

Increasing ELA Teachers' Confidence Regarding LGBTQ+ Inclusion Through Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the prevalent hesitancy among English Language Arts (ELA) educators to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors and perspectives due to discomfort and fear of backlash from students, parents, and administration. Building on Chapter 5 of the author's dissertation, the article proposes a professional development plan to equip teachers with practical strategies to navigate challenges related to LGBTQ+ inclusion in ELA classrooms. Central to this plan are role-play sessions designed to enhance educators' confidence and skills in de-escalating confrontations. Empirical findings demonstrate that after targeted training, teachers report increased comfort and effectiveness in managing opposition to LGBTQ+ content. This research highlights the importance of preparatory support in fostering inclusive curricula and emphasizes the potential of professional development to promote equitable and affirming educational environments.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQ+ inclusion, diversity in education, teaching methods, professional development, ELA pedagogy

In May 2020, I began my doctoral program at the University of South Carolina. As an action researcher, I was motivated to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion, not only in my high school English Language Arts (ELA) classroom as an out queer teacher, but also to provide an affirming environment more broadly through counter-heteronormative activism. Despite this evident passion, I struggled to define my problem of practice. The issue was so significant that it felt impossible to solve. I could not add gender-neutral bathrooms or stop every teacher from making needlessly gendered comments such as, "I need a strong boy to help me move this desk." Discussions with my dissertation advisor helped me narrow my focus to diversifying what I could directly influence: Lenape's mainly White, cisgender, straight, heteronormative ELA curriculum. While an activist's work is never done, action research empowers educators to start with a problem they can solve where they are and go from there.

I framed my problem of practice around the dangerous heteronormative environment at Lenape High School, where I work. From there, I identified two research questions: "How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers' knowledge of queer theory?" and "How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers' comfort with LGBTQ+ terminology and teaching from a queer perspective?" (Mustaccio, 2023, p. 8). The intervention at the center of these questions was a series of professional development sessions I created and facilitated for eight participants, my ELA colleagues, which focused on "LGBTQ+ terminology, heteronormativity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and queer theory and offered sample lessons to help the teachers analyze literature through a queer perspective" (Mustaccio, 2023, p. v). The data I collected to measure my participants' knowledge and comfort made me hopeful, showing improvement, yet I wondered whether my participants would leap from philosophy to action.

At the beginning of the 2023–2024 school year, I learned my eight participants had only somewhat incorporated LGBTQ+ authors or themes and queer theory into their lessons. While their comfort had improved through our sessions, confidence working with queer theory or addressing backlash from students and parents was not enough. In other words, a new problem of practice emerged. As the school year continued, I noticed a disturbing trend: anti-LGBTQ+ phrases like "That's so gay" and "You're gay" and terms like "faggot" littered the halls of my high school. I was shocked at the harshness of this hateful language and the lack of administrative response.

My concern for this climate increased when my supervisor notified me that a parent complained about the literature I was teaching in my 12th-grade class, suggesting I was "pushing my gay agenda." I stared at my supervisor in confusion; my students had just finished a unit on marginalized groups, engaging with works such as "The Story of an Hour," "The Yellow Wallpaper," "Ain't I A Woman," and "I, too." Wracking my brain, I tried to think of what would constitute pushing an agenda. My supervisor explained that a project asking students to rewrite the women's rights "Declaration of Sentiments" to include equality for all people offended a parent because one group mentioned that LGBTQ+ individuals deserve equality. After arguing with my supervisor about the New Jersey-mandated curriculum and that I was teaching the curriculum, I was told to "make Bidart's 'Queer' poem optional so as not to offend anyone else."

These discouraging incidents made me consider what more I can do as an action researcher, activist, and queer ELA teacher to combat my school's heteronormativity. I thought about the LGBTQ+ students I advise in the Gender/Sexuality Alliance club. Are they hearing these exact phrases? Do they feel safe in the bathrooms? Locker rooms? Hallways? Classrooms? When I asked the club



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members about their experiences in high school, their answers were heartbreaking but not surprising, echoing the same central idea: “We don’t feel safe or included here.”

