBTQ students face on a daily basis. This requires time for self-reflection to explore personal biases in order to be better prepared to service the students that make up our 21st-century classrooms.

Recommendations and Future Directions

The nature of special education instruction will require the teacher to spend a significant amount of personal time attending to the educational needs of exceptional students, including those who are members of the LGBTQ community. No longer is it enough to focus solely on the mechanics of special education—the IEPs, accommodations, and modification. Now we must understand the people that make up our classroom and the societal issues that have an effect on teaching.

So how does this reimagining of special education look in teacher education programs to better prepare future teachers to serve their LGBTQ students with disabilities? To start, special education needs to be at the forefront of teacher education for all preservice teachers (Erevelles, 2011). This means that inclusion must be redefined. For many students, the university experience is a time of incredible intellectual growth. Despite the emphasis that many teacher preparation programs put on diversity and multiculturalism, disability and LGBTQ issues have not traditionally been a part of the conversation (Erevelles, 2002, 2011; Lee & Carpenter, 2015). However, teacher education programs are the perfect places for social attitudes toward disability and sexuality to be explored, the perfect places to provide the ideal opportunity to investigate how preservice teachers react when confronted with real issues about three-dimensional forms of multiculturalism and inclusion. Therefore, it is important to give preservice teachers opportunities to start a journal, interview a special education teacher, research a special education school program, or explore their feelings about LGBTQ students with disabilities.

Additionally, teacher preparation programs must minimize the *survey* in survey courses about exceptional populations and diversity. The professors could utilize online course management tools, such as Blackboard, for textbook activities and lectures, and allocate classroom time for more meaningful student-centered activities. Dykes (2010) defines inclusion as the opportunity to embrace an equal and just education. As such, in these classrooms, IEPs, accommodations, and modifications should be considered more than just technical rules for curriculum and

instruction but additionally as social models that promote the inclusion of a more diverse population into the mainstream educational system (Dykes, 2010).

In the most creative of situations, this is the perfect place to role-play or create situations that simulate issues that LGBTQ students with disabilities may face outside of the classroom. The students should be encouraged visit and volunteer at shelters for LGBTQ youth who have been displaced from their homes by their parents or at other community organizations that provide services for this population. Preservice teachers could develop presentations or symposia for educational conferences that address the needs of LGBTQ students with disabilities. Faculty could host panel discussions that give preservice teachers the opportunity to ask questions of, and learn from, members of the LGBTQ community. In our new vision of what special education represents in teacher preparation programs, students will benefit from a good dose of academic freedom.

Finally, colleges and universities must make a concerted effort to make inclusion a priority. Although creating a new course focused on issues related to LGBTQ youth is ideal, university constraints often dictate a number of credit hours in a teacher education program. Therefore, if the creation of a new course is not possible, special education competencies with a focus on LGBTQ issues can be included within the core curriculum of the methodology courses of each major subject: reading/language arts, math, natural sciences, and social studies. In addition, the teaching of a more diverse population should not only be part of the department or college philosophy but should also be at the forefront of educational research. As Patterson noted in 1995, "Despite the value of considering lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues and experiences, such perspectives have often been missing from research and theory. As a result, gay and lesbian lives have often been rendered invisible" (p. 4). Now is the time for special education to come out of the closet and into the light.

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