Even in 2024, LGBTQ+ students in my school feel like I did when I was a queer teen: afraid, invisible, and invalidated. According to a 2021 survey of LGBTQ+ students in New Jersey by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network (GLSEN, 2023), “More than 2 in 5 (42%) experienced at least one form of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination at school” (p. 2), and 95% heard the word “gay” used in a negative way, while 86% reported hearing other homophobic remarks (p. 1). Reinforcing my reaction to the anti-LGBTQ+ phrases I heard at my school, this information prompted me to revisit my dissertation and extend my action research by continuing to help my ELA colleagues handle backlash with LGBTQ+ inclusion to combat Lenape’s heteronormative, homophobic culture.

The follow-up study presented in this chapter centered on one research question: “How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers’ confidence when confronting backlash while teaching LGBTQ+ inclusion in their classroom?” As in my dissertation, I focused on creating and facilitating targeted professional development sessions. I aimed to help participants effectively manage problems that may arise with students, parents, and administration who challenge LGBTQ+ inclusion in ELA classrooms.

RELATED RESEARCH

To situate my new problem of practice, I reviewed related literature. Scholars have established the danger of heteronormativity, explaining, “When a heteronormative environment dominates school culture, students are positioned as straight; binary gender performances and heterosexual identities are empowered while LGBTQ students and non-heterosexual gender behaviors are marginalized” (Dinkins & Englert, 2015, p. 394). The widespread effects include ELA teachers’ hesitation to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors or themes and queer theory into their classrooms. However, an inclusive ELA curriculum “not only disrupts a heteronormative culture in schools but . . . helps create a tone of acceptance of LGBTQ people and increased awareness of LGBTQ-related issues, resulting in a more supportive environment for LGBTQ students” (McGarry, 2013, p. 236). I genuinely believed my ELA colleagues supported LGBTQ+ inclusion in theory, but their fear of backlash from students, parents, and administration made them hesitant in practice. Therefore, to engage in additional action research to combat Lenape’s heteronormative environment, I explored the concepts of teacher confidence and professional development.

Confidence

Self-confidence is a belief in one’s abilities and skills. In education, teacher self-confidence refers to a teacher’s belief in their ability to instruct effectively, manage a classroom, and create a positive, safe, and welcoming environment. Related studies draw on the concept of self-efficacy, defined as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura & Wessels, 1997, p. 4), which Brant and Wilcox (2021) described as “a starting point for a behavior change” (p. 130). In other words, building confidence was a central goal of the professional development sessions I designed, ultimately aiming for change in

teachers’ ability to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors, themes, and texts into their curriculum and effectively address any backlash. My original study determined knowledge and comfort alone were insufficient, yet “the stronger an individual’s belief in [their] own abilities around a given topic or task, the more likely they can persist with it” (Brant & Wilcox, 2021, p. 131).

Effective teaching requires confidence in one’s capacity to affect student performance and learning outcomes. Confident teachers may be more open to LGBTQ+ inclusion in their classrooms without fear of backlash, whereas teachers who lack confidence may hesitate, mainly because of a fear of backlash. Another component of my literature review, professional development, sheds light on improving teachers’ confidence, especially regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Professional Development Regarding LGBTQ+ Topics

Professional development provides teachers with learning opportunities to enhance their pedagogy, share ideas, address internal bias, and more, yet a little more than a decade ago, Whitman (2013) lamented the lack of a “stand-alone course with a specific focus on LGBTQ issues” (p. 126). My experiences and observations showed minimal improvement since that time. Administrators may hesitate to provide such opportunities if they perceive LGBTQ+ inclusion as controversial, fearing student and parent complaints (Payne & Smith, 2018). However, as Adelman and Woods (2006) showed, “an anti-LGBTQ+ environment encourages bullying and violence against self-identified LGBTQ+ youth and sends an explicit message that those who are considered different or non-conforming constitute acceptable targets of bullying” (p. 8). Therefore, professional development geared to combating heteronormativity and homophobia is crucial.

Yoo (2016) explored the impact of professional development on teacher efficacy, conducting a 5-week study in which teachers applied “motivational theories and concepts in their classrooms through various learning mediums” (p. 91). Yoo discovered that professional development positively affects teachers’ confidence. If a teacher struggles with LGBTQ+ inclusion and addressing backlash because they lack the knowledge to handle it, then their confidence will be low. However, with professional development centering on LGBTQ+ inclusion and addressing potential backlash, a teacher’s confidence can increase. By facilitating clear professional development, I sought to raise my colleagues’ confidence with LGBTQ+ inclusion.

METHODS

Action research appeals to me as an educator who supports activism in the classroom because I am “interested in facilitating change” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 4). Specifically, this study took a qualitative approach to prioritize “the ‘why’ rather than the ‘what’ of social phenomena,” incorporating “the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents” (UTA Libraries, 2024, para. 1). By battling Lenape’s heteronormative culture and addressing backlash against LGBTQ+ inclusion in the classroom, my participants and I can be agents of change and make Lenape High School a safer environment for LGBTQ+ students.



Participants and Setting

This study used convenience sampling by enlisting six of the eight participants featured in my dissertation. I invited two other ELA colleagues because the other two participants could not join the follow-up study. The participants, listed in Table 1, were eager to participate in the professional development sessions to increase their confidence when confronting backlash about their inclusion of LGBTQ+ authors and literature. The table also shows each participant's highest degree, years of experience at Lenape High School, and ELA teaching assignments for the 2023–2024 school year.

Lenape High School is a public school in New Jersey and one of four high schools in the Lenape Regional High School District. The district serves approximately 6,659 students overall, while Lenape has a population of 1,924 students, 166 faculty, and eight administrators (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). About 12% of the student population identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community. As a queer educator and advisor of the Gender/Sexuality Alliance, I have a long-standing relationship with administration and faculty as a mentor for LGBTQ+ students at Lenape.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study used two data collection methods: open-ended survey questions and a research journal. Both methods helped me address the research question by documenting the participants' confidence before, during, and after the professional development sessions. I facilitated two sessions in April and May during the second semester of the 2023–2024 school year. Each session lasted 45 to 90 minutes and occurred in my classroom during prep and common planning time. Once each of the eight participants had completed a pre-session survey, I developed a plan for the session based on their responses.

As I elaborate on my findings, the open-ended survey questions enabled me to gauge the participants' authentic attitudes about LGBTQ+ inclusion, including concerns about backlash from parents, students, and administration. This pre-session data guided me in choosing discussion topics correlated with their perspectives and concerns. The sessions themselves served as my intervention, while I kept a researcher journal to collect, interpret, and analyze authentic data during the discussions. Unstructured entries gave me space to record my participants' views on LGBTQ+ inclusion and fear of confronting backlash.

I used two forms of coding to make sense of my data. Through affective coding, I focused on "subjective qualities . . . by directly acknowledging and naming [participants'] experiences" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 105). Applying this approach to the survey responses, I identified patterns by searching for specific keywords related to my problem of practice, such as "fear/afraid," "hesitation," "uncomfortable," and "not knowledgeable." I also engaged in in vivo coding, which "uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 264), especially with the notes in my researcher journal. The following section incorporates direct quotes from participants to honor their authentic voices.

Table 1. Participants

| Pseudonym | Degree | Years at Lenape | Grade and Level |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Beth | MEd, Special Ed & ELA | 5 | Grade 11 College Prep |
| | | | Grade 12 Accelerated |
| Casey | MEd, Special Ed & ELA | 6 | Grade 11 Accelerated |
| | | | Grade 12 Accelerated |
| Deb | MEd, Curriculum & Instruction | 14 | Grade 9 Honors & College Prep |
| | | | Grade 9 Accelerated |
| Jaime | MEd | 16 | Grade 12 Accelerated |
| | | | Grade 9 Accelerated & Honors |
| Jax | MEd, technology | 8 | Grade 11 College Prep |
| | | | Grade 9 College Prep |
| Jess | MEd | 7 | Grade 12 College Prep |
| | | | Grade 9 College Prep |
| Joe | MEd | 19 | Grade 10 College Prep |
| | | | Grade 11 College Prep |
| Riley | BA, Ed & Secondary English | 6 | Grade 9 Honors & College Prep |
| | | | Grade 11 Accelerated |

FINDINGS

This section illustrates my continued effort to combat dangerous heteronormativity at Lenape High School. Building on my dissertation, I aimed to address the participants' hesitation when encountering anti-LBGTQ+ beliefs from parents, students, and administration. In fact, the professional development sessions featured in this chapter derived from the action plan section of my dissertation, where I expressed a goal of helping "participants effectively handle problems that may arise with students, parents, and administrators who may challenge LGBTQ+ inclusion in an ELA classroom" (Mustaccio, 2023, p. 85).

The first session focused on teaching strategies for LGBTQ+ inclusion. I invited participants to "share their pedagogical strategies to teach chosen works [from the curriculum] through a queer perspective" (Mustaccio, 2023, p. 86), which allowed us to discuss effective and ineffective strategies. The second session addressed backlash to LGBTQ+ inclusion and how to gain confidence when teaching LGBTQ+ authors, literature, and themes. To answer my research question, the following subsections elaborate on my preparation for each session, describe my observations during each session, and reflect on key takeaways.



Session 1

Before Session 1, the participants answered two open-ended survey questions, which aided me in planning. Responses to the first question, “What lessons focusing on LGBTQ+ inclusion were effective this year? Please provide a specific example/examples,” were encouraging. Among the eight responses, three participants discussed their use of Shakespeare, and two others used LGBTQ+ authors like Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, and Allen Ginsberg to explore systems of discrimination, marginalization, and dehumanization in the United States. I was pleased to see so many participants from my previous study apply what they learned in my professional development sessions to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors, texts, and themes into their classrooms creatively and engagingly.

The second question asked, “Were there any reasons you hesitated to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors, themes, or characters into your lessons?” Joe and Riley were worried they would get the terminology wrong, which could be anxiety-inducing. Similarly, Deb stated, “I always feel so terrible if I misuse a pronoun or something or don’t properly recognize the characters or authors’ identities.” I could easily address these responses by providing a guide to pronouns and identities. At the same time, the other participants’ comments reinforced my concern about our heteronormative high school environment. Three teachers mentioned a relative lack of LGBTQ+ authors or texts and their hesitation to stray from the curriculum for fear of being reprimanded. For example, Jax stated,

There isn’t much in the curriculum with stories that focus on LGBTQ+ content or even by authors who identify in the LGBTQ+ community. It’s hard to find supplemental pieces that fit the curriculum guide and a stretch to try to include something that discusses LGBTQ+ relationships, even vaguely. Plus, I’m afraid that if I stray from the curriculum, there will be backlash.

Because the limited ELA curriculum deters LGBTQ+ inclusion, it perpetuates heteronormativity. Overcoming those limitations is hard if teachers fear not being supported by the administration. As a result, students may believe LGBTQ+ contributions to literature are not valuable, which further perpetuates heteronormativity.

Three participants also mentioned students’ lack of maturity as a factor. Beth stated, “My freshmen this year are very immature. Numerous times they’ve called a text ‘gay.’” Expressing similar concerns about childish behavior, Deb stated,

I have a few students who lack the maturity to discuss serious class discussions. Many times, I’ve tried to have discussions about marginalized groups, particularly LGBTQ+, and they make jokes and comments under their breath. I have spoken to them and even made a discipline referral, only for the administration to send the students back to class without punishment.

This type of behavior from students perpetuates the heteronormative school climate. When administrators do not reprimand students for inappropriate behavior, they send a message to the LGBTQ+ students that they are not safe and that their mere existence is not valid.

Given these responses to the survey, I facilitated Session 1 so the participants could share practical lessons. For example, Jess stated,

I did a unit on Shakespeare’s sonnets. When discussing the poems’ subjects, I mentioned that some of them are young men and that whether these sonnets are platonic or romantic

is debated. While reading, students discussed whether they thought it was a romantic poem and analyzed specific lines of the poems to support their point.

Jax also mentioned Shakespeare, sharing,

We had a fun unit writing love poems after *Romeo and Juliet*, and they could be from anyone to anyone. Several students wrote LGBTQ+-themed poems, which opened up the discussion with characters from the play, and shared the great poems that were written. Students seemed very receptive.

Additionally, Beth helped students explore “gender roles and stereotypes in *Macbeth* and present day.” Likewise, Riley decided to address heteronormative societal constructs while studying *Macbeth*. She stated,

Lady Macbeth is one of the few solid Shakespearean characters we study, and I wanted to make a connection between how Lady Macbeth is viewed in the play and how Lady Macbeth would be viewed in today’s heteronormative society. We discussed traditional roles and stereotypes in our society and connected them to Lady Macbeth’s character. The kids enjoyed it, and it led the way for us to examine other female characters in our curriculum and compare them to heteronormative beliefs.

In other words, teaching Shakespeare was the most common way to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors because most educators are familiar with him and his work.

Participants also shared other means, such as when Casey described using clips from the television series *What Would You Do?* that included same-sex couples. Jaime added,

During Women’s History Month in March, I incorporated LGBTQ history and famous individuals into my teaching because I noticed little diversity regarding LGBTQ+ women in the curriculum. I have been trying to get my students to recognize that if they believe in gender equality, they need to be more inclusive and not only focus on people who were born female and identify as female. The students are very receptive and try to be more inclusive.

The creative and effective lessons by my participants demonstrated how the professional development sessions from my dissertation helped alleviate the participants’ discomfort with LGBTQ+ inclusion.

When I steered the group discussion to the second survey question about the extent to which the participants hesitated to incorporate LGBTQ+ themes, authors, and texts, the most interesting perspectives on ineffective lessons came from the Grade 9 teachers. Reflecting on this trend, Joe suggested the students’ immaturity prevented good discussions on LGBTQ+ inclusion. Deb agreed by sharing a specific example centered on *Romeo and Juliet*:

We tried to explore why society/family/people in a position of authority exert control over “love” and define whether love can be controlled by its very nature. Two out of three of my freshman classes were not emotionally mature enough to get beyond the intro of this lesson.

Riley responded similarly, “I did not read *Dante and Aristotle*—the freshman novel—this year, which specifically focuses on LGBTQ+ relationships, because my students were not mature enough to handle it.” Grade 9 teachers like Jax and Riley noted that anytime they mentioned anything to do with the LGBTQ+ community, many of their students “giggled.” That kind of immaturity can make LGBTQ+ students feel isolated and scared.



Reflecting on these contributions to the heteronormative environment of Lenape High School, Casey stated, “It’s a shame because I feel that the more mature students are missing out on an important discussion, and the class as a whole is missing out on important teachable moments dealing with empathy, sympathy, and marginalization—not to mention how the students’ immature reactions make my LGBTQ+ students feel.” I extended the discussion to the anti-LGBTQ+ comments I heard in the hallway and my study hall, realizing the Grade 9 students were the primary sources. From there, the participants asked, “How do we combat this type of negative behavior?” and “How do we make LGBTQ+ students feel safe, seen, and important?” Joe captured the group’s mindset by stating, “We must address those students and continue teaching LGBTQ+ inclusion,” while adding, “Although I am still hesitant to do that with their level of immaturity.”

Recognizing a link between such hesitation and the teachers’ confidence, I saw a crucial need for additional professional development to address the participants’ concerns. While the first session ended with the group feeling discouraged by our lack of ability to address immaturity and backlash, it did give me hope that my participants wanted to fight for LGBTQ+ students. I vowed to raise their confidence in the second professional development session.

Session 2

To plan a session around scenarios that would give participants more confidence for addressing backlash effectively, I invited my colleagues to answer two additional open-ended survey questions. The first question probed the participants’ experiences with LGBTQ+ inclusion, asking, “What issues have you encountered when attempting to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors, themes, and literature? Were they from students, parents, or administration?” The overwhelming response was that students and their parental guardians often perceive any mention of LGBTQ+ content as a personal or political agenda in the classroom.

Indeed, most of the Session 1 discussion centered on students’ immaturity. As one participant stated,

Sometimes, the students’ maturity levels hold them back from understanding the depth and importance of LGBTQ+ texts. For example, I’ve done *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* with my frosh in the past. Still, depending on the group of students, it can be difficult if they are too immature or unwilling to discuss these topics.

Recalling our discussion of educators’ lack of techniques to address this immature classroom behavior, I posed a second question to prepare for Session 2, inviting participants to identify specific topics relating to the backlash I could address to help them feel more confident when dealing with it. Three participants stated they would like a general overview of good ways to approach the situation when students, parents, or administrators pose a concern. Two other participants expressed a desire to see “schools address and accept a more fluid definition of family” because “very few of our students are growing up in families that are considered the cultural ‘norm.’” The other three participants discussed the need for more training on handling backlash in the classroom. One stated, “I would like to see more instances of how to handle the backlash from parents and administration concerned about teaching materials. I would also like to learn how to approach the conversation and respond to the backlash appropriately.” The participants’ need for more help

addressing backlash shaped my approach to the second session. By providing more knowledge and resources for combating backlash, I sought to increase their confidence.

I began Session 2 by acknowledging and thanking the participants for being excellent allies to not just me but also Lenape’s LGBTQ+ students and helping to combat heteronormativity. From there, I projected a Google Slides presentation and distributed the slides as handouts. The first section focused on a role-playing activity addressing anti-LGBTQ+ comments in the classroom. Deb volunteered as the teacher, while Casey was the student making the homophobic comments. As the role-playing exercise began, Deb introduced a new novel, and Casey interrupted with a phrase that many participants mentioned hearing in their classroom or the hallway: “Ugh, this book is so gay!” Deb addressed Casey’s comment by saying, “It’s not okay to use *gay* disrespectfully or to mean something is bad. It is incredibly offensive and can negatively impact anyone who hears this. This type of language will not be tolerated in this class.” I then recommended that Deb talk to the student after class and modeled that conversation, focusing on what the student meant by that phrase. I also demonstrated how to fill out a discipline referral for such an incident so the student would understand their inappropriate behavior.

After the role-playing session, the participants shared their reflections. Jax discussed how she often heard derogatory phrases in her classroom and the hallway. She had addressed them in the past but admitted feeling “more confident in addressing my students with clear explanations as to why this language is offensive.” Beth agreed, “Having examples of what to say eases my anxiety about addressing these immature and hurtful comments.” The role-playing activity empowered the participants, giving them the tools and confidence to address such situations effectively.

This discussion was a great segue to the next portion of the session that focused on addressing common myths. As educators, the participants have a crucial role in combating these myths. I chose myths that my participants may hear in the classroom and discussed how to respond. For example, Jax had listened to the common argument that “No one is born gay.” Sharing her struggle to tell students it is not the case, she said, “It’s hard for me to elaborate on why no one is born gay because I do not know the proper response or the credible information needed to discuss the ignorant phrase with my class.” In response, I cited The American Psychological Association’s (2024) stance: “The longstanding consensus of the behavioral and social sciences and the health and mental health professions is that homosexuality per se is a normal and positive variation of human sexual orientation” (para. 1).

From there, we discussed how to combat other myths, such as “Gay people can choose to be straight” and “Students are too young to know their sexual orientation or gender identity.” I referred my participants to informative websites such as GLSEN.org, which offers comprehensive information for cultivating an inclusive classroom, handling backlash, and addressing these and other myths about the LGBTQ+ community.

Transitioning to the session’s final part, I addressed administrators’ backlash by recommending another website, learningforjustice.org. Reminding participants that in 2020, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy signed the New Jersey State Law Bill A1335, which requires LGBTQ+ individuals to be taught in all schools, I encouraged them to defend their inclusive lessons by telling administrators they are just following the state-mandated Core



Curriculum Content Standards. I also mentioned the district-mandated professional improvement plan teachers complete at the end of each school year, which states that teachers will increase cultural competence to foster an inclusive curriculum and classroom. Deb had been unaware of that particular goal and said, "I feel more comfortable addressing administration if I am talked to about my LGBTQ+ inclusion. If I follow the district mandate, the administration cannot do anything about it." Jaime agreed, "This [strategy] helps me when assigning literature and projects on marginalized groups because if a parent, student, or administrator complains, I can refer back to Bill A1335 and the district mandate."

Another aspect of addressing backlash from the administration I discussed was presenting facts, such as offering evidence from a GLSEN report about how LGBTQ+ inclusion will make our school safer and how we can be more of a "Lenape Family" when all are included. I also recommend providing examples of anti-LGBTQ+ behavior we have observed in the hallway and our classrooms. By citing specific examples of homophobia and heteronormative behavior we, as teachers, see throughout the school, we can create positive change and help LGBTQ+ students feel welcomed and safe.

Overall, the participants enjoyed the session, and as Beth stated,

This information has been beneficial because the language is clear and specific. It makes me feel more confident to be able to not only address anti-LGBTQ+ situations in my classroom but also to address comments in the hallway and backlash from people regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion.

I invited the participants to answer one more open-ended survey to gather additional evidence of the session's impact. In response to the first question, "Was the professional development session effective in helping you combat backlash? Please explain your answer," Casey stated.

I found it helpful that the presentation discusses how to address instances when students call something they do not like 'gay,' but they do not realize how hurtful this can be to members of the LGBTQ community; unfortunately, this usually happens at least once a year, sometimes more. The advice on this topic will most likely prove useful.

Echoing Casey's description of the positive impact, Jess answered,

I think the specific examples of approaching certain situations were beneficial. We all want to be able to help or defend people in some way when they need it, but sometimes, we don't know how to approach it. These ideas are helpful for when I find myself in a situation like this.

On the role-playing topic, Riley stated, "I feel it is a good foundation for helping teachers combat backlash." A similar comment noted that I "provided rational responses to comments that could be made in the classroom." Pam shared, "I printed out the responses focusing on combating heteronormativity with students because this is so useful. I never knew exactly what to say before, and this was extremely helpful."

Participants also responded positively to my efforts to help them address backlash from administrators, parents, or students. For example, one teacher wrote,

It was beneficial to have concrete examples of what we can say to respond to backlash from parents or the community (or admin). I feel like we all get nervous when a student, parent, or community member brings up religion, and we certainly don't want to offend their faith, but want to defend the right for ALL

students to feel safe and to be free from discrimination and hate speech.

Another response stated,

What I found most effective was the sample responses provided when facing backlash. I think one of the areas that teachers fear most is community pushback, which then results in pushback from admin. It was good to have examples of this and how we can respond to this backlash.

Overall, the professional development session received a positive evaluation. The participants' responses showed that the specific examples increased their confidence.

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Based on participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions, the professional development sessions resulted in an overall increase in the teachers' confidence regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion and addressing backlash. The data from Session 1 show their ability to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors, themes, and texts, as well as their recognition of the current curriculum's limitations. By sharing pedagogical insights with their colleagues, my participants demonstrated their understanding that LGBTQ+ inclusion in an ELA classroom is essential to create a welcoming and safe environment for all students.

The data from the first session also alerted me to the participants' hesitance to address backlash due to their low confidence, shaping my approach to Session 2. According to the data from the second session, the participants became more confident in addressing backlash after role-playing exercises, discussing specific examples to combat myths, and envisioning how to defend their LGBTQ+ inclusion to the administration. The participants were able to recognize how rampant homophobia and heteronormative beliefs are among their students and understand that being an ally and addressing comments and backlash make a safer and more respectful environment for LGBTQ+ students.

Throughout this action research, I saw a need for additional professional development to address the broader problem of practice. For example, inviting administrators to engage in some of the activities from Session 2 would be beneficial. Even better, interacting and engaging with LGBTQ+ staff and students in meaningful exercises and discussions on pertinent topics could go a long way toward combating heteronormativity and homophobia. Addressing these concerns and the related backlash at the school and district level is critical for creating a safe, inclusive school environment.

I could also design sessions with more concrete examples of backlash to model potential responses. Participants might benefit from more focused, detailed language that they could modify to fit multiple situations. For example, a parent may object to a book with mostly LGBTQ+ characters because their child feels excluded by this book, since they cannot see themselves in these characters. Therefore, I could create a role-playing session with the ELA staff to discuss different responses to help such parents understand why the book is in the curriculum.

Ultimately, ELA teachers need to feel confident enough to address potential backlash because marginalized student groups, especially LGBTQ+ students, need a safe school environment where they are able not only to learn without fear but also to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. If my colleagues and I apply



what we discussed in the professional development sessions, we can continue to combat the homophobic and heteronormative culture at Lenape High School. Through even more education activism, I plan to continue to make Lenape High School a safe place for all marginalized students and combat hate and discrimination throughout the building.

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